

CHAPTER 22

THE JOINING OF HANDS

As May ended and June began, Harry felt as though it was his most fulfilling yet trying time ever at Hogwarts. He was happily in love, and all other aspects of his life were positive except one. Dumbledore's impending death hung over him like a shadow much of the time; he felt free of it mainly when in the presence of Ginny, Fawkes, or Dumbledore himself.

To Harry's great pleasure, Dumbledore had suggested that Harry and Ginny join him for a regular dinner on Sunday nights. They had to be discreet, however, as while Harry having dinner with Dumbledore was fine since he was a teacher, it could not get around the school that Ginny was as well, since having dinner with the headmaster could be considered special treatment. Harry's other four friends knew, of course, and were happy for them that they got to do it.

He had not told Ginny of the latest prophecy, or of the confrontation—Harry assumed it would be one, anyway—that would happen in early summer. He knew she would worry uselessly, and he didn't even know for sure that he would be involved. He assumed he would be, but the prophecy had not said it specifically, just that he would 'later' have the opportunity to defeat Voldemort. Hermione's plea that he not sacrifice himself for her suggested he would be there as well, but he didn't think she knew much more than he did, so she may have been guessing, he felt. He wondered how much, if anything, she had shared with Neville

After Auror training on the second Saturday of June, Harry met Ginny and they went to Harry's office. Harry had scheduled a fireplace call with Archibald Dentus, and while Ginny would not participate in the talk, as Harry's head would be

in the fireplace, she wanted to be with him and hold his hand while he talked. “I want to be with all of you, but I’ll take what parts of you I can get,” she joked.

Harry found that Dentus was in his living room waiting for him. “Hello, Harry, good to see you. How have you been doing? Very busy, as usual?”

“Yes, I’m afraid so,” he answered. “Sometimes it seems like if I could stay awake all twenty-four hours it might be enough, but as it is…”

“I understand, you have quite a few burdens, and one responsibility which is very pleasant, but requires time and attention as well. Speaking of which, how are things with you and Ginny?”

“Really good, thanks,” Harry said. “I still get the feeling sometimes when people look at us that they think we’re overdoing it, or can’t really be this committed to each other this young. But I try not to let it bother me.”

“Good idea, Harry,” Dentus agreed. “Only you can really know what’s going on. I’ve always been especially close to my wife; in fact, I welcomed quitting my Ministry job two years ago because it meant I was able to spend more time with her.”

“I was wondering, Archibald, now that the Ministry’s gotten onto the right track about Voldemort, did you consider rejoining?”

Dentus chuckled. “It isn’t the kind of thing that you can just leave and rejoin,” he explained. “I had a position of a certain level of authority and influence, and when I left, someone else took that position. Such positions are highly coveted within the Ministry, and for me to get it back would mean someone would have to vacate it, which is highly unlikely. But it’s all right, I’m content as I am. Interestingly, I have almost as much influence as I did before I left, partly because I’m respected and listened to by high-level Ministry people, and partly because of the circumstances under which I left.”

“You mean, because you turned out to be right,” Harry said.

“Exactly. That counts for a lot in politics. Well, there’s really only one thing I can tell you that would interest you: some people at the Ministry are talking about

the idea of suspending the issuing of new Apparation licenses until the ARA has expired. Their public argument is that we don't need to be giving licenses to people who aren't going to be allowed to Apparate anyway, and that as they're young, they'll just be tempted to Apparate in violation of the ARA."

"But they might need to for emergencies," Harry said.

Dentus half-shrugged. "The problem with that argument is that the most likely emergency need for it would be a Death Eater attack, and they always put down anti-Disapparation fields before they attack, so it's not going to do them any good anyway. And really, that's true. The other most likely genuine emergency would be a serious health problem, but that's very uncommon among seventeen-year-olds, and most people in serious condition don't have enough strength to Disapparate anyway."

"I really don't like this," said Harry. "But you knew that, that's why you told me."

"I suspected you wouldn't be happy," Dentus agreed. "But I'd be curious to know your reasons."

Harry thought for a few seconds; as he did, he gripped Ginny's hand, and felt her grip his in return. It was easy to forget sometimes when you talked through a fireplace that you weren't really where the other person was. "I can't think of a... logical argument against it, not yet, but I think that continuing to issue the licenses would be a way of saying, 'this is only temporary, we'll stop this as soon as we can,' but stopping giving them seems like a step towards making the situation more permanent. I know people would claim it wasn't, but it just seems that way."

Dentus nodded. "You may not know much about politics, but you have good intuition. Yes, that's my problem with it as well. I don't have a 'logical' argument against it either, but I don't like the direction it points in. The problem is, it's hard to gather opposition to a proposed regulation that you simply don't like the smell of; you have to have better reasons than that. They can also say that it improves the Ministry's manpower situation; with fewer people giving unnecessary

licenses, there would be more people who can do things to fight against Voldemort. The problem is, the reality is that it won't happen that way; the extra manpower will probably get taken by whichever part of the Ministry has the most influence at the time. But again, you can't make an argument based on things you know but others can easily deny, even though they know it's true as well."

Harry smiled to make clear that what he was about to say wasn't directed at Dentus personally. "You know, sometimes it's depressing to talk to you about this, Archibald. All I do is learn things about human nature that I'd rather not know."

Dentus chuckled. "Maybe we should talk about women, then, or some other more pleasant topic. I do know what you mean, Harry. I remember what I said the first time we met, that I felt like I had told you there was no Santa Claus. I'm helping you get rid of your innocence, at least one facet of it, and innocence is sweet. I mean, I thought it was cute, how innocent you were. But for you, right now, innocence could be dangerous, so there we are. But don't be too discouraged. In some ways, politics is the arena in which we see people at their worst, which means that in general, they aren't that bad, and many are very good."

"Why is it that people are at their worst in politics?" Harry wondered. "Is it that hard to find good people to be in politics? I mean, you were."

"Thank you for the compliment, Harry. But note the word 'were.' The kind of reasons I left for are exactly why many good people don't get involved with it in the first place. They see too many things happen that disgust them, and they can't do too much about it. Also, politicians are rewarded for behaving selfishly. They get to stay in office if they do what's popular, as opposed to what's right. It's up to the people to decide what's popular, so politicians are only as effective as the people are in deciding what's popular.

"Also, in the Ministry itself— excuse me just a minute, Harry." Dentus turned in his chair, looked at his hand, and spoke quietly for a few seconds. He turned back to Harry. "Sorry. I was saying, within the Ministry itself, people are rewarded for careerism, for going along with the leadership whether they think it's right or not.

Not to speak ill of the dead, but Percy Weasley was an excellent example of this. Contrarily, Arthur Weasley, a good man who would do the right thing, is content to stay in the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts office because he has no interest in the infighting and moral compromises necessary to achieve a position of influence. Anyway, careerism tends to get everyone pulling the same way even if it's the wrong way, as we saw last year. I could go on, but I've probably depressed you enough for one day."

As Dentus talked, Harry felt Ginny let go of his hand, then hold his wrist in one hand while gently caressing his hand with her other one, occasionally stopping to kiss the back of his hand. He almost smiled, but managed not to, and tried to focus harder on what Dentus was saying while enjoying what Ginny was doing. He wondered if she was having some fun with him, deliberately trying to distract him.

"Well, I guess it's better that I know this kind of thing," Harry said reluctantly. "About the licenses, do you think I should say something publicly about it?"

Dentus shook his head slightly. "I'd say, only if you feel especially strongly about it. The problem is, the more you speak, the less an impact you'll have every time you do. Getting the ARA through was a good time to do that; we've seen it's helped save lives, and it might not have happened without you. You want to save speaking publicly for issues that are very important. This one is annoying, but not that important, and hard to fight against. Also, it might look like you're mainly thinking of your Hogwarts friends."

Harry wanted to say something publicly, but he recognized that Dentus was right. "Okay, that makes sense," he agreed. "Excuse me, but... were you speaking into your hand just then?"

"Yes, Harry, to my wife. Why?"

"How does that work? I've never seen anyone speak into their hand before."

Dentus looked surprised. "Sometimes I forget you didn't grow up in the wizarding world, and I guess there aren't that many married Hogwarts professors

anyway. It's a way for married couples to stay in close touch with each other, though not many people have it done anymore. It was done a lot more a few hundred years ago. When it's done, it's part of the marriage ceremony, and it's called the Joining of Hands. Someone—very few wizards or witches know how to do this anymore—casts a complicated spell over the couple, and the result of it is that they can communicate with each other anytime, as you just saw me do. By willing it to happen, I can see my wife's face in my hand, and I can talk to her, at whatever distance."

Harry was surprised he had never heard of this; obviously, the Weasleys didn't have this. "That sounds really convenient. Why isn't it done much anymore?"

Dentus looked at Harry with a shrewd expression. "I see I've piqued your interest. It's not done much because it more or less went out of style, and there are potential problems. First of all, it's irreversible; if you ever separate from that person, they're still in your palm if you choose, and you're in theirs if they choose. A lot of popular fiction has been written where people get this done and end up breaking up tragically, and then the Joining haunts them for the rest of their lives, their former partner obsessively checks on them, and so forth. There were also a few real-life situations where the Joining ended badly for prominent people, so it was a combination of things that caused it to lose popularity. Also, this can't be confirmed, but some people who had it done whose partners died said that their hands ached for the rest of their lives. Maybe it's just a legend, I don't know. I suppose my wife or I will find out someday." The look on Dentus's face suggested to Harry that Dentus hoped that he and his wife would die at the same time.

"Why did you have it done, if it's not that common?"

"I guess we were both romantic types, and we were very much in love. Still are, of course, though that's always different when you get older. I think it's considered a grand romantic gesture, maybe even a bit overblown to some people. A lot of people think it's not necessary, that they can always be together by Apparating, so there's no point in being able to communicate this way. My wife and

I just liked the way it made us feel connected. I see from your expression that it's something that interests you."

Harry nodded. "It sounds great," he said enthusiastically. "Is it something that Professor Dumbledore can do?"

Dentus chuckled. "Yes, he can. I think a lot of people go to him when they want it done; it's best to have it done by as strong a wizard as possible. But it's done when people get married, and you won't be able to do that for some time." He paused, thinking, then said, "Harry, has Professor Dumbledore talked to you recently about his... future plans?"

Harry's expression changed instantly to one of sadness, and he nodded. "I assume you mean, because of Fawkes choosing me..."

Dentus nodded somberly. "I wanted to be careful, because I didn't know what he had told you. I'm sorry, I know this must be hard for you, because of how close you are to him. I mentioned it because I wanted to know if you understood that he wouldn't be around long enough to do it. There are others who can do it, of course. But you need to understand, if you're going to think about it, that it's a really serious thing to do. Like I said, it's irreversible, and it's probably better not to do it if you have any privacy issues; the other person can see you, only your face, anytime they want. You can know if she does, you can feel a mild tingling in your hand anytime she looks at you in her hand. That's how I knew my wife wanted to talk to me just now. But many people think it's an unacceptable intrusion on their privacy. As I said, though, you have plenty of time before you can get married, so you can research it and think about it."

"You sound like you really want me to be cautious, Archibald... are you saying you wouldn't recommend it?"

"No, Harry, I would just say that it's not for everyone. If I sound cautious, it's because you seem pretty enamored of the idea on the face of it, and I just want you to think about it seriously, see the possible negatives as well. You strike me as

the type who would go running off and doing this because it sounded good, and I mean that as a compliment.”

“Thank you. It does sound good... I’m mainly concerned about the effect on her if I died, which is not exactly impossible. Well, I’ll think about it. So, you said there was nothing else that I especially needed to know about?”

“No, just the usual infighting, which I could tell you about for hours and would bore you silly, though some people would find it fascinating. It doesn’t interest me that much at this point, to tell you the truth, but I do like to know what’s going on.”

“Better you than me,” Harry joked, and they both chuckled.

Dentus looked at Harry a bit more seriously and said, “I do want to say one thing, Harry. You complimented me earlier, and I appreciate it, but I don’t want you to have a wrong impression. I do think I’m a good person, hopefully better than most, but I have done things in my career that I’m not proud of. Not that I’ve had anyone killed or anything,” he added, smiling for a moment, “but small things, mostly. Things that seem defensible at the time, but when you look back on them, you see that you should have done things differently. I’ve done things that damaged the careers of a few people that I thought were bad, and bad for the Ministry... they were, in fact, but I’m still not happy with myself in retrospect.” His face reflected his discomfort. “One way to put it is that I’ve done things that Albus would never have done. That’s a high standard to aspire to, but a good one. It is true that most people who reach the level that I did have done worse things; my sins are minor by comparison. But I think you have this image of me as being.. I don’t know, pure, maybe. I just thought you should know. There are shades of gray in almost everything, and everyone.”

Harry slowly nodded; he felt respect for Dentus for telling him that. He was a little surprised, but knew he shouldn’t be. “I understand, and I appreciate your telling me that. I may be only sixteen, but there are a few things I wish I had done differently, too.”

Dentus nodded his understanding. “I have to imagine that’s the case with everyone. Who knows, maybe even Albus.” Harry wondered whether that was the case.

They talked for a few more minutes, then Harry left the fireplace. He looked at Ginny for a few seconds, imagining being able to look at his hand and see her any time; now it seemed especially appealing. “What?” she asked.

He didn’t want to suggest it to her, or bring it up, until he was sure he wanted to do it, for fear of how she would feel if he brought it up but then decided not to. “Nothing,” he said. “Just happy to look at you.” She beamed at him, as she did a lot, he thought. “I really enjoyed what you were doing,” he added, taking her hand and doing to her what she had done to him.

She smiled. “I’m glad... oh, that does feel nice. Actually, I was kind of afraid I might be distracting you, but I couldn’t help myself.”

He returned the smile. “It did, but it was all right. I’m glad you did it.”

“Did he tell you anything interesting?” she asked. He told her about the idea of suspending the issuing of licenses. She said, “Ron’s not going to be happy if that happens, you know how he’s been looking forward to Apparating. He’ll know he can’t do it yet even if he does get a license, but it’ll be important to him just to have the license.”

“I know,” agreed Harry, “but unfortunately, I can’t argue against it for a reason like that. Archibald thinks it’s best that I don’t fight it at all, and he may be right. C’mon, let’s go get some dinner.”

After dinner, Harry and the others had their usual Saturday evening session on using the energy of love. After over two months, he felt that everyone was making some progress, but he wasn’t sure how much. The others all said they felt it was a good thing to do, though, and wanted to continue. Harry tried not to be impatient at the lack of visible progress, as he had no idea how long it would take, or even if it could be done.

Later, all except Pansy were together doing their homework in the Gryffindor common room. “Sometimes I feel like I can never get caught up with all this stuff,” grumbled Ron as he worked on a History of Magic essay.

“I know what you mean,” agreed Neville. “Even Hermione’s having trouble getting it all done.” Hermione looked up at him sharply. Neville didn’t notice, but Harry and Ron did.

“What, is that something you don’t want us to know?” asked Ron. “Don’t worry, Hermione, we still think you’re as strong with schoolwork as Harry is as a wizard.”

She rolled her eyes. “It’s not like I need you to think of me a certain way, Ron. It’s just that... I hadn’t noticed that I looked like that. I didn’t think it was anything anybody could tell.”

Neville shrugged. “Maybe only someone who spends a lot of time with you would notice. Sorry, I didn’t think my saying that would bother you.”

“It doesn’t, Neville, really. I was just surprised. Oh, Neville, Harry, you’re going to be ready to retake your Astronomy O.W.L.s, right?”

Neville and Harry looked at each other blankly. “When did this happen?” asked Harry.

Hermione tried to avoid rolling her eyes again. “It’s been up on the bulletin board for a week now. Am I the only one who reads it?”

“Probably,” said Ron offhandedly. “Have you ever learned anything worth knowing from it?”

“Yes, Ron. I learned when the Astronomy O.W.L. re-test is. Or, I would have learned if I hadn’t already known. Professor McGonagall had me put it up on the board. You know, as part of my prefect duties. You remember prefect duties, don’t you, Ron?”

Ron adopted an obviously put-on expression of surprise. “Oh, that’s right, I’m a prefect! Have I missed anything important?”

Unimpressed, she replied, “Nothing that you would consider important, anyway. I think Professor McGonagall got used to the idea that I would do all the stuff that both of us would normally do.”

“Are you not happy about that, or just giving me a hard time?” he asked. “I thought you liked doing stuff like that. You never complained about it before.”

“I’m giving you a hard time, mostly, but it occurs to me now that I should have insisted that you do your share the whole time. I suppose it’s my fault. Now that my schedule has gotten really tight, it’s annoying.”

Ron shrugged. “Then I’ll do the stuff. Just let me know which stuff you want me to do. Why’s your schedule any worse than usual, anyway?”

“It’s the end of the year, Ron. You know, exams? Which reminds me, Harry, what are you going to do for exams for your students?”

Harry had thought about it. “I wanted to do what Remus did with us, the obstacle course, but I realized I couldn’t, because I didn’t teach the same stuff as he did, you know, the hinkypinks and stuff. So, it’s basically going to be simple, I’ll give them ten minutes apiece alone, and try to figure out how well they can do the stuff they’ve been taught. I just have to decide whether to take points off for people who obviously know how to do something, but just can’t do it very well.”

“Be nice to them,” said Neville, with a small smile. “That used to be me, after all.”

Harry shook his head. “Seems like a long time ago, Neville. I forget you were like that.”

“I never do,” Neville said quietly. “Especially how it changed.”

A little embarrassed, Harry said, “I really think you give me more credit for that than I deserve, Neville, but thank you anyway.”

“I’m the one in a position to know, Harry. You’d better stop being embarrassed about it. So just accept my gratitude and shut up.”

The others raised their eyebrows and chuckled. Smiling—it was always amusing when Neville tried to be authoritative—Harry said, “Yes, sir,” and saluted.

Puzzled, Neville asked, "What was that you just did?"

"Well, it was just a regular—" He looked at Hermione, who nodded.

"Wizards don't do that, Harry." She explained to the rest of them.

"Ah, I see," said Neville. "I thought you might have been giving me a rude gesture. Not something you'd normally do, so I was wondering."

"I've been a wizard for six years now, and I still do Muggle stuff like that without knowing... I wonder if I'll still be when I'm forty. Anyway, yeah, I'm not going to give them a written test. All I care about is whether they can do the stuff, which I told them at the beginning of the term. Of course, this put the fifth years at a disadvantage, since they have to take O.W.L.s, but I'd rather they could defend themselves better, even if they do less well on the written sections. Sorry, Ginny."

She looked up from her parchment. "You know I'm not bothered, Harry. I think I'll do fine anyway, and you've reminded us of that in class several times, and told us to look in our books for the information. I don't think anybody minds. I think we'll do better than usual anyway. I mean, look what happened to you guys last year who'd been in the D.A. This year, with you teaching, it's been like a big D.A. Nobody doesn't care about what they're doing, and they're happy with what you've taught."

"Well, you're biased, though," he said humorously.

Her expression told him that his attempt at humor had missed badly. "Do you think I would lie to you, or say something like that just because of how I feel about you? Don't you—"

"I was kidding, Ginny," he said, sighing. "Of course I don't think that. I know you wouldn't lie to me."

She looked at him, seemingly trying to decide whether to be annoyed at him or not. "It's just irritating the way you relentlessly brush off compliments. I mean what I say, and it's not because I love you. It makes me feel like I shouldn't bother, because you always argue, you never just accept it. But I want to do it, because it's the truth. I want you to know how I see you."

My keen sense of intuition is telling me that I shouldn't argue with her about this, Harry thought wryly. "I know, Ginny. You know I have a problem with this. I'll work on it. I don't want to upset you."

"Why is Harry the one who has to work on it?" asked Ron.

"Because, Ron, the alternative is that Ginny stops complimenting him," explained Hermione. "I don't think he really wants that."

"I wouldn't think so," said Neville. "I'll take all the compliments I can get." He looked meaningfully at Hermione.

She smiled. "You're so sweet," she said.

He smiled and looked at Harry. "See? Just enjoy it, Harry."

Harry chuckled. "I know, I'll try. And no, Ginny, I don't want you to stop complimenting me. I like it, even if I'm embarrassed by it. Who knows, maybe I'm embarrassed because I like it."

"I should be more tolerant," she said, looking at him sympathetically. "You had no praise at all for eleven years, then a lot after that, especially this year. Sometimes I forget how you spent the first eleven years of your life. But like Neville said, I bet you don't."

"For longer periods these days, I don't think of it," he said. "That reminds me, I need to write to Aunt Petunia and tell them I'm not coming back this summer. I keep putting it off, and I don't want them showing up at King's Cross. Maybe I should do it now, before I forget totally." He took out a new piece of parchment.

"Anyway, Neville, Harry," said Hermione, "the Astronomy re-test is on Friday the twenty-ninth, at nine p.m. So you shouldn't forget to study for that, too."

"How did that end up working?" asked Harry. "Not everyone has to do it, I guess?"

"No, they let us do it where only the ones who want to have to take it, thank goodness," she replied. "Of course, that's only fair."

Harry thought about what to write, and decided to make it as short as possible. He wrote: Dear Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, I just wanted to let you know that you needn't come get me at King's Cross this year. I'm going to be staying at the Burrow, the Weasleys' house, from now on when I'm not at Hogwarts. Please say hello to Dudley for me. Sincerely, Harry.

At Hermione's request, Harry read it to the others. After he finished, she said, "I would say it's kind of dry and unfriendly, but they really don't deserve any better, considering how they were to you."

"I didn't want to pretend I'd miss them, because I don't think they'd bother pretending either," Harry agreed.

"Speaking of Dudley," asked Ron, "do you think he's in any special danger from Malfoy? Now that Malfoy's out of here and roaming around?"

"I don't think so," said Harry. "He's still got that sensor, but I should ask the Aurors about that. Maybe I can get them to give me something that would recognize the signal, too. I should probably be there if someone attacks him."

The others exchanged dismayed looks. Neville said, "Good idea, Harry, because that's what we want, you running into dangerous situations that could be dealt with by Aurors." The others were clearly surprised by Neville's sarcasm, but agreed with the sentiment. Neville had an eyebrow raised at Harry, daring Harry to contradict him.

Harry met Neville's eyes. "He is my cousin, Neville, and while he's not my favorite person in the world, it's because of me that he's in any danger. I feel like I should be sure to be around in that kind of situation."

"But the Death Eaters might guess that, Harry, and attack him to draw you there, like Malfoy used Ginny to lure you into the Chamber. You shouldn't be going anywhere they'd expect you to go. You really should let the Aurors do it." The others nodded, concerned that Harry would ignore Neville's advice.

"He's right, Harry, you really shouldn't," agreed Hermione.

“I agree with Hermione, Harry, and you know how seldom that happens,” said Ron, to everyone’s amusement except Hermione’s.

“But Dumbledore said Voldemort doesn’t think to go after people like family members,” pointed out Harry.

“No, Harry, that’s not quite right,” argued Hermione. “What you told us he said was that Voldemort doesn’t do that for the purposes of creating terror. If he wants to intimidate someone, he’ll just threaten or hurt them, he’d figure it’s far more effective. But he clearly does do such things if he thinks they’ll cause a clear, direct reaction that benefits him. Last year, when he knew how close you were to Sirius, he sent you those images knowing it would get you to come. He doesn’t know that you and Dudley aren’t that close, he might assume you are, and that it would work as well. I know how stubborn you are, Harry, but you have to see my point.”

Harry sighed, frustrated. “I have mentioned, haven’t I, that I hate it when you’re right?”

“Once or twice,” she affirmed, with a small smile.

“All right, I won’t try to get the Aurors to let me help if that happens. Come to think of it, they might not have let me anyway.”

“That’s true, they’re pretty smart,” commented Neville. They got back to their homework, as Harry wondered how he was going to find the time to study for the Astronomy O.W.L., and whether he even should. What was he going to need an Astronomy O.W.L. for, anyway?

Harry woke the next morning at six o’clock, unusually early for a Sunday. He didn’t go back to sleep because of the content of his last dream of the night; it was another one involving Dumbledore. Dumbledore was talking to him, but it was as though it was from a great distance, and Harry could barely make out what he was saying. Harry’s best guess was that it was something to the effect that he shouldn’t worry, that everything would be all right. I wish that were true, he thought.

He would have gone to breakfast, but he wanted to wait for the others, especially Ginny. So he went to the common room and chatted with some people who had gotten up early, and ten minutes later, Hermione came out of her dormitory. Remembering an idea he'd had yesterday, he asked her if she'd help him research something in the library later. She said, "Sure, I'll probably be spending most of my time there today anyway, except for the Neville hour. I try really hard to set aside an hour a day for him. I wish it could be more, but sometimes it's tough to do even that much."

"Same thing with me and Ginny," he agreed. "Fortunately, I don't have to work quite as hard on homework as you do. Because of Auror training, today's my only free day, and I definitely want some time with Ginny."

"Then you shall have it," said Ginny from behind as she ran a hand through his hair affectionately. "It's nice to hear you talking about me when you think I'm not there. Especially when you're saying nice things about me."

He turned, smiled, and mouthed 'I love you' to her, which she did in return. The three of them talked until Ron and Neville came down almost a half hour later. After breakfast, Hermione and Neville went off to the library, while Ron, Harry, and Ginny decided to have a fly. To Harry's surprise, Pansy joined them, saying she'd never really taken the time to fly, and that she'd like to try it. They flew slowly and easily at first to help Pansy acclimate, then flew as fast as she could keep up with. After a while Harry and Ron raced on their Firebolts, while the girls watched with amusement; Harry thought he heard Pansy make a comment about men being competitive as they passed once.

Afterwards, Harry headed to the library, letting Ron and Ginny assume it was something to do with schoolwork. He found Hermione with several books spread out in front of her, as usual. "Oh, Harry, that's right, you wanted my help with something. What was it?"

"Are you familiar with something called the Joining of Hands?" he asked.

“Sure. It’s not talked about in our usual texts, but it’s mentioned in some of the outside reading I’ve—“ She broke off and eyed him curiously. “You want to do it, don’t you? That’s why you’re asking.”

“I’m thinking about it,” he replied. “I only found out about it yesterday, and it sounds like something I’d like to do. I want to know more about it before I even talk about it with Ginny. But yes, I’m interested in doing it.”

She smiled. “That’s so like you, Harry. I should have guessed that you’d be a total romantic once you fell in love. You don’t do anything halfway, if you think it’s important. Okay, let’s go look for some books on it.”

As Harry expected, she quickly found several books mentioning the subject, and wizarding wedding customs in general. They started looking through them, and a half hour later, they talked about what they’d found. They had confirmed everything Dentus had said about it, and found a few new bits of information, such as that when the two people spoke to each other, the one listening heard the voice in their head, not out loud. They found no information about negative effects, and Harry discovered that his mind was made up. “I’m going to ask her,” he told Hermione.

“Why am I not surprised,” she said. Then, more seriously, she asked, “Are you doing this because she’s insecure about losing you? Because, since this is irreversible, it’s a way of committing to her more strongly?”

He thought for a minute, and said, “Not exactly, though that’s a really good thing about it. It’s mainly that it’ll be very convenient, and I like the idea that I can see her any time I want. I suppose it’s also the case that I like the symbolism of it, and it could help with her insecurity. But I’d want to do it anyway. And thanks for helping me with this, I know you’re really busy.”

“I always have time for a friend who’s thinking about a major life decision,” she said humorously. “Good luck.” He thanked her, and left.

Harry and Ginny were going to head out to their favorite couples’ spot after lunch, but had to wait for a half hour because two Ravenclaw seventh years were

already there. Ginny wanted to go as soon as they saw the Ravenclaws leave the spot, but Harry wanted to wait for them to return to the castle, so they wouldn't pass them on the way. She chided him for caring, especially since the Ravenclaws were doing just the same thing she and he would be.

Harry waited until they had been there for about fifteen minutes, then brought the subject up. "Do you know about a marriage custom called the Joining of Hands?"

"Not much, just a little. Only because Mum has a friend who had it done, she told me about it once. Why?"

Harry wondered if Ginny wasn't as quick to catch on as Hermione, or if she didn't want to reach the same conclusion for fear she might be wrong and look bad. "I was thinking... I'd like us to do it."

She looked at him as if scrutinizing his eyes carefully for any hints of doubt. "Are you serious? You know it's permanent, right?"

"I know," he said, looking into her eyes. "I want to do it."

She gave him a brilliant smile and melted into his arms. "Of course I want to. I even daydreamed about this once, I imagined looking into my palm and seeing you, I can't believe you want to. It's funny, in a way it's like you're asking me to marry you. You know this is done at weddings, right?"

"I know, but you know how I feel about this. I want to be with you for the rest of my life, so I just assumed we'd get married. I just haven't asked because we're still way too young."

She kissed him on the cheek a few times, then held him again. "I almost don't know what to say. Sometimes when I think of how you feel about me, I think about how the first years feel about you. You have a hard time accepting it, and so do I. You really don't care that I'll be able to see you anytime I want by looking at my hand?"

He shook his head. "I think it'll be great."

“Of course, it won’t be for a long time until we can do this, either,” she pointed out.

“No,” he said. “I want to do this now.”

She was startled. “Now? We can’t do it now, like you said, we’re too young to get married! Much as I’d love to...”

“Hermione was helping me research it earlier,” he said. “It’s usually done as part of a wedding ceremony, but there’s no law that says it has to be; it can be done anytime. As for our ages, I can do it since I’m of age. You can do it if you have your parents’ permission.”

“I think they’d give it,” she said, smiling cautiously. “Mum would want to, and Dad wouldn’t argue, he’d probably be okay too. It would be great to have it now, but I’d always pictured it as part of a wedding ceremony. I’m curious, why do you want to do it now especially?”

“I heard that it’s best if the strongest wizard possible performs the spell. Dumbledore knows it, he’s done it before. I want him to be the one to do it.”

Her expression became somber. “And he’s not going to be able to be there at our wedding..” She nodded. “I understand. Yes, Harry, I want to do it. I’m so amazed and excited that you want to, I can’t believe it. How soon can we talk to Mum and Dad?”

“I was thinking... after we’re finished here, we’ll go to Dumbledore and ask him for permission to talk to your parents, we can use Fawkes. If they say yes, then we’ll ask him at dinner tonight.”

She looked at him, even more in love than before, hard as that was for him to imagine. “I adore you, Harry. I just feel so... I don’t have words for what I want to say. You’ve made me very, very happy.” She kissed him passionately, with an energy she never had before. He lost himself in the feeling, thinking of nothing else.

Dumbledore gave his permission for Harry and Ginny to visit the Weasleys, and Molly excitedly gave her permission before asking Arthur, which amused him. “I see it’s not necessary for me to say anything, but I’ll just say that even if I didn’t approve, I would never say no, because I can see how strongly you two feel about it. I do approve, in any case. I assume you’ve thought this through?”

Arthur was clearly not totally reassured to know that Harry had thought about it for only a day, and Ginny for an hour, but after asking them some questions, he was satisfied that they sufficiently knew what they were getting into to have it done. They all talked for a half hour or so more, then Harry and Ginny returned to Hogwarts.

They spent the rest of the afternoon studying, then took Fawkes to Dumbledore’s quarters to have their Sunday dinner with him. They talked about Dumbledore’s career, and Ginny asked questions about his wife. After they had finished eating, Harry remembered something he had wanted to ask about. As he started to speak, Harry caught himself as he was about to say ‘Sir..’ Dumbledore had requested that both Harry and Ginny simply call him Albus at the dinners, since they were there as friends, not headmaster, teacher, and student. It had been hard for Harry to get used to, and even harder for Ginny.

“Albus, I wanted to mention these dreams I’ve been having... seems like I’m always dreaming about something, last year it was from Voldemort, then recently the Veil, and now... for a few weeks, ever since I found out, you’ve appeared in my dreams maybe three or four times a week. Nothing really happens in them, I just see your face, it’s all very vague. A few times I barely remembered the dream at all, and I only noticed it because it’s happened several times. Do you think it means anything?”

Dumbledore considered. “Well, the obvious interpretation would be that it may be part of the process of your adjusting to my departure. Our minds operate on both conscious and unconscious levels, and each one may do things differently. You had no particular impressions from anything in the dreams?”

“In the one this morning, it seemed like you were trying to tell me not to worry, that everything would be all right, but I couldn’t tell for sure. When I woke up, all I could think was, everything would be all right if you weren’t leaving, but I knew that wasn’t going to happen. Do you think I’m just dreaming that because I want it to be the case?”

“Dreams are so subjective that it is difficult to say. It is not impossible, of course. One possibility, more spiritually based, is that your spirit knows that there is nothing to worry about, that our spirits will meet again, as yours will with Sirius and your parents. You do not have the context to understand this properly in your physical form, so you are given assurances which you cannot help but find vague.”

“So, you think we have spirits?” asked Ginny.

“Yes, Ginny, I do. I have not had a spiritual encounter personally with someone who has passed beyond the physical realm, but I have talked to many who have. My talent as a Legilimens was not required to know that these mystics are genuine, compassionate, and highly spiritually developed. They describe communication with those who have passed away, contact with spiritual beings, and an understanding of the nature of the universe which we in the physical realm cannot fully comprehend.”

“Why couldn’t we comprehend it?” Harry wondered.

“Because our minds are not equipped to, and our language lacks the concepts required. To make an analogy, we have five senses, and even those do not accept all the information they could. There are sounds we cannot hear, colors we cannot see. Dogs can smell things we cannot. We are equipped to live in our physical world; our bodies are tools that enable us to do so. But it is not so strange to think that in other realms, there are types of sensory input, ideas, or information which we could not process, lacking the proper senses or frame of reference to do so.”

“Is that the kind of thing that ghosts can understand, since they’re not physical anymore?” asked Ginny.

“I don’t think so,” answered Harry before Dumbledore did. “I talked to Nick about Sirius after he died, I was hoping he would come back a ghost, but Nick said he wouldn’t. He said that ghosts are mainly there because they’re afraid to move on to whatever’s next, they like the comfort and familiarity of their surroundings. So I’d guess they wouldn’t know that kind of stuff.”

“Harry is right, though perhaps Nick is being too hard on himself,” said Dumbledore. “It may be better to say that they are drawn here, that they feel they still have something to do or resolve. Granted, some stay for less high-minded reasons, such as Myrtle, who wished to haunt those who had mocked her, and has become ensconced in a despair of her own making. She seems terribly sad, but she is comfortable. But yes, ghosts have no greater spiritual insight than do the still living.”

“Just as an example, Albus, I’m wondering... what will happen to Myrtle, eventually? Will she just stay at Hogwarts, in that toilet, forever?”

“No, Harry, she will not, nor will any ghost. They will move on when they feel ready to do so. For some it may take a few days; for others, five hundred years, but it really does not matter. We all do what we do at our own pace. Myrtle will eventually feel bored or restless, and will choose to move on.”

“So, then, what happens after they, after we, move on? You said I would see you, Sirius, and my parents again?”

“Yes, you will. Time works differently in the nonphysical realms, so it is not as though your parents will have to wait for, say, seventy years to commune with you. To them it will seem as though no time has passed. We take the idea of time for granted, but it has relevance only to us.”

Now Harry was confused. “How can there be any place where there’s no such thing as time? Everything we do takes time, and even if we were existing as spirits, wouldn’t we still be thinking, and wouldn’t that take time?”

“In a sense, yes,” Dumbledore explained, “but in a sense, no. Think about how we measure time, by the movement of the planets, of physical objects in the

universe. In the spiritual realm, there are no physical objects, so how would time be measured? In the nonphysical realm, things may feel as if they take time, but they do not; everything happens at the same time. I know this is difficult to comprehend, as it starts to reach the conceptual constraints our physicality imposes on us.

“But to answer your question about what happens after we move on, the answer is, we do what we choose. Many may return to the physical realm; this is what is called reincarnation. We have new bodies, a new identity, but the same spirit. Some may stay in the nonphysical realm, or move on to other physical realms. The concept of infinity is another that our minds are not equipped to handle well, but there is an infinite number of realities of which we may choose to experience, and an infinite amount of time for us to do it in. Our spirits are eternal, they can never die. Our bodies die, but they are meant to, so that we may have a variety of experience. That is why I am not disturbed about leaving. I know that, as your dream said, it will be all right.”

Harry was silent, not knowing what to say. Finally he said, “It’s funny... if someone else, one of these mystics, maybe, had told me this, I would have thought that it was an interesting theory, and maybe it was true, but we couldn’t know, or at least I couldn’t know. But you telling me is more like, it must be true, since Albus said it was.”

Dumbledore chuckled. “I appreciate the compliment, but there are many sources of accurate information; it is simply a matter of recognizing them. Legilimency is a help in such matters, though most people learn in time to distinguish those who understand what they are talking about from those who do not. Still, Harry, that does bring up something I wished to discuss with you. Before I depart, I would like to teach you Legilimency, or at least, start the process. You could get by without it, but it is a highly useful skill to have. I am confident that you can be well along the road in learning it by the time I must go. I know it is another imposition on your already limited free time, but—“

”Albus, you know there’s nothing I’d rather do than spend my limited free time with you, even if it was just to watch the sunset. I’d really like to learn it, also. It would really help me in dealing with Ministry types. Even with Archibald’s help, I still feel lost sometimes.”

“Yes, it would be beneficial in that regard in particular. Let us say, then, we should set aside forty-five minutes a day for the purpose. Is there a particular time of day that suits you?”

Harry had started to think about it when Ginny spoke. “He can see you at four o’clock, after his last class, every weekday.” Harry looked at her sharply; that was their usual time to spend alone, either taking a walk outside or in the couples’ places. Ginny looked back forcefully with a look that said ‘Don’t argue with me.’ Harry looked resigned and nodded.

Dumbledore looked at Ginny fondly. “It is very generous of you, Ginny, to sacrifice your time with Harry, which I know is precious to you.”

“We can find other time,” she said, giving Harry a loving look. “Even if it’s not too long, the important thing is that I know he wants to.”

“Oh, that reminds me,” said Harry. “Speaking of spending time together, there’s something we’d like to ask you to do.”

Dumbledore nodded. “Yes, I know what it is, Harry. I will do it.” To Harry’s startled look, Dumbledore continued, “Archibald contacted me later last night and told me of your conversation. He said he felt it was even money that you would be asking me to perform the Joining of Hands for you within the next twenty-four hours. I do not gamble, as he knows, but I would not have taken him up on it even if I did. In any case, I assumed that you went to Arthur and Molly earlier to seek their permission for Ginny, and were granted it. It would please me greatly to do as you ask.”

Harry smiled. “I guess I should have somehow expected you’d know. I’m really glad you’ll do it, Albus. It means a lot to me that it’s you, to both of us. For some reason, I’m almost surprised that you agreed without giving me some

warning; both Archibald and Arthur did, just to make sure I wasn't running rashly into something I wasn't ready for, or didn't understand."

"I am confident that you are doing it for the right reasons, so I am not concerned. I had it done myself, and it was never anything but pleasant. I am sure it will be so for you. When would you like me to do it?"

"We'd like you to do it now, if you wouldn't mind," said Ginny. "But we have to get my parents here. Mum said that her only condition for saying yes was that they got to be there when it was done. We should also get the other four," she said to Harry.

He agreed. "I'll get out the map, find out where they are, then go get them. I kind of wish I had your dog spell, that would be much better."

"Then you should use it, Harry. Mine is really quite simple. Just visualize the dog, and instruct it what to do. Then summon it, and it will go off and find the person in question."

Harry decided that his dog would be silver, and that it would be slightly larger, medium-sized, and shaggy; he had always liked long-haired dogs. He saw it in his mind, asked it to find Hermione, and lead her back to where he was. He also decided to specifically ask it to behave affectionately. Then he summoned it, and it shimmered into existence. It barked once, then went running off.

Ginny smiled with delight. "It's so cute! Harry, we should get a real dog like that someday."

"Then we will," he agreed. He felt more partial to dogs than cats; he wondered if it was because Sirius had been a dog. He focused on Ron's dog next; it went running off as well. Harry chuckled to himself. "What's so funny?" asked Ginny.

"That one was for Ron. I asked it to be extra-affectionate to him when it found him."

Ginny laughed, imagining what would happen. Harry summoned two more, one for Neville and one for Pansy. A few minutes later, there was a knock on the door of Dumbledore's quarters, and all four of his friends entered.

"That didn't look like his dog, Harry," said Hermione. "Did you do that?"

"Professor Dumbledore taught me how to do it," he said. The others looked impressed.

"It's really cute," said Hermione. "Did you make Ron's different on purpose?"

Grinning, Harry nodded. Hermione, Neville, and Pansy broke up laughing. Ron smiled tolerantly at Harry, giving him a friendly shove to the shoulder.

"I wasn't there, but I ran into them on the way, they told me what happened," said Pansy, still chuckling. "Apparently it plowed Ron over, licking his face and barely letting him up. It sounded hilarious."

"The three of us were in the common room," said Neville. "Hermione's came first, she figured out that it was probably from you. It was affectionate, but in a more normal way. The whole common room was watching, it was so unusual. Then Ron's came in, practically attacked him, and everybody was laughing really hard. It was great."

"Leave it to you, mate, to use a new spell and have a go at me at the same time," said Ron.

"He did it to me, too," pointed out Hermione. "Remember the class where we started on silent spells?"

Ron chuckled. "Ah, yes, that was good. So, were you just practicing the spell? Or did you want us here particularly?"

Harry looked at Hermione. "You didn't tell them?"

"I thought you should be the ones to do it. I was so happy when I saw the dog, I knew what it meant."

Holding Ginny around the waist, Harry said, “Ginny and I have decided to have the Joining of Hands done.” Ron’s eyebrows shot up, Pansy smiled, and Neville looked blank. Hermione explained it to Neville.

“That’s great, you two,” enthused Pansy.

“But why did you call us down here?” asked Ron. “You won’t be doing it until you get married, there was nothing urgent.”

“We’re going to do it now, Ron,” said Ginny to her brother. “Professor Dumbledore is going to do it, in the next ten minutes or so.” Ron and Pansy were gaping.

“It was important to us that Professor Dumbledore be the one to do it,” explained Harry. The others nodded, understanding what he meant. Turning to Dumbledore, he asked, “Should I use Fawkes to go get Arthur and Molly, or can I just ask Fawkes to do it himself?”

Fawkes disappeared. “It appears that you just did,” said an amused Dumbledore. A few seconds later Arthur and Molly appeared, holding Fawkes’s tail.

“Harry, Ginny, are you ready?” asked Dumbledore. They took a step toward him and said they were. “You must each now decide which hand you would like it to be,” said Dumbledore.

“I hadn’t thought of that,” admitted Harry. He held each hand in front of his face to see which seemed better. “I guess I’ll take the left, in case I want to be holding my wand at the same time.” Ginny decided the same thing.

“Most people who are right-handed choose the left, and vice versa,” said Dumbledore. “You should hold hands with your left hands, then. Please stand facing each other, Harry, a bit to the right, so you can comfortably hold each other’s left hands.” Harry felt a bit tense; not nervous, but he understood the importance of the occasion. He knew it was a turning point in his life, as falling in love with her had been. He was happy, and wanted to appreciate the moment.

Harry had read that there was no prescribed reading or speech that the one doing the spell was supposed to say, like in a wedding ceremony. He wondered if Dumbledore would say anything in particular.

“Harry, Ginny... I have performed this spell many times, and this is the first one that was not part of a wedding ceremony. Yet in a way, it is the ceremony itself. Part of the reason you do this is for the practical value of having a simple, easy way to communicate with the person with whom you would most like to communicate. But part of the reason is your desire to affirm to each other and your loved ones your intention to spend the rest of your lives together. Vows can be rescinded; this cannot.

“When I am asked to do this, if I am not acquainted with the couple, I interview them first, using my talent as a Legilimens. If I sense that they do not have a strong enough bond, or are getting married for inappropriate reasons, I decline to perform the spell. Though you two will be questioned for doing this at such a young age, rarely have I felt a bond as strong as yours. Both of you feel love in abundant quantity, you are friends, you know each other well, and you are determined that your relationship and your love will endure. This is the last time I will perform this spell, and it is an honor and a privilege that it be for the two of you, about whom I care so very much.”

Harry felt himself tearing up, and was sure others there, especially Hermione, were as well. He gripped Ginny’s hand a bit more tightly, and she his.

Dumbledore did not say an incantation, but waved his wand around them twice in a circle over their heads, once around their hands, then tapped their joined hands in such a way that the tip of the wand touched both their hands at the same time.

“The Joining is complete,” he said. “You will now see in your hands the love that you see in each other’s eyes, and feel in your hearts.” They immediately looked at their left hands. Harry saw Ginny’s face; her expression was rapturous, and he knew it was because she was seeing him in her hand. While he knew that at any

given time she would look normal, or bored, he also knew that she would feel the tingling they both felt in their hands now, know that he was looking at her, and smile.

They looked up from their hands at almost the same time, wearing nearly identical expressions of love and happiness. Then they kissed, and their friends clapped and cheered. Harry stepped forward and hugged Dumbledore. "Thank you, Albus," he said, fighting off tears. "It was my pleasure, Harry," Dumbledore responded, letting Harry go and getting a hug from Ginny. Then Molly hugged him, after which Arthur did too, for the first time. He then hugged all his friends, and they him, enthusiastically. "It was like you got married," said Ron as he hugged Harry. "That was how it felt," Harry said. "We just cheated on the age thing." Ron laughed and patted Harry on the back. "I'm thrilled, mate." He went to hug Hermione, who said, "It was wonderful, Harry, I'm so happy for you," then whispered, "Ron and Pansy were holding hands while Dumbledore was talking." Harry laughed, and let go of her. Having finished hugging everyone, he looked at his hand, which showed Ginny's face as she hugged Neville. She looked over at him, a loving and amused expression on her face as she felt her hand tingle.

He thought about the wedding he would no doubt have in two or three years. If he and Ginny permitted it to be so, Harry knew it would be a huge event, over which much hoopla would be made, which anyone in the wizarding world would want to attend. He knew that what he had just experienced would always be much more meaningful and precious in his memory. Then Ginny came up to him, gave him a quick kiss, and stayed with him as they talked to their friends for another half hour before leaving Dumbledore's quarters.

The six of them walked back to Gryffindor Tower, chatting happily; Pansy stayed with them until they reached the portrait hole. In the common room, they told the astounded Gryffindors what had happened; it had to be explained to many of them. They fielded the expected questions, such as whether they were too young, and accepted congratulations. A few asked to look at their hands while they looked

at each other, but Harry knew from his reading that only the people themselves could see each other in their hands. Finally, he and the other four were left to themselves.

“I suppose,” said Neville, “that for you, the best part of this is that you get to talk to each other even from your beds. That’ll be pretty neat.”

“Yes, that’s an extra bonus,” Ginny agreed. “The nice thing about doing it now is that if we had done it when we got married, we wouldn’t have needed it so much. Because of the lack of privacy, now is when it’ll be the most useful. But as far as the beds go, we can, but we have to stop when Harry does his Occlumency exercises. If I look at him while he does that, it’ll distract him, and I’m afraid that if I do it after, it might make the Occlumency less effective. So we have to stop at a certain point.”

“You would anyway, of course, just to get to sleep,” pointed out Hermione. “Otherwise, you’d have a situation where, say, she’s almost asleep, he looks at her, and it distracts her just enough so she can’t get to sleep. So I’d imagine that for any Joined couple that weren’t sleeping in the same bed, there would have to be a time at which they agreed to stop looking.”

“Do you think it would wake you up, if I looked at you before you woke up?” asked Ginny.

“I don’t know, I doubt it,” Harry said. “The tingling isn’t very strong, and I think I’m not what you’d call a light sleeper.”

Ginny grinned. “That’s another one of those things I’m looking forward to finding out.” They all chuckled. “But I have to wait a few more years, unfortunately.”

“So, am I going to hear you talking to her late at night?” asked Ron, who to Harry’s surprise was not suggesting by his tone that it would be a problem.

“I don’t think so,” answered Hermione. “The information I read said that when the couple talks to each other, the one talking can do it in the barest whisper,

and as long as it's audible, the other person will hear it fine. So I doubt it'll get through the curtains on the beds.”

They talked for a while longer, and it was time to go to bed. They said good night, and Harry wondered if the others were especially watching him say goodnight to Ginny, as they would expect them to look especially happy that for them, it was not really goodnight.

Harry changed into his nightclothes and climbed into bed. He picked up *Reborn From the Ashes*, read it for about ten minutes, then looked at his hand. He saw Ginny talking, and he saw her smile as she felt him look at her. It was obvious that she was talking to her dormitory-mates, so Harry waited until she finished what she was saying, then whispered, “No hurry, just let me know when you're done talking to them. I love you.” She smiled again as she listened to another girl talking. Harry thought about putting his hand down, but he decided to just lie there and keep watching. He knew he probably wouldn't do this much after the first few days, but it felt good right then, so he just wanted to enjoy it. He watched her talk, but couldn't hear what she was saying; it seemed that for him to hear her, she had to be talking to him.

About ten minutes later, he saw her get up and move to her own bed. At least he imagined by looking at her face that that was what she was doing, only her face showed in his hand, nothing in her background. Now she was concentrating; he imagined that she was pulling back the curtains of her bed, then changing into her nightclothes. He assumed that her robe would go over her head at some point, but he never saw it; he guessed that he would only see her face, nothing else, and that even if she wore a mask he would still see her face. Finally, he felt his hand tingle as she looked at him.

“Have you been looking at me all this time?” he heard her ask in his head. “I can't be that interesting.”

“Well, all I know is I'm very interested in you,” he answered in as low a whisper as he could manage. She smiled as he added, “It's also the newness of it, of

course. I probably won't look at you for so long when you're doing something else all the time. I still will sometimes, though, I imagine. Were they asking you questions?"

"Yes, they're being nice about it. They know this means I'm more or less married, and they know that they shouldn't expect me to join them that much anymore. They just wanted to know what I thought about this, why I did it, that sort of thing."

"Why did you tell them you did it?" he asked, curious.

"First, I said, this extremely desirable man is offering to chain himself to me, who am I to say no?" she said with a grin. Harry chuckled. "But they asked more seriously, and I just told them that I'm totally in love with you and I want to be close to you in whatever way I can, and that we're both hopeless romantics. They were impressed by that, and even more impressed that this was your idea. You know, of course I was joking about the chain comment, but I'm sure that this will help the next time I get an insecurity attack. That had to be somewhere in your mind when you were thinking of this."

"Yes, but like I told Hermione, I would've done this anyway," he said. "It's so great to be able to do this, what we're doing. I don't know why more people don't do it. I wanted to ask your parents why they didn't, but I thought it might be rude, so I didn't."

"Yes, we do have to be careful about acting like other people should do this, or like they're not so committed if they don't," Ginny agreed. "I can understand why some people wouldn't want to do this. There's a huge amount of trust involved, because you're giving away so much of your privacy."

"But wouldn't you have to totally trust someone anyway, to be married to them?" Harry asked.

"I suppose so, but I think for this, it's even more so. Or you could say, there are greater risks in the other person abuses it. Can you imagine what would happen if one of the people just started talking to the other person all the time, even when

it wasn't wanted? You could drive a person crazy, it'd be this voice they could never get out of their head."

"When I researched it with Hermione, what we read mentioned situations like that," said Harry. "Archibald said it was a common subject for tragic popular fiction, which I can believe; there's all kinds of possibilities."

"Well, let's hope I don't get unbalanced and start talking to you all the time," she joked.

He smiled. "I'm not worried about that. He paused, then said, "I really love you. Funny, I feel like I say that too much sometimes, way more than I think most people say it."

"You can never say that too much," she said emphatically. "And besides, we can't know how much other people say it, since it's usually something people say when they're alone. My parents could say it ten times a day and I'd never know. They don't seem like they do, but you know what I mean. Don't ever feel like you're saying it too much. I promise you, that's not possible."

He nodded. "I just had a strange thought... if a year ago someone had shown me how I am now, I would've thought they were being stupid. I've changed so much, and the strange thing is, it wouldn't have happened if it wasn't for Voldemort."

"I think it would have happened anyway, just not as soon." Ginny answered. "You found this love within yourself, but that meant it was always there, it just needed a reason to come out. It would have come out when you fell in love; you just had a chance to get comfortable with it before that happened. But I see what you mean, you might not have been so unreserved about it. The Voldemort thing made you totally embrace it, because you felt like you had to."

"I did have to, believe me," he replied. "I barely got past those dreams in September. That reminds me... when I looked at you in the Chamber, and realized that I was in love with you, I also realized that you had looked at me like that once

before, on the morning of the fourth dream, when you kissed me on the cheek. Do you remember that?”

“Vividly,” she answered. “I was a little worried, because I thought it was obvious, like I had just revealed myself or something. I felt like I had told you I was in love with you without saying the words. I knew I couldn’t say the words, because of how you felt about having a girlfriend. But I thought you might have known, and I worried that you knew but didn’t feel the same way. Thank goodness I was wrong.”

“No, I didn’t get it from that,” he said. “I knew that look meant something, I just didn’t know what. But now I think a part of me did know, but refused to recognize it because I was so scared. I guess it just had to take some more time before I felt like I was ready.”

They spent a while longer talking about how they fell in love and what they were thinking along the way. Finally, a half hour later than usual, they stopped talking so Harry could do his Occlumency before he slept. They signed off by saying ‘I love you,’ which Harry felt sure would be the way they would do that every night. He did his Occlumency practice, and was asleep soon after that. He dreamed, and there was Dumbledore again, saying that everything would be all right, a bit more clearly this time. When he woke up, he again barely remembered it.

They had decided the night before to, as a test, look at the other one as soon as they got up, so that one would see the other sleeping, and see whether it woke them up. Harry felt the mild tingling as soon as he woke, and looked at his hand to see Ginny’s smiling face. He smiled back at her and asked, “How long have you been looking?”

“About ten minutes,” she said. “It’s safe to say that it doesn’t wake you up, anyway. It was nice to watch you sleep, you looked very peaceful.”

“I’ll have to try to wake up earlier than you sometime soon, so I can see how you look,” he replied. They didn’t talk to each other on their hands for very long, because they would be able to talk in person soon.

Pansy joined the other five earlier than usual, eating with them instead of joining them after she ate. “I guess this means you want a report,” said Ginny as they sat down. Pansy nodded. “It was really nice,” Ginny continued. “It was what I imagine it’s like when you’re married, you can lie down in bed together and talk to each other, really relaxed. Except for not being able to touch him, that is. But you’re lying down, you’re going to sleep soon, but you can talk, you can see him. It’s wonderful.” Her face and smile made the last words unnecessary, Harry thought.

He and Ginny answered questions about it through most of breakfast, and talked about how it would affect them in their classes. “I’ll bet,” Ginny said, “that now all my teachers will be on the lookout for me looking into my hand. I’ll have to be careful.”

“Well, you can look anytime you want, as far as I’m concerned,” said Harry. “If I’m teaching, I won’t be able to respond, of course, but that doesn’t mean you can’t look, or tell me something quick if you want to.”

“I’ll try not to talk to you, that could be a bit distracting. But I might look.”

“But you can see him all the time anyway,” pointed out Ron. “What’s the point of looking when you can’t even talk to him?”

The girls all looked amused that he would ask the question. “I know that looking at Harry doesn’t have the same appeal for you that it does for me, Ron, but—“

”You know what I mean,” said Ron, rolling his eyes.

“I know. Just having fun. I think it’s something about being in love, when you look, you don’t just see the other person, you see their love for you. I don’t know if I can explain it more than that. It just feels really good.” Harry thought that was a good enough explanation.

A little later, as he walked into his morning class, he was surprised to get a round of applause from his first years. He looked at them quizzically; Helen looked a little annoyed at his being dense, and said, "It's because you got married, Professor."

"Well, not exactly, but—"

"Close enough," she interrupted, then looked embarrassed, realizing what she'd done; the students knew they weren't supposed to interrupt professors.

"Sorry, sir," she said, to chuckles from Harry and the other students. "But Pansy told us all about it when she got back last night. It sounded like a wedding. I know it's not really, but she said in a way it's even more than that. You can't take back what you did."

"Why did you do that, sir?" asked David Septus.

"Because he's really brave," joked Hedrick, prompting Augustina to throw a quill at him, to general laughter.

"Because he loves her," said Helen, pointedly, to Hedrick.

"Yes, of course that's true," said Harry, "but lots of people who love each other don't have this done, and it doesn't mean they love each other any less. I guess it's just different for different people; some would be comfortable with this, some wouldn't be." Just as he finished the sentence, he felt his hand tingle. He thought they might be interested to know, since they were asking about it, so he told them. "Talk to her!" urged Helen, and the others seemed interested for him to as well. He looked at his hand and spoke in a normal tone so his students could hear what he was saying.

"You're in class, how is it you can look at me? You can answer, my students wanted me to answer you."

He listened to her answer, then said to the class, "She's in Herbology and they're looking at plants, so she can talk a little." To her, he said, "I bet Professor Sprout will know, she'll say something to me later. By the way, Hedrick said he

thinks the reason I did this is that I'm really brave." He glanced up and grinned at Hedrick, who now looked embarrassed as the class roared its laughter.

"That'll teach you," said Augustina.

Harry listened for the answer. Looking at Hedrick, he said, "She laughed, and she said, 'Tell him I agree with him.'" Now Hedrick smiled as the rest laughed. "I'd better get back to my class now," he said to her, and put down his hand. He had to spend another ten minutes answering questions about the Joining before he could get on with his class.

In the staff room later, he got another round of applause when he walked in. Embarrassed, he accepted their congratulations. "Definitely the youngest married couple we've ever had at Hogwarts," commented Flitwick. "And yes, I know it's not a legal marriage, but it's a marriage all the same. You just got around the laws."

"What I wonder is, is this going to inspire other younger couples to do the same thing," said Professor Vector. "We could see a surge in this kind of thing, once it becomes known that you did it."

Harry raised his eyebrows. "I'd hate to think that somebody would do this just because I did."

"People now say 'Voldemort' just because you did," pointed out Flitwick.

"But that's different," argued Harry. "We have to be able to say his name to fight him. People don't have to be able to talk to each other on their hands."

"No, but it's what it represents," responded Flitwick. "It means that you're so in love that you'll brush aside any risks, and do what your heart tells you to do even though you don't have to, when the prudent thing would be to wait. Romantics will swoon over it, and regular people will give it a thought where they might not have before. It's also a strong endorsement of the idea of commitment. But then, you probably didn't think about how it would look to anybody but you and Ginny, did you?" Harry shook his head. "Well, if this picks up in the next few years, we'll know why," Flitwick concluded.

“I think it’s wonderful, Harry,” said Sprout. “But you will tell your beloved not to talk to you any more from my class, won’t you?”

Harry smiled as the teachers chuckled. “I don’t think she’ll do it again,” he said. “It’s just so new, I suppose.”

“If I see you so much as look at your palm in Potions, Professor, for whatever reason,” said Snape, “I will give Miss Weasley a detention.”

Harry chuckled, as he had no intention of coming close to that with Snape around, but McGonagall bristled. “That would be absolutely inappropriate, Professor,” she reprimanded him. “You should not penalize one student for the conduct of another.”

“He did, earlier this year,” Snape pointed out, referring to the Snackboxes.

“He’s right about that,” Harry conceded. “Of course, I didn’t goad her into it, like that time. But obviously he’s not serious, Professor,” he said to McGonagall. To Snape’s sharp glance, he quickly amended, “I mean, I don’t doubt that he would do it, but he knows I’m not going to do that. I’m on my best behavior in his class.”

“Really,” commented Flitwick dryly. “And what sort of behavior do the rest of us get from you?”

Harry thought for a minute. “My normal behavior, I guess.”

Flitwick chuckled. “I suppose that will do.” They talked more about his situation and his impulsive nature, eventually moving off of him as a topic of conversation. Harry reminded himself to be careful about looking anywhere near his hand in Potions.

The next few days and weeks, as usual, passed quickly. Harry found Legilimency very difficult at first, but started to get a feeling for it after the third lesson, which Dumbledore assured him was rapid progress. Harry felt it was because Dumbledore was such a good teacher. He wondered how much of it was because of the close relationship they had; neither had any reservations about opening his mind to the other, which Harry felt helped him to learn faster. In the

seventh lesson, he finally was able to slip into Dumbledore's mind and see images, which were all of love. Harry was very pleased at the breakthrough, but wondered why he and Dumbledore saw such images when they visited each other's minds, but last year with Snape, it had only been images of pain and embarrassment.

"It all depends on the state of mind of the Legilimens," Dumbledore explained. "Professor Snape's state of hostility toward you was reflected in how he used the skill, and it summoned images consistent with that. It could be argued that he did so because such images will give the one studying extra incentive to shut the invader out, but such extreme measures are not necessary, as was proven later with you. Keeping out a friendly mind and a hostile mind are two different things, but a better approach is to learn the easier one first, then the more difficult one."

"So if I practiced with anyone else, their images would be ones of love, the same way," Harry guessed.

Dumbledore nodded. "If they were not, it would mean that you harbored hostility toward that person, and certainly should not be practicing with them. I was going to mention, Harry, that I think it would be advisable for you to practice this with one of your friends, if they are willing. It would assist you greatly, but I do have one caution: it should not be Ginny with whom you practice. I am not suggesting that you would accidentally see something either of you would find objectionable, but it is best not to do that with someone with whom one has an intimate relationship."

Harry doubted there was anything in his memory that he wouldn't want Ginny to see, and thought the reverse was probably true as well, but he could see the reason for it as a general principle. "I understand," he said. "I'll ask someone else." Even though he didn't know who it would be as he started speaking, in a few seconds it was clear to him who he would ask.

After the session, he went to the library and sat next to the ever-present Hermione. He explained what had happened in his lesson with Dumbledore, and what Dumbledore had recommended. She nodded, saying, "Yes, I can really see

what problems could arise. I assume you're here because you want to practice with me."

He nodded. "You're the perfect person. I can't use Ginny, and Ron might do it but he'd be mortified. Pansy or Neville would be possible, but neither of them studied Occlumency like you did before the beginning of the year. You could make me work harder to get in, and help me get better faster. But, and I mean this, I don't want you to do it if you're not comfortable. I mean, when Dumbledore did it with me, it was just images of love, not like with Snape, nothing I'd be embarrassed to have a friend see. I assume it would be the same with you. But, again—"

"All right, Harry," she said, amused. "I appreciate your concern, but like you said, I'm sure it'll be fine. Yes, I'll help you. When would you like to do it?"

"Would now be okay? I just finished the lesson with Dumbledore, it would be fresher in my mind."

"Yes, okay," she agreed. "Probably I could use a break anyway. Your office?"

"Yeah, that's the best place. I'll tell Ginny while you're getting your books together." He held up his hand, and her face appeared. He saw her smile, then his hand tingled. "How was the Legilimency lesson?" she asked.

"Really good, I made kind of a breakthrough," he said quietly, but not a whisper; he didn't mind if Hermione heard. "He suggested I practice with someone else, but that it not be you. He said there can be problems if couples do that."

He saw her nod. "Probably there wouldn't be a problem, but it makes sense. Hermione, right?"

"Not too tough to figure that out, I see. Yeah, we're going to my office. I'll let you know when we're done." He saw her blow him a kiss, and chuckled. "I love you," he said, now whispering, and put down his hand.

Having collected her books, Hermione got up and walked with him out of the library. "Just curious, Harry, were you whispering so I couldn't hear you, or so anyone else couldn't?"

"Anyone else," he said. "It doesn't embarrass you that we do that, does it?"

“Of course not, Harry, this is me,” she said, as if he needn’t have asked. “You’re thinking of Ron. You know I think it’s wonderful that you do that, I would always encourage you.”

“Just making sure. No, I didn’t think I needed to bother keeping my voice down that low. Still getting used to the Joining, I don’t want to do anything to look stupid. I don’t mind looking stupid in front of you, of course.” He looked at Hermione, then continued, “You know, I really appreciate that about you, that I can trust you like that, and be so comfortable around you. I might be embarrassed about something, but I know you’d always be nice about it.”

“Thank you, Harry, that means a lot to me. And while we’re on the subject of appreciation, I wanted to thank you for the fact that you and Ginny haven’t asked me or Neville if we wanted to be Joined too, or suggested that we do it. Not that it would have been terrible if you had, but it just shows you’re being sensitive.”

“‘Sensitive’ isn’t one of the compliments I’ve heard a lot,” he joked, “but I was able to figure that one out. It would just seem rude and arrogant to think everyone else should do what we did. Even though we decided to do it fast, I know it’s a big thing.”

“It did make us think about it, of course,” she said. “We talked about it, and it probably made us talk about our future sooner than we would have. We know it’s still really early for that, and we know we don’t have to decide whether we want to be together for the rest of our lives just because you did. I don’t think either of us feels any pressure. We’re happy with how things are now, and we graduate in another year, so there’s no hurry. I could definitely imagine marrying him, and I think, I hope, he feels the same way about me. I don’t want to put too much pressure on him. But if we did decide to get married, I could imagine it as something I’d be interested in doing. You two certainly seem happy with it so far.”

“Seems that way,” he agreed. “I guess you can see what happens with us, see if there are any problems or not.”

She chuckled as they entered his office. “I certainly hope there aren’t. I don’t think there will be.” She put her bag on the floor. “Okay, so should I try to resist it, or just let you get in if you can?”

“I think it’s better if you don’t resist at first. I just now got to the point where I could get into his mind, and that was without him resisting. If you resisted, I might not be able to do anything at all.” She nodded, and they started. He tried to penetrate her mind as Dumbledore had shown him, but he had lost the feeling for it that he’d had with Dumbledore a while ago. He tried for ten minutes, apologizing once for keeping her from her studying, which amused her. Finally, he was successful; trying to enter her mind, he saw a series of images. She was about five years old, obviously just having cried, being comforted by her mother. She was in one of the couples’ places, telling Neville she loved him, then kissing him. She was hugging Harry in his dormitory the morning after the fifth Voldemort dream, him telling her how much he appreciated her help. She was hugging her father, who appeared to have just returned from a trip, at age nine. She was lying in her dormitory bed, hugging Crookshanks. Harry withdrew from her mind.

“Finally,” he said.

“Harry, to be able to do that after only seven days of study is really impressive. You should be proud.”

He was gratified to hear her say so. “I suppose I am, I guess I’m just not patient with myself. I know it’s a very complicated skill. I feel like it’s this tiny crack in your mind that I can get in through, and it’s really hard to find. But now I sort of have it, I think I could do it again. Now I want you to resist, to use what you learned about Occlumency in August.”

“Okay, give me a minute to concentrate,” she said. She closed her eyes for a few seconds, and said, “Okay, go ahead.” He cast the spell again, searching for the spot he’d just found. It was elusive, but he concentrated... there it was. He started in, but was stopped. He felt a kind of barrier that he didn’t know how to get past. He

tried for a few seconds, then felt the effort of trying becoming too much, his concentration fading. He withdrew.

“I found my way in that time, but you blocked me,” he said. “I’ll try again in a minute, just keep doing what you did.” After a minute, he cast the spell again. He found his way in, he was blocked. He poked and prodded around, looking for a way past the barrier. He would not try to break through by force; not only would it be an aggressive act, but he worried that it might provoke the kind of memories Snape had provoked in him, a chance he refused to take. He kept probing... and suddenly he saw her holding him, telling him she loved him, the first time anyone had ever told him that. He saw her hugging Ron in the Great Hall after he’d read her card, her whispering that she loved him, him whispering ‘I love you, too’ back to her. He saw her and Neville sitting on a bed, reaching over to kiss each other, naked from the waist up—

He recoiled, breaking the connection so fast that it was almost a physical sensation. He looked at her, mortified. “Hermione, I’m so sorry, I had no idea—“

She cut him off with a look. “It’s not your fault, Harry. I wanted to help you, it’s a chance I took. I was hoping that wouldn’t come up, but it’s not the end of the world. I know you didn’t want to see it, don’t feel like you did something wrong.”

He felt like she should be angry with him. “I would never have asked, believe me, if I’d known that was there. How in the world—never mind, I shouldn’t be asking that...” He trailed off in further embarrassment.

She smiled a little, embarrassed for him more than for herself. “You thought we wouldn’t have had enough privacy for anything like that. It was over Easter vacation, at the Burrow when their parents weren’t home. Ginny arranged it and stood guard for us.” She paused, then asked, “Are you angry with me for letting you do that, knowing you could find that?”

His eyebrows raised in surprise at the thought. “Of course not! I just feel terrible for violating your privacy. Look, I’ll try this with Pansy—“

”You know you can’t do that, Harry, you’re not thinking,” she cut him off. “She would do it if she had to, she cares for you that much, but think about who’s involved in a lot of her memories.” Harry immediately understood Hermione’s point; he knew that no memories of love of Pansy’s would feature Malfoy, but memories of him would be bound to come up from time to time if Harry practiced with her. “Not to mention,” added Hermione, “that she’s ashamed of a lot of her past, and you could conceivably see anything. It would be really difficult for her.”

He nodded solemnly. “I didn’t think of that,” he admitted.

“You would have, if you weren’t trying so hard to think of someone else to do it besides me, because you’re embarrassed at what you saw,” she observed. “But I’m the person to do this with, you said so yourself. Ron would make a terrible candidate, you can’t with Ginny, and Neville has the same memory I do. This skill could be important, and you only have a little time while Dumbledore’s still around. You’ll have to practice with someone after he’s gone. Who? It has to be me. Don’t feel bad. I’m a little embarrassed that you saw that, but I’ll deal with it. You dealt with embarrassment, over love, to fight Voldemort. I can deal with this, to help you.”

His emotional reaction was subsiding, and he was able to think more rationally; he could see the sense in what she said. He still felt bad, however, but he felt proud that she would do that for him. “I feel like I’m more embarrassed at what I saw than you are.”

“It was a shock to you, you had no idea. I knew it was there, so I was prepared for the idea that it could show up. I decided to risk it, you didn’t. I thought of warning you, but then you would have insisted on not doing it, and I didn’t want that. It really is important that you learn this. Now, let’s continue, okay?”

His eyes widened. “Are you sure? Is there anything—“

She looked amused at his concern. “No, that was the only time. But when summer comes, we might have to think of something else; I’m hoping things will happen that will be too great a risk for you to see.”

“We can use the Pensieve,” he said. “We should have used it this time.”

She raised her eyebrows. “That’s true,” she said. “I guess I’ve always thought of it as a way of seeing someone else’s memories. I’ve never seen it used for the purpose of hiding a memory, so I didn’t think of it.”

“Snape did it last year. Before each session, he would take out a memory and put it in there. C’mon, let’s go get it.”

She looked impatient. “We don’t need it now. You’ve already seen the memory, it would be pointless.”

“But if we continue, I might see it again. This way, I won’t.”

Exasperated, she said, “Harry, think! It’s in your memory now, you can see it any time you want to. Not that you’d want to especially, but you know what I mean. It’s there. It would be an utterly pointless waste of time to spend ten or fifteen minutes every time we practice this just to hide a memory you already have. Don’t you think?”

Again, he couldn’t argue. “Yes, that makes sense.”

“Also, let me ask you something,” she continued. “You’ve practiced this with Professor Dumbledore, you trying to get into his mind, him not resisting. Did he put any memories into the Pensieve before you did that?”

“No, he didn’t,” Harry admitted.

“I didn’t think so,” she responded. “Why not? Because he loves you, respects you, and trusts you. He figures that if you see anything that might embarrass him, you’ll be an adult about it, you won’t respect him less, it’ll be all right. Of course we all have our privacy, it’s important. But Harry, this is a very intimate thing we’re doing, you have to keep that in mind. I would only do it with someone I felt very, very close to. I think everyone has things, some down deep, that they wouldn’t want anyone else seeing. By doing this with you, I basically said that I trust you with whatever’s in there. If you want to respect that, you can do it by accepting that, and letting me be the judge of what I’ll risk you seeing and what I won’t. How about it?”

“Now I’m embarrassed, but for a different reason,” he said. “I’m sorry, I probably just made this worse for you by acting this way. If you say it’s all right, I should just accept that. At least one of us is acting like an adult.”

She shook her head tolerantly. “You were shocked, Harry, it’s understandable. It’s all right now. Are you all right to continue?”

He nodded, wanting to be as mature about it as she was, and feeling he could barely manage. He tried to calm himself. She trusts you, he thought, she wants you to just accept it and move on. He focused on love, and soon he felt normal again. “Okay, I’m ready. You should try to resist every time from now on.” She closed her eyes, and said she was ready. They practiced for another twenty minutes, and he felt that it was very helpful; he was getting more and more familiar with what he needed to do. He recognized that only practice could help him improve, and it was definitely going to take more practice than he could do in the remaining time with Dumbledore. She was right, he needed her help.

After they finished, he said, “Hermione, I want to thank you... for doing this, and for the trust it shows you have in me. I didn’t understand it properly when I asked you to do this, but I really appreciate it.”

“You would do it for me, Harry,” she said confidently. “In fact, in a way, you have. You’ve shown us stuff in the Pensieve that I think is more personal than what you saw, just personal in a different way. You trusted me, you trusted us with that. You would risk whatever embarrassment you thought was necessary to help me. But I’m glad you appreciate it. Do you want to do this again tomorrow, after your lesson with Dumbledore?”

“Yes, thanks. I really feel like I’m making progress, and that’ll help. By the way, I feel like I need to know... are you going to tell Neville about this? About what I saw?”

“I thought about that... I won’t go out of my way to tell him, but if he asks, or it’s a situation where I’d have to lie to avoid it, then I’ll tell him, I wouldn’t lie to him. I don’t know how uncomfortable he’d be. Knowing the purpose, I think he’d

understand why I risked it. He loves you too, you know. He'd be embarrassed, but he'd be all right. And that reminds me, you should feel free to tell Ginny. I don't want her saying 'how'd it go with Hermione?' and you saying 'fine' and her knowing from your eyes and your face that it wasn't fine."

"I hadn't thought about what I would tell her," he said. "I could just tell her it's something that would violate your privacy if I told her what it was. She'd accept that."

"That's true," she agreed, "But she's the one who set it up, I think she more or less knows what happened. By the way, I assume you never found out what Snape was hiding in the Pensieve last year, did you?"

Speaking of not lying, he thought... "Actually, I did. He got called out of the room, and I couldn't resist, and looked in. He came back and caught me, was furious, and told me not to come back. That was why I stopped taking Occlumency lessons last year."

Surprised, she looked like she was trying to rein in annoyance. "So, you lied to me last year! You said you'd gotten the basics down well enough! Why didn't you tell us?"

"It's because of what I saw," he admitted, the memory causing his mood to dampen. "You would have wanted to know what it was, and I really didn't want to tell you."

"Why not? Can you tell me now what it was?"

"I won't tell you the details, but they aren't important anyway. The gist of it is that it was a memory of when Snape was a fifth year at Hogwarts. It was an incident in which... my father and Sirius tormented him, humiliated him." He looked at her, still haunted by the memory. "My father acted like an arrogant jerk, like a bully. He was full of himself, and went after Snape for no good reason, just he felt like it. I had always been proud of him, of what people had told me about him. But I was ashamed after seeing that."

Compassion in her eyes, she said, “I’m sorry, Harry, that must have been really difficult. I can see why you didn’t want to tell us. But I’m sure your father wasn’t always like that, I’ve heard lots about how good he was, too. I’m sure those aren’t just stories.”

“I talked to Sirius and Remus in this fireplace soon after that, with the help of Fred and George’s diversions. Sirius told me that yes, they were jerks, but they grew out of it, and that Snape gave as good as he got, which I believe. It made me feel a little better. But it also made me think of how Dumbledore is always so nice to everyone, even people who don’t deserve it, always forgiving, feeling people can change when it seems unlikely. If I met someone like my father was then, I wouldn’t give him the time of day, I’d write him off. But everyone says he became a really good person, so I’d have made a wrong judgment, kind of. It does make it seem that Dumbledore is right to feel like he does.”

She put a hand on his shoulder. “Dumbledore is right about a lot of things,” she said. “Come on, let’s go back to Gryffindor Tower.”

In the last week of June, Harry counted down the days with great trepidation. Summer had arrived, and so he knew that the events that the chess prophecy, as he had come to think of it, had referred to could happen at any time. He felt he had internalized the idea of Dumbledore leaving—he refused to use the word ‘dying’ in his mind, he told himself, because Dumbledore wanted Harry to think of him as ‘elsewhere’—as much as he could, but he still knew he would be devastated when it happened. Like the Hogsmeade deaths, no amount of rational consideration could take away the pain he would feel.

Part of him wanted to talk about it with Hermione, ask her if she felt nervous too, but he didn’t because he didn’t want to make her think about it more than she had to. He didn’t know if he would be a part of what happened, but she knew she would, and the idea had clearly scared her. He couldn’t talk to the others, because he didn’t want to tell them about the prophecy. He took emotional refuge

in being with Ginny, talking to her in his hand at night. She lifted his spirits, and he hated to think of having to get through this time without her.

His Legilimency training was going even better; he could now enter his non-resisting training partner's mind at will. Dumbledore was now working with him on the hardest part of Legilimency: looking for memories and emotions that revealed lies without the person being any the wiser. It took a great deal of finesse, Harry was learning, and he wondered if he would ever manage it. Dumbledore assured him that he would eventually master it, which encouraged him to keep at it energetically.

In Thursday's lesson, in addition to the practice, Dumbledore gave him a short lecture on what he referred to as the etiquette of Legilimency. "When you know that someone is lying, you should not say or suggest that you know the person is lying. People lie all the time, about large things and small, and you would alienate everyone you knew in short order if you did so. Simply appear to accept what they say, though you need not act as if you believe the lie. Generally, it is also better to avoid mentioning that you are a Legilimens at all; you may want to avoid any mention of it in public or the press. As of now, only your friends know that you have studied it. People may behave uncomfortably around you if they know you have the skill."

"So," Harry mused, "that was why, at Malfoy's hearing last summer, he wasn't penalized for whatever lies he told in his testimony, even though you knew most of what he said were lies."

"Yes, of course. The purpose of Legilimency is not to catch people in lies, or expose their lies, but simply to inform you of them so you can react appropriately. A few of my friends on the Wizengamot knew that I was a Legilimens, but they knew that I would not reveal what I knew of Malfoy's, or anyone's, testimony that I knew to be untrue. While highly accurate, Legilimency is subjective, and cannot be used for such purposes. It is also best not to reveal the lies of others to anybody but your closest friends, and even then, only for good reason.

Mastering Legilimency would allow one to become an excellent gossip, but obviously that would be a poor use of the skill. One must use considerable discretion.

“You must also be careful to avoid using it when dealing with Ginny in particular. Not that there is any special reason to think she would lie to you anyway, but it is common for married couples to lie to each other about small things, or convey lies of omission. Perhaps she might lie about something to avoid aggravating you or worrying you needlessly. For example, I assume you have not told her of the most recent prophecy. Since you suspect that you will be involved in whatever happens, if you told her, she would worry greatly until it happened. Partly for that reason, you do not tell her. If she were a Legilimens, and used her skill on you, she would know you were committing a lie of omission. Using it on your life partner simply causes too many complications. Sometimes you may find yourself doing so unconsciously, however; what is more important is that you not do it deliberately.”

“Do you ever use it unconsciously?”

“Yes, quite often. Also, one can reach a point where, after sufficient practice spotting lies using Legilimency, one can spot them almost as well without the use of Legilimency. One comes to associate certain facial expressions, mannerisms, body movements, and so forth with dissembling. They range from subtle to obvious, depending on the person. But, yes, one does reach the point where one detects lies using Legilimency without being consciously aware of it.”

“Well, I hope I get to the point where I can do that,” said Harry. “I know, you’ve said a few times that I will, and I do believe you. It just seems daunting at times, it’s so difficult.”

“That is very understandable, Harry. I myself did not master the skill until I was in my early twenties. I would have waited somewhat to teach it to you if I had more time. Fortunately, your now-formidable magical power makes it less difficult

for you to master than it otherwise would be. Speaking of your power, I wished to ask how your lessons with your friends on the energy of love are proceeding.”

“It’s hard to say,” said Harry. “Hermione and Neville especially say they feel like they’re making progress, but it’s hard to tell, of course. I guess we’ll know if they start exhibiting unusually strong power or something. The Aurors will be keeping an eye on Neville on Saturdays, see if he starts changing in any way. But even if it’s not helping their magic, they all like it and are happy to be doing it.”

“Then that is an excellent end in itself,” agreed Dumbledore. “We seem to be finished for the day, Harry, unless there is something else you would like to discuss.”

“Not really... well, I was going to mention those dreams again, but I’m not sure there’s more you could say. I’m still having them, not every night, but many nights. It’s almost as though they’re getting clearer, more focused. The message is stronger, more understandable, still the same one, that everything will be all right.” Humorously, he added, “Sometimes I feel bad that if my spirit is going to all this trouble to reassure me, it isn’t having the effect it should. You’re still leaving, probably really soon now. Do you think it just means that in whatever confrontation there is, that will turn out all right?”

“That is certainly a possibility, Harry,” said Dumbledore. “I would not be surprised if that were true, but again, it is impossible to know. No doubt retrospect will give you more information.”

Harry nodded. “I guess it’s nothing I should worry about. After all, in the dream, you keep telling me not to worry, it would be funny to worry about that. It’s just unusual to have a dream that persistent, at least one that wasn’t sent by Voldemort. Anyway, no, I don’t think there was anything else. I’m looking forward to your lesson tomorrow.”

The next day at lunch, Hermione reminded him that the O.W.L. re-test was that night. He nodded, amused, since she had reminded him of it for each of the last three nights as well. He had studied it the night before, but mainly so he could

tell her he had, and partly because Ginny was studying it as well. Her O.W.L.s were coming up soon, though hers would all be next week, because the one-week break in classes due to the Hogsmeade deaths meant that classes would continue into the first week of July. Hermione then started to quiz Neville on which stars were in which constellations, her tone suggesting that she wasn't convinced that he had studied enough. Harry and Ginny exchanged a glance, and Harry remembered their conversation in his office on the day of the last Quidditch match.

As they ate, Hermione asked Ginny if she was worried about her O.W.L.s. "No, not really," Ginny casually answered. "I have a feeling I'm not going to need them much." Hermione frowned slightly but didn't say anything; Ginny laughed. "I'm just teasing you, Hermione," she said. "I do take them seriously, but what I said is true, at the same time. I don't know what I'll do once I'm out of Hogwarts, exactly. Remember, Professor McGonagall wasn't exactly amused when I told her on Career Day that my career plan was to be Mrs. Harry Potter." Harry and Ron chuckled, remembering their laughter when she told them about that after it happened. Not every fifth year was brave enough to make jokes to McGonagall. "But you know Harry and I think we'll want a family, and that takes more than enough time. The question is how many kids; I don't know if I can manage what Mum did. Harry's not bothered about it, says that however many I think I can manage without going crazy is okay. So we'll see."

Harry looked up. "I don't think those were my exact words," he said, aware that she wasn't serious. "I don't know if we need seven, but I do want kids."

"I'm curious, Harry, why do you think you feel so strongly about it?" asked Neville. "I mean, I have no idea what I'll want."

"I'm not sure, but I think it has to do with my own childhood. I never got to have the kind of experiences and feelings before age eleven that most kids did. Christmas, birthdays, cold evenings around the fire, that sort of thing. I never felt the love and togetherness of a family, not until I spent time with the Weasleys. I want to be able to experience it from the parent's side if I couldn't as a child. I want

to be part of a normal, loving family.” Looking up at Ginny, he added, “I think I’ve made a good start on it already.” She gave him a very happy look.

“Funny, when you say that, it makes me feel like I was lucky,” said Ron, “but I never felt like I was when I was a kid. Not that I felt unlucky, except for the hand-me-downs, but I guess I took for granted the things you’re talking about. They felt good at the time, but it never occurred to me that some people didn’t have them. And Ginny felt hard put because she didn’t have a sister.” To her indignant look, he added, “Come on, how many times did I hear you say that you wished you had a sister? A lot, for sure.”

“I just said that when I was mad at you,” she retorted. “So, yes, a lot.” The others chuckled. “Right now I feel like I want us to have four, two of each. Preferably two boys first, then two girls, because girls mature faster than boys.” She smirked at Ron, who rolled his eyes.

While she was talking, Pansy had sat down, having finished her lunch with the Slytherins. “What if you keep having boys, though? Are you going to do what the Weasleys did, just keep on going until you get a girl?”

“What makes you say that’s what they did?” asked Ron defensively. Harry wondered if Ron was defensive because if that was what had happened, it meant that when he was born his parents had been hoping for a girl.

“No particular reason, Ron, that’s just what it looks like,” said Pansy. “Is it true? Did you ever ask your parents?”

“They just said that they wanted every child they got, and they were very happy about everything that happened,” said Ginny. “In other words, they won’t say. I guess I can understand why, though. I wouldn’t want to say to my kids, I wanted this one but not that one, or I wanted something different than what happened. Mum did say once, ‘All you want when it happens is for them to be healthy,’ which I can believe.”

“So, how did the conversation get around to what kids Harry and Ginny are going to have?” asked Pansy. Ginny explained, and Pansy said, “Yeah, I’m not sure what I’m going to do, either. Looks like the Mrs. Harry Potter job is taken.”

“Yes, it was a highly sought-after position,” agreed Ginny. “There’s some danger, but it’s very rewarding, not to mention, permanent.” Harry smiled, happy to have made her so happy. I just wish there wasn’t the danger, he thought.

After he finished eating, he decided to see Dumbledore quickly. He walked into the office to see Snape standing opposite Dumbledore’s desk. “I’m sorry, sir, I can come back later, it isn’t urgent.”

“It is all right, Harry, go ahead,” said Dumbledore.

“I was just going to mention that dream I had again, it was a little different last night. Maybe I’m dwelling on this too much, but it’s pretty unusual, the whole set of them. Anyway, you were saying what you usually say, but there was more, I just couldn’t hear it. Like a whisper, almost like the original message was at first. But there was another thing different about it; I saw a few faces, very vague... a man and a woman, and another man. I couldn’t recognize them, except one. It was you,” he said, looking at Snape, who looked startled. “At least I think it was you, it looked like you, but there was one difference. You were smiling, a warm smile. You looked really genuinely happy.” Which was very strange, Harry did not add, though it was clear anyway.

“Very interesting, Harry,” said Dumbledore. “Do you have any speculation on what it could mean, Severus?”

“No, Headmaster,” said Snape stiffly. It was clear to Harry that he had made Snape uncomfortable; maybe it was reminding him that he never seemed happy, Harry thought.

“Well, perhaps you will in the near future,” said Dumbledore. “Harry’s dreams seem to be getting clearer as time goes on.”

“Does that mean you think they’re significant, sir?”

“It would not surprise me,” responded Dumbledore. “Dreams can be significant in many ways. Even if their significance does not extend beyond you, they may still be considered significant. Still, I would not—“

There was a knock on the door, and McGonagall and a nervous Hermione walked in. “Professor Dumbledore, I have just received information that concerns Miss Granger.” Turning to Hermione, she continued, “Your parents were involved in an auto accident on their way to work this morning. They are injured, but will recover.”

McGonagall’s last words didn’t seem to soothe Hermione, who looked anguished. “This is because of me, I can’t believe they did this,” she lamented. Harry couldn’t tell if the ‘they’ referred to her parents or not.

“I am very sorry, Hermione,” said Dumbledore. “Normally, in a case such as this, it would be expected that you would go directly to the hospital to see them.”

She slowly nodded. “I know, sir. I’ll have to go back to my dormitory and change into Muggle clothes. Do you know which hospital it is, Professor?” she asked McGonagall.

“Wait a minute, should she really be doing this?” asked Harry. “I mean, what if this is...” He stopped, remembering the prophecy. “This is it, isn’t it?” he asked, with a chilling realization. “The chess game? This was done to get you out of Hogwarts?” She nodded, looking very afraid and very determined.

“She must go, Harry,” said Dumbledore. “She knows what must be done. But there is something you can do for her first. Hermione, take out your wand. Harry, please apply an Adhesion Charm.” Harry did so, knowing he had been asked because his magical power had become so strong; only a stronger wizard than him would now be able to dislodge Hermione’s wand from her hand against her will. It would only be a small help, though; she would still not have a chance against Death Eaters.

“I’m going with her,” said Harry. “I’ll make sure—“

”You can’t go, Harry,” Hermione said, looking like she wished he could. “I don’t think it’ll work right if you do. I have to go alone.”

“But they’re going to grab you!” he almost shouted. “They’ll probably be waiting at the hospital!”

“Yes, Harry, they will,” she said. “But remember, the rook isn’t the one that gets sacrificed.” She glanced at Dumbledore, her concern for him overtaking her concern for her parents or herself. “I’ll be all right. But remember what I said, the night we were with him.” She took a step toward the door, then turned and quickly walked to Dumbledore and hugged him tightly, then just as quickly left, followed by McGonagall.

Harry looked at Dumbledore, his emotions churning. “I would ask you some questions, but I have a feeling you wouldn’t answer them.”

Dumbledore nodded. “I am sorry, Harry, but you must not know more than you do. I know it is very difficult, but there is nothing to do now. We must wait for events to transpire, and react to them. You may want to consider making efforts to calm and relax yourself. You may find it particularly useful.”

Harry got the feeling that Dumbledore wanted to talk to Snape alone, but hadn’t said so yet. “Yes, sir. I’ll go back to my dormitory until it’s time for your class to start.”

He headed back to Gryffindor Tower, trying to calm himself. He still didn’t know if he would be involved or not; what Dumbledore had said suggested to him that he would, but maybe it was just a good idea to be calm in general whether he was involved or not. He turned the last corner near the portrait hole, and saw Hermione, in a sweater, blouse, and pants, exit behind McGonagall. Impulsively, Harry ran up to her and hugged her. She hugged him back and kissed him on the cheek. “I’ll be okay, Harry. I’ll see you soon.” She walked off after McGonagall toward the castle entrance.

Harry went into his dormitory, which was empty, and lay on his bed. Fawkes appeared and started singing, and he tried to focus on love. He could only think of

Hermione at first, however. He tried to tell himself that it was all for a reason, that it would help defeat Voldemort. He just wished there was another way, one where this didn't have to happen, where Dumbledore didn't have to leave. He closed his eyes, concentrated on Fawkes' song, and focused on love again, more successfully this time.

He arrived in Dumbledore's class a few minutes before it started and took his usual seat behind Hermione, except that she wasn't there. Neville, who sat next to her at the front, turned to Harry. "Do you know what happened to her?" he asked. "McGonagall just asked her to come with her, and we haven't seen her since."

"Her parents were in a car accident," Harry said, trying to keep his greater concerns out of his voice. "They're going to be okay, though. She went to visit them in the hospital."

"That's too bad," said Neville, concerned. "I'm glad they'll be okay, though." Harry nodded, envying Neville his ignorance of the situation.

Dumbledore walked in, and conversation quieted, as usual. He explained to the class why Hermione was not there, then proceeded with a lecture. For the first time ever in Dumbledore's class, Harry found that he was having a hard time concentrating on what Dumbledore was saying. He tried to focus on Dumbledore, but his attention kept wavering. He can probably tell, Harry thought, and he'd forgive me, saying it was understandable.

A half-hour into the lecture, Harry found his attention drifting again. Suddenly, in his mind's eye, he could see the Department of Mysteries, the room with the Veil of Mystery. The image lasted less than a second, but he could clearly see Voldemort holding Hermione by what looked like the back of her neck, with Hermione in obvious pain and distress. At the same instant, pain flared in his scar, though nowhere near as strongly as it had at other times he had gotten such images. It was still rather painful, and he winced and bowed his head, touching his scar.

“What has happened, Harry?” Dumbledore asked, stepping over to him. Fawkes burst into view and started singing.

“I just got an image...” He couldn’t help but glance at Neville apologetically before continuing. “Voldemort, in the room with the Veil of Mystery. He’s got Hermione.”

Harry could see startled glances from his classmates, and a horrified look on Neville’s face; Ron looked shocked as well. “Was there anything else?” asked Dumbledore.

“Yes... the image was very quick, but I’m sure I saw one thing. He was making this gesture, like this,” he said, demonstrating the gesture used to beckon someone. “I think it means he wants me to come, like he’s going to kill her if I don’t.”

The class gasped, and Dumbledore nodded. “He wants both of us to come, Harry,” he said. “You must go first. I must do a few things, and I will be along in a moment.” Harry stood, nodding. He found that he was much less worried about facing Voldemort than he was about what would happen to Dumbledore. How could he lose to Voldemort, be killed by him? How would that help them?

Neville leaped to his feet. “I’m going, too,” he insisted. Clearly he was not going to take no for an answer, but Harry knew he would have to.

“You can’t go, Neville,” said Harry sadly. “I’m sorry.”

“You said that last year, but we came with you anyway,” Neville argued, determination etched into his face. “I’m coming this time, too, Harry, I have to. I love her, I have to help.”

“I am very sorry, Neville, but Voldemort wishes that Harry and I come, no one else,” said Dumbledore, looking at Neville compassionately. “If you come, he will simply kill you.” Harry saw the class watching, entranced, with expressions ranging from alarmed to terrified.

“I don’t care! I—“

”She would care, Neville!” shouted Harry. “She needs you, but to stay here, not to go get killed.” Neville said nothing, but glared at Harry. Fawkes continued to sing.

Harry faced Dumbledore, tears coming to his eyes. “Sir, I—“

”Harry, you must focus on your task now,” said Dumbledore. “Come from the same place you did in your dreams, and it will be all right. Do not worry about me. I am doing what I wish.”

Harry focused, with great effort, and looked into Dumbledore’s eyes. The love he saw there almost made him cry, and gave him strength, at the same time. Having totally forgotten that there was still a class there, Harry hugged Dumbledore. “I love you, Albus,” he said.

“I love you too,” answered Dumbledore, who broke the embrace, then kissed Harry’s forehead. “An old wizarding custom, it will be explained to you later. I will be with you, but you must go now.”

Fawkes was in the air, tail feathers sticking out. Harry looked confused. “I can Apparate there, he knows that.”

“He thinks it best that you use him; you should not argue with him. He will be back for me, do not worry.”

Harry nodded, grasping Fawkes’s tail feathers. As he felt Fawkes start to lift off, out of the corner of his eye he saw Neville lunge for him, as Hermione had leaped on him when he had gone to aid Pansy. Ron, leaping to intercept Neville, was the last thing Harry saw before he and Fawkes disappeared.

CHAPTER 23

THE VEIL OF MYSTERY

To Harry's surprise, he did not suddenly find himself face to face with Voldemort, or in the Department of Mysteries. Instead, he found himself outside, in a place he had never seen before. His first thought was that it was beautiful. The weather was sunny and warm, and he was standing in an area which was mostly grass but had some flowers, of many types. There were trees, but not so many that it felt like a forest, and even a stream. Harry felt that if there was such a place as the Garden of Eden, this was what it must have looked like. He then wondered what he was doing there.

Fawkes let out a short, sharp burst of song. To Harry's amazement, over the next two seconds, what had to be twenty or thirty phoenixes started appearing. Some were in trees, some were flying, a few were on the ground.

Fawkes started singing, and to Harry's further astonishment, all the others did as well. The sound Harry heard captivated him; he had never heard anything like it in his life, and was sure he never would again. The closest analogy he could think of to what he was hearing was a symphony; the phoenixes were combining to create one grand, complex song, as if each phoenix were a different piece of an orchestra. But the music was more than simply beautiful; it inspired Harry. In the classroom, he had wondered how he could possibly keep his focus on love, knowing what would happen to Dumbledore. Hearing the song, Harry sank deeply into the feeling of love. He knew he could do whatever he had to. Dumbledore would simply be elsewhere; he would be all right, his spirit was eternal. Harry remembered his dreams, suddenly feeling that they were more than he thought they were. Dumbledore would be all right, he knew.

The song ended after about thirty seconds, and Fawkes was in the air again, waiting for Harry to grab his tail. Harry took out his wand, ready for whatever was to come. Love was the only thing that mattered. He took hold of Fawkes's tail, and in a second they disappeared again.

He was suddenly in the room with the Veil of Mystery, which was ten feet in front of him. Off to the side, five feet away, stood Voldemort, holding Hermione in the same way Harry had seen in the image. He let go of Fawkes, who gave a very short burst of song, then disappeared. Harry still felt the bolstered courage and focus that he had received from the phoenixes. He didn't know what he would do; he just knew he had to keep his focus and trust his instincts.

"Welcome, Potter," said Voldemort. He was grinning smugly, trying to affect the manner of a gracious host, but not all that well, Harry thought. "So good of you to join us. I'm glad you received my invitation."

"Just barely," Harry replied, wand at the ready. "It was just a flash of an image, but I'll bet you were sending it at full strength. Thanks to Dumbledore, you're not getting into my mind anymore."

"Ah, yes, Dumbledore... you know, the invitation was extended to him as well... so, where is the Muggle-loving simpleton?"

Harry wasn't about to tell Voldemort that Dumbledore would be along soon; though he doubted it would matter, he didn't want to give Voldemort an extra chance to get ready. "He's no simpleton, as you well know," Harry said. "You wouldn't have invited him if he were. He's the only wizard you ever feared."

In the dreams in September, Voldemort had been enraged when Harry suggested that he feared Dumbledore; now he sounded amused. "I invited him because he has been a pest, nothing more. I admit he is powerful, but he is truly a fool, which will soon be demonstrated. With his magical ability, he could wield real power, but instead he chose to sit quietly at Hogwarts and never use it. I do not object; it has been to my benefit. Now, aren't you going to say hello to your friend?"

He glanced at Hermione, then quickly looked back at Voldemort. He knew that he could cause both of them harm by expressing concern for her fate. “I’d rather talk to you, Voldemort. I’m curious to know why you’ve chosen this place to come. It couldn’t have been easy to get in here, not to mention that the Aurors should be here any minute.”

“We will be undisturbed by Aurors, I have seen to that,” replied Voldemort, still smug. “As for my reasons for coming here, they will be apparent soon enough. I hear you have quite a close relationship with Dumbledore, so it is fitting that he will die in the same way your godfather did. Perhaps after he does, you will want to join him, you can all be together again.” He chuckled. “If there truly is anything beyond, which of course there is not. These mystics, they dabble in such foolishness, and Dumbledore is no less a fool for believing them.”

For some reason this gave Harry a surge of hope; Voldemort’s ignorance in certain areas was clearly to his detriment, and this might be one, he thought. He was considering whether to respond when Fawkes suddenly appeared, carrying Dumbledore, a few feet away from Voldemort. Dumbledore looked calm and focused, as Harry knew he would be.

“Ah, Dumbledore, there you are. Now, we—“

To Voldemort’s apparent surprise, Dumbledore walked straight for him. Before Voldemort could raise his wand, Dumbledore had reached him, and grabbed Voldemort’s wrist. He looked Voldemort in the eye, but said nothing.

Voldemort looked astonished, as if Dumbledore had done something totally nonsensical; Harry had to admit to himself that he couldn’t see the point in it either. “Would you like to subdue me physically, Dumbledore?” asked Voldemort quietly. “Perhaps the Prophet was unknowingly right... you are quite old, it is true. Still, you may have wits enough to notice that I have a deadman’s grip on the Mudblood here. If I release her involuntarily, she dies instantly. Perhaps you—“ He stopped speaking and looked at Dumbledore with mounting anger.

“You dare to try to peer into my mind?” demanded Voldemort, outraged. “You should know better, Dumbledore, I am a better Occlumens and Legilimens than you have ever been. Now, if you wish her to remain unharmed, you will—“

Voldemort cut himself off yet again as Dumbledore again did something totally unexpected. He pointed his wand at the Veil; energy shot out of his wand and reached the curtain, seeming to stop there. Then in the same instant he released Voldemort’s wrist, he flew through the air toward the Veil, as though being pulled by a powerful, invisible force. Harry saw a small, bright thread of energy leading from Voldemort’s wrist to Dumbledore as he flew. In less than a second, Dumbledore reached the Veil, and went through. The thread lingered for a second, then vanished. Dumbledore was gone. Fawkes flew up high in the air and sang.

Part of Harry wanted to cry out in despair, and he was sure he would have if not for what Fawkes had done. But somehow, he was able to keep that grief out of his present thoughts. He did this on purpose, Harry thought, he must have a plan, there has to be a reason. In any case, he knew he still had to focus; he had to save Hermione, and himself.

Voldemort had a bewildered look, which turned into a truly evil grin, the most awful grin Harry had ever seen. “Well... I must say, my young friends, that was much easier than I had thought it was going to be. I thought I would have to persuade him to go through it, and here he simply does it on his own. Very convenient.”

Keeping his grip on Hermione, Voldemort turned to Harry; as he did so, he turned a control on a pendant around his neck. Looking at Harry’s forehead, he said, “Well, I see you were even closer to him than I thought. Did you tell him of the dream you had, the one involving the Legion of the Dead? I believe you did. I did not expect that he would believe only that, but I did plant other evidence to give the impression that I planned to call them into service. They do not exist, of course, but the idea was to play into Dumbledore’s belief in mysticism and the afterlife. I knew that if I could persuade him that I intended to reach them, he

would take measures to stop me, perhaps going so far as to do what he has done. I knew my plan would succeed when the phoenix chose you as its next companion, signaling that Dumbledore's end was near.

“You see, Potter, Dumbledore's death was futile, because of his beliefs. He gave up his life in this way because of what the phoenix did, but fate does not work that way. His end was not inevitable, he simply thought it was. Had he not decided to do what he has done, the phoenix would not have chosen you. He has confused cause and effect, and died for it. He has been led to believe that by doing what he has done, he can prevent my calling the so-called Legion into service, from the other side. There is no ‘other side,’ of course, but he believed there was. I never intended to get the help of entities that do not exist, so he has died for precisely nothing.” He surveyed Harry though raised eyebrows and great satisfaction. “So what does Dumbledore's heir have to say about this turn of events?”

Still focused, Harry frowned. “What do you mean, his heir?”

Impatiently, Voldemort said, “He obviously kissed you on the forehead... I have been told that you are ignorant of much of wizarding customs. Here, allow me to be of assistance.” He flicked his wand and a vaporous circle flew toward Harry; he raised his wand to defend against it, but it simply hung in midair, taking the shape of a circular mirror. Harry looked at it and saw on his forehead a bright purple dot, less than an inch in diameter, where Dumbledore had kissed him. He had no idea what it meant, and Voldemort obviously discerned as much.

“It seems that he should have told you, at least. Perhaps he was too busy trying to stop my nefarious plans,” Voldemort sneered. Harry kept very focused on love, ignoring Voldemort's taunts. “That mark means that he has chosen you as his heir, not that it will do you any good. So, how do you feel?”

Harry felt an inclination to be as silent as he had with Malfoy, but realized that it was a different situation. He thought he might gain some useful insight if he engaged Voldemort in conversation, not to mention that his very state of not being intimidated was bound to annoy Voldemort. Also, he thought it best to keep

Voldemort talking for as long as possible, so the Aurors had time to arrive. Harry didn't know how Voldemort and whoever else had gotten into such a secure area, but he had to believe that Aurors knew by now, and were trying to get past whatever was keeping them out.

"I'm sad that he's gone, but I don't believe you that it was for nothing. He was a brilliant man, and I think he had a reason for what he did, you just don't know it yet." He dearly hoped that was true; he hated to think that Voldemort had been correct in his gloating. He knew better than to take anything Voldemort said too seriously, though.

Voldemort chuckled. "It seems that you do not know it yet, either, in that case. Believe what you will, Potter, it is all irrelevant. He is dead, and his death has accomplished nothing. He is not coming back through that veil. Now, if you would hand over your wand."

A grim smile came to Harry's face. "That doesn't seem likely," he said.

"I am not surprised that you say that, of course," agreed Voldemort. "Let me put it to you this way. Give me your wand, or she dies."

This was exactly what Harry had feared most, because Hermione could not have been clearer about her wishes. He was not to sacrifice himself for her, and giving up his wand would be tantamount to doing just that. He looked at Hermione, whose eyes conveyed the same message: don't do it. The thought of it threatened his focus, almost made him despair. But Fawkes's song was still in the air, and it reminded him of what he had to do. He had to stay alive, he was the one who could defeat Voldemort. He gathered all the courage he could muster, and looked at Voldemort. "No," he said simply.

Voldemort's eyebrows went high in surprise. "Do you doubt that I'll do it?"

"No, I don't," said Harry. "But I'm not giving you my wand. If you want to beat me, you'll have to do it in a fair fight."

Voldemort laughed. "A fair fight? What a stupid concept, Potter. Perhaps no one has mentioned to you that life is not fair. Still, I am impressed. I was advised

that such a threat would coerce your cooperation. You apparently have more of a survival instinct than I thought. Well, perhaps I will not kill her just yet. I believe she may have useful information, and she would make a nice plaything for the young Malfoy. I'm sure she would amuse him greatly."

Here was extra motivation for Harry to get them out of there; he could imagine what Malfoy would do to a captive Hermione, and he knew he couldn't allow it. "I'm surprised that you would grant 'the young Malfoy' any favors," Harry said disdainfully. "I thought you didn't reward incompetence. He had any number of chances to kill me, and he failed every time."

Voldemort didn't seem bothered by Harry pointing this out. "True, and he has been... reprimanded for his failures. Still, he had not at that time been Cleansed. His failure was due to weaknesses he no longer has."

Harry tried to keep his confusion off his face. "Cleansed?"

"For Dumbledore's heir, you are quite ignorant, Potter. He should have explained more things to you. Cleansing is part of the initiation of becoming a Death Eater. One is relieved of one's weaknesses; it allows those I command to serve me better. In any case, your cooperation is not required. Avada Kedavra!"

The Killing Curse came at Harry, and his shield snapped on. The Curse was stopped; Harry was surprised that Voldemort had even tried it.

"Oh, no!" Voldemort cried in mock despair. "He has deflected my Killing Curse! However shall I kill him? Perhaps I should simply give up. What do you think, Potter?"

Harry was surprised; he wouldn't have guessed that Voldemort would use sarcasm. "I think you're saying that you can kill me in any number of ways that don't involve the Killing Curse. I never assumed anything else, you know." He tried to think of ways he could get his hands on Hermione; if he could get a decent grip on her, perhaps he could Disapparate them both out of there.

"It is good that you are under no illusions, then," smiled Voldemort. "Well, how about a duel? I hear your strength is improving. Perhaps you could be an

entertaining opponent.” Seeing Harry’s raised eyebrows, Voldemort continued, “Oh, don’t worry, I have procured another wand just for this occasion. After our encounter two years ago at my rebirth, I discovered that your wand and mine are brothers; fate is odd that way. We cannot have that happening again.”

Harry readied himself. Voldemort took out a wand and sent out the first spell, still holding Hermione in the same grip. Harry blocked it and responded, but within ten seconds he knew he had little chance of winning. What he expected was proving to be the case; he was at least Voldemort’s equal in terms of power, but he simply had too little experience dueling. The bout continued, longer than it should have; Harry slowly understood that Voldemort was playing with him, like a cat with its prey. Voldemort could end the bout at any time. Harry took a more defensive posture, just hoping to stop anything that could kill or disable him. Voldemort seemed to become annoyed as he became aware of what Harry was doing. With a look of extreme boredom, Voldemort got by Harry’s defenses; Harry was thrown five feet backwards. He scrambled to his feet.

“Surprising natural ability,” said Voldemort clinically, “but of course, far too inexperienced to be any kind of worthy opponent. You would have made a good Dark wizard... except for your mental defects. If you were Cleansed, I doubt there would be anything left by the time it was done.” Voldemort sounded very amused.

Where are the Aurors? Harry thought. He knew that his survival and Hermione’s hinged on keeping Voldemort occupied, but he was sure they would have come by now. “That’s okay, it sounds like something I wouldn’t want any part of, anyway.”

“Well, now, let us see what the young lady here has to tell us,” said Voldemort, who still seemed in no hurry to do whatever he was going to do, if anything. Harry still couldn’t understand how he could be so confident about having so much time. Fawkes was still circling, still singing. “Of course, we cannot have you helping her. I would like to see what cooperation we get from her under the Cruciatus Curse, but you could block it for her. So...” As he spoke, he was

creating a shimmering curtain of energy that eventually stretched across the entire room, splitting it in half. As a test, Harry sent a Stunning Spell at it, and it bounced off. Harry was sure he could break through it with time; he just needed to figure out how.

Voldemort threw Hermione to the ground. “I have been told that you have information which I may find valuable,” he said coldly. Harry blinked in surprise; he couldn’t imagine what that would be. “Would you like to tell me what it is, or suffer a great deal?”

“There’s no information I can give you that you would find useful,” said Hermione. It looked to Harry as though she, too, was trying hard to focus, as they had practiced in their Saturday evening group.

Voldemort surveyed her silently as Harry tried different spells on the shield, trying to figure out a way past it. “You appear to be telling the truth,” Voldemort said finally, sounding surprised. “I am not happy to have been misinformed. Still, you have proved useful, and—“ He cut himself off, then grinned. “Ah, very clever, Dumbledore,” he said to himself. “Not quite clever enough, though.” He looked down at Hermione with an expression that suggested that she would pay for having tried to deceive him. “Your words are the literal truth, but I have found the lie of omission behind them. I see you have studied Occlumency as well, but are not yet sufficiently skilled. You do have the information I want, you simply cannot access it at this moment. Well, there are ways past Memory Charms... sadly, they tend to leave the subject in less than perfect condition, but your usefulness was at an end anyway. Crucio!”

Harry frantically accelerated his search for a way through the shield, and hit upon the idea of an energy beam that would try to drill a hole through the curtain of energy; he felt that the energy of love would defeat whatever Voldemort had done. But to Harry’s shock, just after Voldemort said the word, a familiar energy shield snapped on around Hermione—and he knew he had not done it. She screamed in pain, but the shield held, and after a second she was obviously in no

pain at all. She sat up and glared at Voldemort. Still trying to focus, Harry let out a silent shout of joy. He returned his attention to finding a way past Voldemort's shield; he visualized the energy beam and sent it out from his wand.

Voldemort looked quite angry; he had obviously not contemplated this. Whether out of anger or curiosity to see if she could stop it, Harry didn't know, as Voldemort said "Avada Kedavra!" The green shield immediately came on, and the bolt was stopped. Harry said a silent thanks for the Saturday evening sessions as his energy beam started to tear a hole through Voldemort's wall of energy. Hermione started to gasp for breath; he must be doing some Dark spell that leaves the person without oxygen, Harry thought quickly, and pointed his wand at Voldemort through the hole he'd opened. Voldemort hadn't noticed, and was blasted back a few feet, but kept his balance as the rest of his wall of energy dissipated. Furious, he fired off a few spells in quick succession, which Harry parried. Harry suddenly felt his body temperature rising, and realized that it was an area-effect spell of Voldemort's. He tried a few counter-spells, and finally found one that worked on the third try. He looked over and saw Hermione gasping for breath again, and fired at Voldemort, who this time was ready for him; Harry's spell had no effect.

"I believe I am about ready to stop toying with the two of you," said Voldemort in annoyance. "You cannot possibly defeat me, that must be clear to you. Oh, and the Aurors have not come, by the way, because of this, the rarest of magical artifacts," he said, pointing to what was around his neck. "This is the only one that exists; it is essentially creating our own pocket of time. The outside world has stopped, or so it would seem to us. It does not last forever, perhaps two hours, but more than long enough to deal with you. Now, if—"

"You don't seem to be having much success so far," said Hermione scornfully. "Of course, you're pretty incompetent when it comes to dealing with Harry. How many times have you tried to kill him? Seven or eight, and that doesn't even count when he was a baby. He's got your number, Voldemort. You can kill me, but you'll never get him. He keeps coming up with new stuff every time you attack

him, so you might want to give it up. Who knows what he might come up with next?”

Harry wondered what Hermione was doing, but then he realized that she was trying to anger him deliberately, hoping it would create an opening for Harry to do something. Predictably, Voldemort snarled and sent more spells at her; she warded some off, Harry tried to help, and he then put Voldemort on the defensive again.

“Stupid Mudblood! You have no idea what you are talking about!” sneered Voldemort in what was almost a shout. Harry had a sudden idea as Voldemort continued his tirade. “He is but a boy, and I can kill him any time I want, now. I would prefer him alive, to take him back and deal with him in a more leisurely manner, but you and he are becoming sufficiently annoying that—“

Harry had cast the Legilimens spell on Voldemort, and focused for all he was worth. Voldemort’s anger had diminished his Occlumency skills, or perhaps he did not expect Harry to try such a thing, but Harry found his way in, and focused on bringing up memories of sadness, vulnerability, or weakness. Voldemort stopped talking just as Harry got the first image, of an eight-year-old Tom Riddle crying after having been screamed at by a worker at his orphanage. Next, Riddle was six, in tears after having a favorite toy taken away by older children.

Suddenly Voldemort turned on Harry, incandescent fury on his face. “You dare... you would even try...” he sputtered. “You will pay dearly for that, Potter.”

Just as he turned, Hermione shot spells at him, which he warded off with half his attention. Harry took the opportunity to respond. “Why, because you used to be human? Are you ashamed of that? I’ve cried before, and I will again. It’s part of being human. You just—“

Harry broke off as he gasped for breath, and at the same time felt a deep frost suddenly surround him. He struggled to find counter-spells, and managed to try two that were not effective before falling to his knees. Voldemort turned to

Hermione, waved his wand... and suddenly collapsed. Harry staggered to his feet as Voldemort lay on the ground, unmoving.

Hermione quickly got up as well, as Harry said, "What in the world—"

"Harry, quick, we don't know how much time we'll have. Cast Legilimens on me. Dumbledore set the Memory Charm to release as soon as you got into my mind." Still wanting to ask questions but motivated by her urgency, he focused and did as she asked. He found his way in, and started to seek images of love, but before anything came up, she spoke. "Okay, that's done it, I remember now." She reached into her pants pocket and took out a small container of what looked like a gelatinous red substance. She put it down and, to Harry's shock, started to pull apart Voldemort's robes; soon, his chest was exposed. "Hermione, what—"

"Quiet, Harry, I have to concentrate. Be ready to Disapparate. If he so much as twitches, get us out of here." She opened the container, spilled some onto his chest, and to her obvious disgust, started rubbing it all over his torso, firmly and thoroughly. Harry noticed that Voldemort, skeletally thin at his rebirth, didn't seem to have gained much weight. She looked at Harry and said, "Harry, use an Absorption Charm, as powerful as you can make it. Focus on love, make sure that stays with him."

Again wanting to ask questions, but knowing he shouldn't right that minute, he did as she asked. He did the charm several times, focusing on different areas, until he was sure he had done as much as he could; he could not see the red substance anymore. "Okay, we can go now," she said, closing his robes around him as they had been.

"But he's unconscious," Harry pointed out. "Isn't there something we could do...?"

"Like what, kill him?" she asked. "Neither of us can, Harry, this is what we were supposed to do. I'll explain later, but we don't know when he'll wake up, we have to go!"

“Okay, but shouldn’t we deactivate that thing around his neck? Let time start running again in here, maybe the Aurors will get to him.”

“All right,” she said. She reached over and turned the device off. “Better yet, I’ll take it.” She unclasped it and quickly put it into her pants pocket. “Do you want to Disapparate us out of here, or use Fawkes?”

“Disapparate,” he said. “Maybe it’ll set off more alarms, get attention.” He put his hands on her shoulders as the door that led to the room opened. Harry saw Lucius Malfoy and a few other familiar Death Eaters burst into the room. As they raised their wands, Harry visualized he and Hermione back in the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom.

They were suddenly there, standing in front of the class, which gaped at them in shock. Harry noticed that Professor McGonagall was now there. Neville raced forward and hugged Hermione tightly. Harry thought to tell the class what had happened to Dumbledore, but then saw how McGonagall was looking at him, especially the purple mark on his forehead. He realized that was part of what the class was shocked by, that they must all know what it meant.

He suddenly wished that Ginny were there, and in the next second, Fawkes burst into view, carrying her. She looked at his forehead and, he could see, knew what had happened as well. She raced to hug him, and as he fell into her arms, the grief that he had put off finally came out. He started crying, and now he knew that it was in front of a class, but didn’t care in the least. Dumbledore was gone.

He wasn’t sure how long he cried, maybe two or three minutes, he thought. Ginny held him, spoke softly to him, comforted him. When Harry finally stopped enough to look up, the rest of the class had gone, except Ron; he assumed McGonagall had ushered them out, and Ron had probably refused to go. Neville still had a protective arm around Hermione; Harry could only imagine what a wrenching experience it had been for Neville. To the class, Harry had only been

gone for about three minutes, because of Voldemort's time-stopping device, but it had to have been an agonizing three minutes.

He let go of Ginny, thanking her. Neville approached him. "Thank you, Harry, for bringing her back," he said earnestly.

"I'm not sure how much of it was me, Neville, but I did my best," he replied. Neville patted him on the shoulder.

McGonagall approached him. "Harry, I hate to do this right now, but delay is inadvisable. We must know what has happened, as soon as possible." Harry saw Snape appear in the room, with Fawkes, carrying the Pensieve. Harry made a silent request of Fawkes, who disappeared again.

"You can use my memories, Professor, they're the same as Harry's," volunteered Hermione. McGonagall nodded, and Snape set the Pensieve down. Fawkes returned to the room carrying Pansy, who took a look at Harry's forehead, and walked over to hug him. As he held her, he said to McGonagall, "They're all coming. This happened to Hermione and I, they all have to know."

Snape was obviously not happy. "There are operational details, Professor, which—"

"I don't care, they're coming," Harry cut Snape off. Snape looked at McGonagall, who reluctantly nodded.

"I am agreeing, Harry, because this was such an experience that you could not be expected to avoid sharing it with those closest to you," she said. "But I expect that each of the six of you will speak of it to absolutely no one else, with the exception of what will be publicly known. This is extremely serious. Is that understood?"

Ron, Ginny, Pansy, and Neville all nodded, their expressions indicating they understood the seriousness of the situation. With her wand, McGonagall locked the classroom doors as Hermione put her memories into the Pensieve. Harry kissed Ginny on the forehead and held the back of her head.

Hermione finished, and they all put their fingers into the Pensieve. Harry saw himself suddenly appear in the room and let go of Fawkes. Neville tensed as he saw how Hermione was being held by Voldemort, and put an arm around her as Ginny put one around Harry.

Soon they saw Dumbledore appear, grab Voldemort's wrist, and appear to be pulled into the Veil. Harry stopped the images and asked, "All right, I'd really like to know why he did that."

Snape said, "Miss Granger, I see from your hands that you accomplished your task. How was the Dark Lord subdued?"

"He just collapsed," she replied. "No reason, we don't know why."

McGonagall turned to Harry. "That was Albus, Harry. He did that."

Harry gaped. "But he's..."

She looked at him meaningfully. "He is... elsewhere. This is what he intended, it was his plan all along. I did not see how it could work; I know little about mysticism. But while he was not certain, he was confident. He did research, he consulted many mystics from all over the world. The information they gave him suggested this plan to him. He is not a ghost; he is now not what we would call alive, but it is clear that he exists, in some way we do not understand.

"You saw him touch Voldemort; that was an essential part of what he knew he had to do. His aim was to create a link with Voldemort, and he used the Veil to do it. You saw that thread of energy that followed him into the Veil; that was the link he sought. He used Legilimency on Voldemort to try to deepen that link. Whatever he has done—and I do not pretend to understand how it works—has allowed him to, from wherever the Veil takes people, maintain a link with Voldemort. I do not know the extent or form of this link, but it explains Voldemort's collapse at the end. Professor Dumbledore has achieved what he set out to do." Harry thought he heard awe in her tone.

Harry looked at his friends, who were clearly awed as well. "Hermione, did you have any idea...?"

She shook her head. “No, Harry. I’m sure he thought it was too risky for me to know as well. All I knew was that I would hopefully get a chance to do what I did, I didn’t know how it would happen.”

“Did the prophecy give him the idea to do this?” Harry asked McGonagall.

“Not as such,” she replied. “He had been considering the vague outlines of such a plan already. When he received the prophecy, he decided that it meant that such a thing could succeed, and pursued it more energetically. I confess I attempted to dissuade him.”

Harry realized that he hadn’t thought about the fact that she would be as pained by Dumbledore’s death as he was. “I would have too,” he said. “Does this mean that he can knock out Voldemort any time he wants? What else can he do?”

“We do not know, Harry,” she replied. “Only time will tell. We do not even know for certain that he can do it more than this once. This is all very new territory.”

There was silence for a moment, and Harry resumed the flow of the memory. They watched Voldemort’s smug satisfaction at Dumbledore’s death. After Voldemort had finished gloating, Harry stopped the images again. “How was Voldemort persuaded to come here, anyway? How was it arranged that he thought that he could try to get Dumbledore to go through the Veil voluntarily? He really thought Dumbledore believed the stuff about the Legion of the Dead?”

“There are many details on that matter, Professor, that you and your friends do not need to know,” said Snape. “Suffice it to say that the headmaster devised a plan to persuade the Dark Lord that his plan to deceive the headmaster would be successful. The headmaster was able to create a false image of a prophecy, one whose wording was deliberately vague, but intended to encourage the Dark Lord in his plans. I presented this prophecy to the Dark Lord, telling him I had managed to steal the memory from the headmaster’s Pensieve.” He surveyed Harry’s friends. “I believe that most of you had already deduced that I am serving as a spy against the

Dark Lord. Release of this information could gravely damage our cause and have enormous ramifications.”

They nodded earnestly. “I think we pretty much knew that already,” said Ron.

“The headmaster’s final act served as confirmation to the Dark Lord that his interpretation of this false prophecy was correct, and that the headmaster’s was incorrect, as you just saw. Fawkes’s choosing of you, Professor, fortuitously added to the Dark Lord’s confidence that his plan would work.” Snape resumed the images.

Soon Voldemort was threatening to kill Hermione if Harry did not surrender his wand; Harry and Hermione exchanged a worried glance, as they knew what effect seeing it would have on Neville. When Harry’s image said “No,” Neville looked at Harry, eyes wide, horrified. Hermione stopped the images and turned to Neville.

“Listen to me, Neville,” she said. “I pleaded with Harry to do that. He didn’t want to, you know him well enough to know that. You also know that he can’t die, or else we’re all in serious trouble. Giving up his wand would be giving up his life in that situation, not to mention that I would have died anyway. Voldemort wasn’t just going to let me go if Harry gave up his wand. You were ready to give up your life for him, and you would again. We all have to be ready to do that. You would have done the same thing in my position, you would have pleaded with him to do what he did.” Neville took this in, and slowly nodded.

Harry said, “Neville, believe me when I say that that was the hardest thing I’ve ever done. I almost couldn’t, because I believed that he would do it. It was agonizing. But I knew what she wanted, and what was at stake. I just made myself do it.”

“I know, Harry. I’m sorry. It was just... a shock. But I realize that you saved her life by doing it, and I can imagine how hard it must have been.” He patted Harry on the shoulder, and Hermione continued the images. Neville looked

predictably furious about Voldemort's mention of giving Hermione to Malfoy. Harry heard her say softly to Neville, "That's never going to happen, Neville. Harry and Dumbledore made sure of that."

When Voldemort mentioned Cleansing Malfoy, Harry looked at Snape questioningly. Snape subtly shook his head and gave him a look, which Harry understood as a request not to seek further information, at least not there and then.

The next part of the scene that provoked a strong reaction was when Hermione was able to use Harry's new spells. Everyone except Harry and Snape gaped at Hermione; Harry grinned broadly for the first time since Dumbledore had died. "I was so happy when I saw that... well, you can imagine."

"Thank you," she said happily. "I didn't have a chance to reflect on it at the time, but I'm excited because it means the Saturday evenings worked, and probably will for everyone else, with time. Probably it just happened with me soonest because I was tested like this. You know what this could mean."

"You mean, that it is not just him and Albus," McGonagall clarified, and Hermione nodded. "Indeed, there are wide-ranging implications, which we shall discuss later. But we should continue with this for now." She started the images again, and Harry saw Neville put his arm back around her and look at her proudly. "You'll be doing it soon too," she whispered.

The others gaped again when Hermione started insulting Voldemort, but no one stopped the images. "A worthwhile effort," commented Snape.

Then as Voldemort was angrily responding to Hermione, Harry was doing the Legilimens spell, and as Voldemort turned on him in fury, Harry stopped the images. He explained to the others what he had done, and described the images he had received. This got more amazed looks, and Snape said, "If any of the Dark Lord's followers tried such a thing, they would be dead in the next few seconds. He is very sensitive to any intrusion into his mind. It is remarkable that you are still here."

“I wouldn’t be, if not for Albus,” Harry replied. “As you’re about to see, we were fighting a losing battle.”

The images continued, and Harry saw he and Hermione start to be overcome, when Voldemort collapsed. Harry and Hermione’s friends watched, fascinated, as he removed her Memory Charm, and repulsed when she spread the red substance over his torso. “I wouldn’t mind leaving that in the Pensieve,” she muttered. “That was so disgusting... he even feels evil.”

Harry turned to Hermione. “Why didn’t we try to do anything else? Maybe we couldn’t kill him, but couldn’t we have tried to capture him? He was unconscious, after all.”

McGonagall answered before Hermione could. “The headmaster’s instructions to Miss Granger were very specific: she was to apply the substance to Voldemort as quickly as possible, then leave immediately. Professor Dumbledore could not know how long Voldemort would remain unconscious, and there exist highly advanced magical defenses against being involuntarily transported elsewhere. Had you tried, you could have been killed, or ended up somewhere you did not intend, and captured.”

“Wouldn’t it have been worth the risk, though?” Harry wondered. “I mean, he was unconscious, who knows the next time we might get a chance like that.”

“For what it is worth, Professor, I felt as you do,” said Snape; Harry felt from Snape’s tone that Snape had had a few arguments with Dumbledore about the topic. “I felt that the chances that the Dark Lord would anticipate being rendered unconscious and involuntarily transported away were remote, and so he would not have prepared any such defenses. The headmaster, however, chose to act with extreme caution; he took very literally the words of the most recent prophecy, that you could ‘later’ defeat the Dark Lord. He felt that to attempt to do so now would invite disaster.”

As they spoke, the scene reached the end, and they all left the Pensieve. McGonagall faced Harry and Hermione. “You both performed with exceptional

skill and bravery,” she said, “under extraordinarily trying circumstances. I am very proud of you... as I am sure Albus would be.” She smiled a bit, then added, “Perhaps I should say, ‘is.’ This business still confuses me.

“I will make an announcement during dinner tonight, though the whole school will know before then what has happened, because of the mark he left on Harry. Professor Snape and I will confer to discuss exactly what elements of this to make public knowledge. For now, you should convey to those who ask that Professor Dumbledore saved your lives by sacrificing his, which is not untruthful, and that was what allowed you to escape. You should avoid providing even minor details so as not to risk compromising secrecy regarding what was done.” She stopped talking and was preparing to leave, then looked at Harry and said, “Harry... that Pensieve is now yours, along with everything else that was Albus’s. We will meet sometime in the next week to discuss the matter.” She and Snape left the room.

Before Harry could ask, Neville did. “What was that red stuff, Hermione? Why did you have to do that?”

Hermione took a deep breath, as if getting ready to tell a long story. “It’s something I’ve been working on all year, something top-secret. I wasn’t allowed to tell anybody; for a lot of the time, even Snape didn’t know. I got this idea from Helen Clark, one of Harry’s Slytherin firsts. When she saw the Marauder’s Map at the beginning of the year, she said, ‘It’s too bad you can’t use a map like this to find Voldemort.’ I started wondering if it was possible. I spent some time researching it, and I thought it could be done. I talked to Dumbledore, and he encouraged me, making sure I had all the materials and books I needed. He also secretly escorted me out of Hogwarts a few times, introducing me to some magical chemists and researchers. I studied less than usual this year, also. You noticed that I wasn’t raising my hand all the time.”

“We just thought you were tired of being made fun of,” said Ron.

She chuckled. “That, too,” she admitted. “Anyway, the more I studied it, the more I thought it could be done, and in April, it finally worked. I, and the outside

people I was working with, managed to create a rather large map of England, which was similar to the ones I made for you. If the red stuff is absorbed into a person's skin, they become visible on the map. It doesn't even work for all of England yet; little magical relays have to be set up every few miles or so for it to work, so it's going to take some effort to cover the whole country. But we did tests, and it worked on the researchers and I. Kingsley was told after the first successful test, and he was thrilled at the idea, but of course the hard part was going to be figuring out how to get it onto Voldemort. Now that we have, once we get the relays set up, wherever he is in England, we'll be able to know where he is. I don't know how long it's going to take."

The others looked very impressed. "So, you put him in check," Harry said. She nodded and told the others about the chess prophecy.

Neville looked wounded. "Why didn't you tell me?" he asked Hermione.

"She did it to save you worry, Neville," said Harry. "There would have been nothing you could have done, and you would have agonized over it. I mean, she's not my special person, and I worried a lot about her for the past month. I didn't tell Ginny, even though I didn't know for sure that I was going to be involved. I thought I probably would be—I've gotten used to the idea that things always happen to me, especially when they involve Voldemort—but I couldn't be sure. I'm sorry," he said, now looking at Ginny, "I know you would have wanted to know, but I didn't see the point in telling you."

"The point," she said, "is that I want to share your life with you, both the good things and the bad. I know that this is a part of being Harry Potter's special person. I don't feel like I'm really with you if I don't share stuff like that. I forgive you, because I know your heart was in the right place. I can see your point. But I think we're going to have to have a talk about this, reach an understanding." He nodded and took her hand. He could see her point, too.

Neville reached over and put his arm around Hermione's shoulder, moving her head to rest against his. "I was so terrified, when Harry told us about that

vision. I thought for sure I was never going to see you again. It... made me realize, more than I ever had before, how important you are to me. I don't ever want to lose you."

"You won't, Neville," she assured him. "I love you, I'm not going anywhere."

"I love you, too," he said. "You were only gone for a few minutes, to us, but it seemed like much longer to me. All kinds of things went through my mind. One of them was that I wished we'd had the Joining of Hands done. I would have been able to look at you, know if you were all right or not. I would have sat there and stared at my hand."

She looked at him uncertainly. "Are you saying that you thought then that you wanted it done, or..." She didn't want to finish the sentence.

He looked at her very earnestly. "At that moment, it was what I thought I wanted. Now, looking at you... I know it's what I want. I want to do this with you, if you want to."

She smiled. "Yes, Neville, I want to. I've wanted to since they had it done, I just didn't want to pressure you." They kissed; Harry and the others exchanged smiles.

"Nothing like almost losing someone you love to make you realize how much you love them," said Ginny. "It's too bad Dumbledore's gone, he could have done it for you."

"We couldn't have yet, anyway, since neither of us is seventeen," pointed out Hermione. "Who knows if Neville's grandmother or my parents would consent. It's probably better if we wait until we're both seventeen. But yes, it is true that it's best if the strongest possible wizard does it." She and Neville glanced at each other, and they both looked straight at Harry.

He took a few seconds to catch their drift. "Me?" he asked, surprised. "But I don't know how to do it!"

Neville regarded Harry imperiously. “Learn,” he said. Harry smiled and snapped off a salute. Neville smiled back.

Ginny looked thoughtful. “I’m curious, Harry, if I’d known what was going on, would you have wanted me looking, or would you rather I wasn’t, so you could focus better?”

He thought about it. “It’s almost hard to say, really. I’d want you to be able to look, but the tingling would remind me that you were looking. It might not threaten my focus, but in that kind of situation, you know you could die. You try not to think about it, because it would be too distracting. But now I have another reason not to want to die, an even stronger one. I don’t want to have to leave you. So your watching me could remind me of that, and I could worry and lose my focus.”

“That makes sense,” she said. “I guess I won’t in the future, then, much as I’ll want to. I’m not naive enough to think this won’t happen again.”

“Not until Voldemort’s gone,” Harry agreed. “But it’s still hard to imagine how that’s going to happen. I mean, we accomplished a lot today. He’ll be able to be tracked, at some point, and it may be that Dumbledore can do more to Voldemort from wherever he is now. But I’m supposed to be the one with the power to ‘vanquish’ him, and I have no idea how I’m going to do it. He’s still way too strong for me, too experienced. Those were awful spells he was hitting me with, he could have done away with me any time he wanted. Like he said, he wanted us alive, that’s the only reason he didn’t kill us. It never occurred to him that he was in any danger, that there was any chance he’d be stopped before he could kill us.”

“That makes me wonder,” said Ron, “How did Dumbledore do that, if time was stopped to everyone outside the room? How could he have picked the right time?”

“We may never know, Ron,” answered Harry, “but he did tell Ginny and I once at dinner that in the... nonphysical world,... no wait, realm, he said, that time

doesn't work the same way, or there's no such thing as time. Maybe from where he is, he can choose any point in time he wants. It's really, really strange."

"Hermione, it's so fantastic about the spells of Harry's you did," enthused Pansy. "We definitely have to keep up the Saturday sessions in the summer, maybe do more of them. Thank goodness Harry had the idea to do them."

"Yes, it feels really good," Hermione agreed. "I'm sure that Dumbledore is very proud, wherever he is. I know he wanted this to happen. You might be teaching your classes very differently next year, Harry."

"It does look like I might be," he agreed. "I'll have to think more about it, talk about it with McGonagall. By the way, I noticed that you used the spells without an incantation either, even though your score on that meter wasn't 100."

"I have a theory. I think if I were tested now, it would be 100; I think that anyone who uses the energy of love successfully is going to score 100 and not need incantations. I also think that's why your spells didn't come with incantations; they weren't necessary. You can only do them by using the energy of love."

"Sounds like a reasonable theory," he said. "Given what happened, I think the Aurors might be interested in you coming along for some part of the time for the next session. By the way, Neville, what are we going to do about tomorrow?"

"You mean, are we going to see the Aurors? I don't know... I'm okay to, it should really be you that decides. You should also talk to Kingsley, they might want to wait. A lot of them are close to Dumbledore."

Harry nodded. "Okay, I'll talk to him soon, see what he thinks. I think maybe we'll do it on Sunday. I still want to do it, it may just be better to wait a day, until the shock wears off a little more. Funny, I say shock, but I had almost six weeks' warning for this, and it was still a shock. I can only imagine if I hadn't known about it in advance. There's no way I could have not fallen apart when it happened, then Voldemort would have had me."

They spent the next two hours talking more, covering all aspects of what happened. Harry felt that it was not so much that they needed to talk, but that they

needed each other, each other's company and support, in what was a difficult time for all of them, for all had cared about Dumbledore. He thought it could be likened to a support group, or a wake, then he realized that they were almost the same thing. He had never felt closer to his friends than he did then.

When they finally left the room, it was five o'clock. Ron, Ginny, and Neville decided to go back to Gryffindor Tower, while Harry and Hermione went to see Hagrid. Hagrid had heard, of course, and burst into tears again at seeing the purple mark on Harry's forehead. He calmed down, and apologized. "Bin grievin' the whole year, don' know why it should seem like such a shock now." They talked for a half hour, exchanging stories and memories.

On their way back to the castle, near the castle steps they ran into Cho and Marietta. Cho looked at Harry with pity, and hugged him. "I'm so sorry, Harry," she said. "But I'm so glad you're alive, the Hufflepuff sixth years told us what happened. I would have been so scared. But this is you, I would have known you wouldn't be." She released him, looking at him proudly.

"I was scared, just not for myself," he said, glancing at Hermione.

Marietta walked up to him. "I'm sorry too. He was really good to me, when he had no reason to be. I'll never forget how he was, at the feast."

He nodded. "I learned a lot from him. Especially that night." To his own surprise, he impulsively stepped forward and hugged her. He could feel that she was startled, but after a second, returned the hug. "Thank you," she said, her voice full of emotion. Harry realized that she was thanking him because he was truly forgiving her, as he had not the night of the feast, not in his heart of hearts.

Back in Gryffindor Tower, Harry relaxed on his bed until dinner, Fawkes singing to him. The thought that he would be spending more time in Fawkes' presence was both uplifting and depressing at the same time. He asked Fawkes to rest on his chest, petted him, and talked to him about Dumbledore. He got the

feeling that Fawkes was sad, too. He wondered whether he was imagining it, or whether he was becoming more attuned to Fawkes' nonverbal communication.

Dinner was somber; the Great Hall was much more quiet than usual. Harry and his friends talked, but not as much as usual; they had already said much of what they could say in their long talk earlier. At one point all ten Slytherin first years came over to give Harry their condolences. "Pansy told us she saw what happened, how brave both of you were," Helen said to Harry and Hermione. Harry talked to them for a few minutes, then they went back to their table.

At six-thirty, McGonagall walked into the Great Hall and up to the podium; Harry noticed that most all of the teachers had taken their seats at the teachers' table. "It is my very painful duty to report to you the death this afternoon of Albus Dumbledore, the school's headmaster." Where once there would have been a gasp there was dead silence, as everyone already knew. "There was a confrontation with Voldemort in the room at the Department of Mysteries containing the artifact known as the Veil of Mystery. Voldemort provoked the confrontation by having his Death Eaters abduct Gryffindor sixth year student Hermione Granger, who he then took to that room. He demanded the arrival of the headmaster and Professor Harry Potter, who both soon arrived on the scene. Miss Granger was involved in a plan to achieve a strategic advantage in the struggle against Voldemort. Due to the headmaster's sacrifice, the operation was a success. We cannot give details, for reasons of security, but I can say that we have significantly improved our position in this struggle as a result of today's events.

"The headmaster's actions achieved not only this purpose, but also saved the lives of Miss Granger and Professor Potter. Professor Potter managed to keep Voldemort distracted for the time necessary, fighting off spells that would have killed most wizards. Miss Granger, in addition to assisting with the strategic operation which occurred, was able to fight off Voldemort's Cruciatius Curse and Killing Curse by using the shields discovered by Professor Potter; she is the first person other than Professor Potter or the headmaster who has demonstrated the

ability to use them.” There was a moderate gasp at that, and many heads swiveled in Hermione’s direction.

“The headmaster himself knew throughout this year that his remaining time was short; his phoenix Fawkes’ choosing of Professor Potter as his next companion signaled that he would not live more than another year. Phoenixes do not choose new companions until the death of the older one is near. The headmaster used this information to devise a plan to put his death to the best use possible, and it has succeeded. He had no regrets.

“I worked with Albus Dumbledore for forty years. He was not only an excellent headmaster, but also a kind man and a good friend. I shall miss him greatly, as shall we all. Thank you.”

Harry and his friends exchanged looks. “I’m a little surprised she even said that much,” said Hermione. “I guess the idea was that it was all right to say anything that Voldemort and his people already know.”

“Hermione,” Harry said, “you still have that thing you took off of Voldemort, don’t you?”

She nodded. “I was surprised, too. I thought she or Snape would take it from me. Maybe they think we’ll need it.”

“Sounds reasonable, considering what you guys get yourselves into,” said Pansy.

“You’re in it too, now, don’t forget,” said Ron humorously. “You save Harry’s life, you’re in the group.”

“What about Justin?” she asked.

Ron paused, then said, “You save Harry’s life twice, you’re in the group.” The others chuckled.

“What about me, Ron?” asked Neville. “I’ve only done it once.”

The others looked at Ron, amused, as he thought. Finally, he said, “You go running into a room, totally outnumbered, to try to save Harry...” Ron joined in the laughter that followed. “Don’t give me a hard time, Neville.”

Neville reached for Hermione's hand. "I learned from the best." Ron shook his head and reached for his goblet.

A voice behind him said, "Is Neville really giving you a hard time, Ron? People do change, don't they?"

Harry looked behind him to see Hugo Brantell. "Hi, Hugo. Not too hard to figure out why you're here. Have a seat." Hermione moved toward Harry, and Hugo squeezed in on her left.

"How are you doing, Harry?" asked Hugo, concerned.

Harry thought about it. "I've had all this time to prepare for it, so it's not the shock it would have been otherwise. I'm really sad, of course, I'll miss him terribly. I feel like... I wish so much I could have had another five years with him, but if that had happened, they would have been over just like that, and I would have wanted another five. I guess these things happen when they happen, no matter what we want. But I am reassured that he was sure that his spirit would survive, and... not that anyone could keep anything secret from you anyway, but how much do you know about this that's not going to be public?"

"All of it," he replied. "McGonagall showed me Hermione's memory." Seeing their raised eyebrows, he added, "Dumbledore confided in me about that kind of thing, too, since it would be hard to keep secrets from me anyway. They know I can be trusted. Anyway, you two were really impressive. And Dumbledore... I'll tell you, Harry, you wanted another five years with him, but my feeling is, at least you got this year. I wish I could have had that. You just can't say enough about him to do him justice."

"That's for sure," Harry agreed. "And you're right, I do cherish this year. The best thing about being a professor was that I got a chance to spend much more time with him. Anyway, I was saying that what happened at the end of what you saw not only saved our lives, but was reassuring. He's there, somewhere. He may not be coming back, but unless Voldemort suffered some kind of fit purely by coincidence, what we saw was proof that he's still around, in some way we don't

understand. At least I don't understand it. So I feel better for him, but I'm still really sad for myself."

Hugo nodded. "And how about you, Neville? You had a pretty tough day, too."

Looking surprised to be asked, Neville thought for a few seconds. "It was a pretty tough three minutes; the rest wasn't so bad. I realized a few things I hadn't known," he said, looking at Hermione.

"Why aren't there all these Ministry people around, Hugo?" she asked. "I'd have thought they'd all come rushing down here, wanting to express their official sympathy and all that."

"Some wanted to, but McGonagall said no," said Hugo. "There's going to be a ceremony tomorrow to honor him. She said they could come then, that now is too soon."

"Good for her," agreed Hermione. "The last thing you want to do when you're grieving is be polite to a bunch of politicians. I'm afraid you're going to have to talk to them, though, Harry. You can't really avoid it. I suppose you could try to honor his memory by dealing with them like he would have."

"Couldn't I honor his memory while hiding in my dormitory, listening to Fawkes sing, and talking to Ginny in my hand?" joked Harry.

"I'm sure he wouldn't mind, anyway," said Hugo. "Well, I'm sorry, Harry, but I do need to ask you a few questions for the article. You, too, Hermione. Is here okay, or would you like to go somewhere else?"

"The usual place, I think," said Harry. "The rest of you want to come? They nodded and got up. As they walked out, Hugo said, "I'm going to want a picture of you two, also. People are going to want to see that mark."

"Just what I need, more people looking at my forehead," Harry said with resignation as they walked out.

After the interview, Harry's friends headed back to their common rooms, but he had one thing he wanted to do before going back.. Looking at his map, he found that McGonagall was in her living quarters. He knocked on her door, which opened. She got up from a chair. "Harry! Come in. What can I do for you?"

"Nothing especially, Professor. I just wanted to come by to see how you were doing. Everybody's been making a big fuss over me, because of this," he said, gesturing to the purple mark, "but this had to be really hard for you, worse than me. I know you and he were really close."

She looked touched by his concern. "Thank you, that's very thoughtful. Yes, I..." She trailed off, looking like she was trying to avoid being overcome by emotion. After a few seconds of trying to regain control, she said, "Oh, to hell with it," and stepped forward to hug Harry. He felt as though they were both pouring their emotions into the embrace, holding each other as they would like to be holding Dumbledore. She sobbed for a few seconds, then sniffled and let go of him. "I really have not had a chance to grieve, Harry," she said, her voice still heavy with emotion. "I had all year, of course, but not today. We had to find out what had happened, then consider the strategic ramifications, talk to the Aurors, by which time people were starting to call. I just came back to my quarters for a rest, I may have more things to deal with later.

"You know, after you came back from that confrontation, and you cried on Ginny as you did... I envied you. I wanted to cry, just as you were. But I could not, right then." She chuckled and sobbed at the same time. "Albus would tell me that I should go ahead and do so now, I am sure. The fact is, it's almost difficult to do, there is such a reflex to suppress it. The last time I did was sixteen years ago..." She started to sob again, as Harry recalled what she had said on that December morning when she took him to Hogsmeade to meet Cassandra. He reached out and held her again. Feeling her cry brought more tears to his eyes, which he didn't fight. They stood there for another minute, silent, each crying at times. She stepped back, looking at him fondly. "Thank you, Harry, I needed that."

“It’s no problem, Professor. I—“

”Minerva,” she corrected.

He smiled, touched by her gesture. “It’s no problem, Minerva.” He chuckled; to her questioning look, he explained, “I just thought, if I told Hermione this, she’d swoon. She’d love to be able to call you Minerva.”

McGonagall laughed. “Hermione is sweet. Very few students would admire me as she does; most would be too intimidated, or simply would not see me as any kind of role model.”

“Well, I suppose more may from now on,” he said. “I assume you’re going to be the headmistress now?”

She nodded, shrugging as though it weren’t important. “Albus arranged it with the governors before he left. I suppose I shall have to cultivate a different image now; being strict may be a good quality in a deputy headmistress, but not a headmistress. Perhaps I should practice smiling over the summer.”

“Somehow I think you’ll manage,” Harry said, smiling.

“By the way, Harry, I wanted to be the one to tell you... the new deputy headmaster will be Professor Snape.” She took in his surprised look, and said with amusement, “Either you are not as surprised as I thought you would be, or you are better at hiding your feelings than you used to be.”

“Maybe it’s a little of both,” he said. “I guess I always remember what you said at the beginning of the year, about not criticizing fellow teachers. I mean, well... whatever I said wouldn’t be anything you don’t already know anyway, I would think.”

She nodded. “You do not think he has the qualities that a deputy headmaster or a headmaster should have,” she guessed. “I know this, Harry. So did Albus, and so does Professor Snape. He does not particularly welcome the appointment; he has no interest in the position. Professor Dumbledore assured him that he could resign the position after Voldemort has been dealt with. The reason for giving him the position is to increase his value to Voldemort.”

Understanding dawned on Harry. “Ah, I see. There would be more chances to give him false information.”

“Or even true information, yes, with higher credibility,” she said. “Sometimes it is necessary for us to provide Voldemort with information which is of genuine help to him. If Professor Snape were of no help to Voldemort, he would not be so valuable to him, and therefore to us. I am sure you understand that.” Harry nodded. “In fact, that reminds me of something, and now is as good a time as any. Harry, would you use your new dog to summon Hermione?”

Harry did so. “You don’t have one?” he wondered.

She shrugged. “I never bothered to try; it is not as though I need to summon people all that often. Also, I found the spell somewhat... whimsical, more suited to his personality than mine.”

Harry decided he felt comfortable enough to make a joke. “Maybe yours could be an owl. It could fly to the person, land on their shoulder, and look at them like this,” he said, adopting an expression that suggested that someone had done something wrong. “Hedwig’s looked at me like that more than a few times,” he added as she laughed.

“I will think of something, I’m sure. Perhaps a cat; it would be more in keeping with my character, and my being an Animagus. By the way, I was impressed that you learned the spell so quickly.”

“He said it wasn’t that difficult,” Harry pointed out.

“I think he meant that it would not be that difficult for you,” she suggested. “I am sure that no other sixth year could do it, especially so quickly. You must keep in mind that with your power being what it is now, some spells will be much easier for you than for others.” She paused.. “Getting back to Professor Snape... you should know that he will be as distressed about the headmaster’s death as you or I am. We will never see any evidence of it, but it is true nonetheless. You may want to keep that in mind.”

“I suppose I could have guessed it. The time we talked Albus out of doing the Cruciatus Curse on me at the demonstration... it was obvious that he was really concerned for him. I know there’s a lot I don’t know about their relationship. Can I ask you, do you know what it is? I know you can’t tell me, of course.”

“Yes, I do know what it is, and you are right, I cannot tell you. If anyone does, it will be Professor Snape himself. He may, someday, by the way. I am the only one apart from the two of them who knows. Anyway, you may want to deal with him regarding this with compassion, even though he may seem to disdain it and not require it. This has been as difficult a year for him as for me. Ironically, the one who it may have been least hard on was Albus himself. He was truly content.”

There was a knock on the door, and Hermione walked in. “Professor?” she asked quietly; Harry realized that she had never been to McGonagall’s quarters.

“Come in, Hermione,” McGonagall said pleasantly. “I asked Harry to call you because there is something I wanted to tell you. Please sit down.” McGonagall sat in a chair; Harry and Hermione, on a sofa.

McGonagall took a deep breath. “I think you deserve to know this, Hermione. In your confrontation this afternoon, you heard Voldemort say that he had been informed that you might have useful information. I assume you may have guessed the source of that information.”

Hermione nodded. “Professor Snape,” she said.

“Yes, Hermione. With Professor Dumbledore’s authorization.” Harry felt surprised even though he knew that Snape would not have told Voldemort such a thing without permission. “Professor Snape was instructed to tell Voldemort that he had discovered that you were working on a project that was intended to undermine him, but that he did not know the exact nature of the project. You had to be made an attractive enough target to be worth abducting. That information, combined with your closeness to Harry, was enough to do it.

“I see that you are not upset by this information, which is very much to your credit. You know very well that this could have had disastrous consequences

for you. For example, Voldemort could have spirited you away to try to get the information from you before the confrontation; that was our largest worry. He almost certainly could not have broken Professor Dumbledore's Memory Charm, but you would have been destroyed in the process. Even as events occurred, had you not manifested the ability to use Harry's spells, or if Harry had not been resourceful enough to find a way through Voldemort's wall of energy, you could have been irreparably damaged. Your parents could have been killed in the accident. Frankly, we did not anticipate that; we thought he would wait until the school year was over to do this. In any case, the whole enterprise was fraught with danger for you, and you were not exactly told all the details. I wanted you to know what was done, and to thank you for the bravery with which you faced it."

Hermione nodded. "Thank you, Professor. I guess what disturbed me most was what they did to my parents; I didn't think they'd do that, either. They don't know what I'm involved in, and I'm wondering if I may have to tell them. But the rest of it... I knew what I was getting into, helping Harry fight Voldemort. I think all six of us know what could happen, and that we might not have all the information all the time. I also know that Professor Dumbledore wouldn't have asked me to face that kind of danger without a really good reason. It was, and it worked. It's amazing that he managed to manipulate Voldemort like he did, never mind what he did afterwards."

McGonagall nodded. "I am still stunned by that. I may have to look into this mysticism business. Clearly, there is something to it." She gave them a self-deprecating smile. "Now, there is something else I would like to discuss with the two of you. Firstly, Harry, Albus told me that you had been attempting to teach your friends to use the energy of love in their magic; clearly, that has been successful with Hermione. Albus was convinced that your new spells could only be done by using that energy, and that it was not an easy state to reach. Even he did not know if it was something only you and he could do, but he suspected that such

was not the case, and has been proved correct. What consideration have you given to including this in your classes next year?"

"I guess not that much, since I only found out about this a few hours ago. Of course, when we started the Saturday evening sessions, I knew that it was a possibility in the future. But is one person enough? We all know Hermione's usually the first to get things. I kind of hoped that there would be more than one."

"I think Neville's going to be next," said Hermione confidently. "He's been making progress, I can tell, and I think what happened today will give him a big jolt, like what happened with Ginny did with you. I'm not going to be the only one, Harry, just the fastest."

"If that's true," answered Harry, "then I can't think of any reason not to teach it. I just wonder how long it'll take, and how parents will react to something so... experimental. But I don't think there'll be any problem from the students. I've already had some first years asking why I'm not teaching them how to use the energy of love, if I use it myself. My biggest worry is, what if some students just can't do it? They could spend all this time, and it would be wasted. I mean, I couldn't have done this when I was eleven; you know how my aunt and uncle are, and I didn't have any friends before Ron and you. I couldn't have succeeded in summoning feelings of love."

"Those are reasonable concerns, Harry," agreed McGonagall. "But I daresay that most students are not in the unfortunate situation you were in. Most have at least their parents to love, and most make friends at Hogwarts. In any case, I assume we agree that at the very least, this is something that it would be a terrible waste not to try to impart to students in some form, whatever the details may be?" Harry agreed.

"In that case, Harry... you will have plenty of time to think about this, but I would like you to consider altering your future plans. You are already the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, and you are uniquely qualified to teach students how to use the energy of love. If you leave at the end of next year to become an Auror,

Hogwarts would lose an irreplaceable asset, and could not teach students what you have discovered. Imagine, Harry, a generation of wizards who use the energy of love. Not only would they be powerful, but they would never be tempted to become Dark wizards. How could they, having become so accustomed to using the energy of love? Not to mention that they would be much happier people, as you have become.

“If you become an Auror, you will be an excellent one, probably the best and most powerful. But by remaining here, you could have an impact on hundreds, eventually thousands, of lives. I know you feel an indebtedness to the Aurors, you would not want to abandon your plans. You could still be a detached Auror, continuing to train with them, and go on missions. You would be a special-purpose Auror, not an everyday one. Foreseeing this possibility, Professor Dumbledore has talked with Kingsley about this. Kingsley is not overjoyed at the prospect—they are very fond of you, and quite pleased that you wish to join them—but he recognizes the situation, and your unique value to Hogwarts. He, and they, would not oppose your staying here, nor would it affect your relationship with them. Their attachment to you is as a person, not simply your future value to them.

“As I said, you will have plenty of time to think about this. But I am curious to know your initial reaction,” she concluded. Harry glanced at Hermione and saw that she was quite curious as well.

“Wow... it’s all a bit much. I’m honored at the way you put it, but I also can’t deny that it’s reasonable. Someone should teach this for a long time, and it does make sense that it be me. But I hate to think about not being an Auror, I’ve wanted to for such a long time. And I’ve really been looking forward to all that gambling,” he joked.

McGonagall and Hermione laughed. “I’m sure they will keep you abreast of all such opportunities,” McGonagall said. “Again, I know you will need to think about this. But I also wish you to know that Professor Dumbledore had strongly contemplated this, waiting only for someone in your group to successfully develop

the ability that Hermione has. He visualized a likely future for you should you decide to stay.

“As I said, Professor Snape’s appointment as Deputy Headmaster is temporary,” she continued, noticing Hermione’s surprised expression. “He is doing it only because it has practical value at the moment, and because Professor Dumbledore asked him to. Professor Dumbledore imagined that as we would then need a new Deputy Headmaster, you would be a suitable choice. I see myself remaining in this post for no more than fifteen more years, after which you would be more than ready to assume the job.”

Harry was flabbergasted. Him, be headmaster? Or deputy headmaster at such an incredibly young age? But she was serious, he knew that. He looked at Hermione, whose radiant smile let him know what she thought of the idea. He still couldn’t wrap his mind around it. “How could I be deputy headmaster at eighteen? Or headmaster at thirty-three? It just doesn’t seem possible.”

“Neither did being a teacher at sixteen, but look at how you have managed. You have done your job excellently, you are admired and respected by all students, and loved by many, especially the younger ones. For Albus’s position and mine, or should I say, my former one, administrative skill is not what is important; leadership is. People must accept your leadership not because you are feared, as would be the case with a Headmaster Snape, or because they are intimidated, as many students feel with me, but because they genuinely wish to. This was the ability Albus had, and you have. You have seen it already, in your experiences. You are the unofficial leader of your group of friends. The Slytherin first years enthusiastically embraced your leadership after only one lesson. The path Professor Dumbledore has considered for you is not only possible, it is utterly logical and natural. I do not tell you this as any kind of incentive; I know you would not particularly aspire to this. I simply wish to let you know what you could be letting yourself in for. But to do anything else would be a waste of your talent.”

After a few seconds' silence, Hermione spoke. "She's right, and so is Professor Dumbledore. Think about the effect Professor Dumbledore has had on you, and on so many people over the years. You could have that same effect. I know you can't see that now, but you have to try. Remember those Christmas thank-you cards from the first years? They were serious in what they wrote, Harry. You've had a huge effect on them. You could do a lot of good, for many years. You have to think about it."

He smiled at her. "I have a feeling you're not going to let me do anything else, I know how you are."

She smiled back and nodded. "Yes, I hear that people hate it when I'm right."

He laughed. "Okay, I promise to think about it, that's all I can say. It just seems really overwhelming right now. I'm still only sixteen, you know."

McGonagall nodded, seeming to understand that she had said as much as she could. "And, Hermione, do you recall my suggestion at last year's Career Day, that you consider becoming a Hogwarts professor? Well, part of the headmaster's notion was that after Harry became headmaster, you would make an excellent deputy headmistress. I agree, of course."

Hermione gasped. "Thank you, Professor," she said. "It's such a compliment, I'm so honored... and if Harry does this, it would be so great to be with him like that. It would be wonderful." For Harry, the idea of being headmaster looked a lot more appealing, if she could be there with him.

"You would be extremely well-qualified, of course. Albus particularly liked the symmetry of the idea. Albus felt that he and Harry were very similar in many ways, and of course you and I are as well. The relationships are also similar; Albus and I were, though not life partners, extremely close; the same is true for the two of you. He felt that if this came to pass, Hogwarts would be in excellent hands for the future."

McGonagall looked at Harry. “Before I forget... I mentioned to you that we would meet sometime next week to discuss the disposition of Albus’s property. But there is one thing in particular that he wished you to have as soon as possible; I retrieved it from his office earlier. Excuse me a moment.” She went into her bedroom and came out in a few seconds, holding a large book. Harry stood to look at it as she approached him.

She handed it to him; it was surprisingly light for such a large book. On the cover, in neat, large handwriting, was written, “From Albus, to Harry.” He looked up in surprise as Hermione stood to get a better look. He started flipping through the pages, which were very thin but sturdy; he guessed that it was five or six hundred pages. Every page was filled with neat handwriting, not printing.

“He has been working on this all year,” said McGonagall. “He has allowed me to read it; needless to say, it is very impressive. It covers many subjects; his life and experiences, Fawkes, relationships, his beliefs, information about magic... anything he thought was important. There are many aspects of it which are directed to you in particular, of course; his comments on some of your experiences, and so forth. He has written a book with an intended audience of one.”

Harry couldn’t believe it... how much effort had this taken? Just for him? He immediately understood what it meant about how Dumbledore felt about him, that he would do this. He was very moved, and felt tears coming on again. He quickly handed the book to Hermione. Having seen his face, McGonagall was already moving forward to hold him. Overwhelmed, he started to cry, and continued for a few minutes. I guess I didn’t get it all out the first time, he thought. Of course, there was a lot to get out, he knew. He hugged McGonagall again to thank her for holding him, and stepped back.

“This is... amazing, I don’t have words for it,” he finally said. “I can’t believe he did this. Now I wish he were here, so I could thank him.”

“I think he knows,” McGonagall said. “He is elsewhere, apparently, but not gone.”

“Harry...” Hermione paused for a few seconds in obvious amazement. “Near the end... there are detailed instructions on how to perform the Joining of Hands. He writes, ‘I have a feeling you will be doing this soon, sooner than you think.’” Harry smiled as Hermione told McGonagall what Neville had asked that afternoon. Was it possible that Dumbledore had guessed it would be them? He decided that he wouldn’t be surprised.

He went back to Gryffindor Tower; McGonagall asked Hermione to stay for awhile, which made Harry happy. He hoped they could establish a relationship, since he knew how highly each regarded the other. His head still swimming over the book, he climbed through the portrait hole and into the common room. He headed for Ron, Neville, and Ginny, and sat down with them. He showed them the book and explained it; they looked awed, as he had expected. Harry flipped through it and read bits of it to them; Neville was moved as well at what Dumbledore had written about the Joining of Hands. All indicated a strong interest in reading it eventually, if Harry read it and thought that Dumbledore wouldn’t mind.

He thought about heading to his dormitory at ten o’clock, but he decided he wanted to wait until Hermione got back. She returned at ten-thirty, glowing with pleasure. She didn’t give details, but said that they had talked about many different topics, and that it had been a wonderful experience. For the others, McGonagall wasn’t quite their idea of a role model, but they were happy for Hermione.

Harry and Ginny had gotten in the habit of going to bed at the same time, so they could talk for awhile before going to sleep. They did tonight, Harry telling her more details of his meeting with McGonagall. He hadn’t told the others about her and Dumbledore’s plans for the future of Hogwarts, but he told her. Naturally, she approved of the idea, and encouraged him to think it was possible and natural. She reminded him that he had been intimidated by the idea of teaching at first, and that had turned out well; she was pleased when he told her that McGonagall had said much the same thing.

After talking for nearly an hour, longer than usual, they signed off. Harry had wanted to start reading the book, but it was already rather late, so he regretfully put it off. He did his Occlumency exercises, petted and talked to Fawkes, and tried to sleep. Fawkes sang, and again he felt thankful to have Fawkes; he wondered how much sleep he had not lost because of Fawkes. The beautiful song guided him to sleep.

Harry was walking outside, the sunlight coming through the trees in beams which seemed to happen only in pictures, not in real life. He looked around and recognized the area where Fawkes had taken him for what he had come to think of as the phoenix symphony; again he was struck by its beauty. He wondered why he was there, and suddenly heard a voice behind him. “Harry, it is good to see you again.”

Disbelievingly, he turned around. It was Dumbledore, looking as he had before he had gone through the veil. Astonishment gave way to joy, and he walked over and hugged Dumbledore. “Albus, it’s so wonderful to see you... but you went through the Veil! What’s going on? How are you here?”

“I understand that this is disorienting,” Dumbledore said. “It is for me, as well. I am getting used to my new status, however. It is quite a change.”

“New status... so you did die? How are you talking to me, then? How did you get here?”

“I am not really here, as such; I mean, not in this physical location. You are sleeping, and this is... not a dream, really, because you alone are not generating this. This is a real experience, it is just not a real physical experience. That makes it no less valid, however.

“I cannot reach you while you are awake; too much is happening in your mind to distract you from this sort of experience. While you are sleeping, I can reach you. You and I have combined to create this setting. Fawkes took me here three times when I was in physical form, and I also could not but admire its beauty.

This may feel physical, but it is not; you just hugged me, but our bodies are currently simply markers, forms created because you are used to it. We could communicate as disembodied forms, but this is more comfortable for you, and not at all unpleasant for me as well. The setting is a nice reminder of the pleasures of being in physical form. And to answer your first question, yes, I did die, in the physical sense. My physical body is gone, never to return. But obviously I do not feel dead, and in a real sense, I am not.”

“I’m so happy to know this, Albus. I wish I had known before you died that I’d be able to communicate with you like this. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I was not sure, and I did not want to raise your hopes for something that might not happen. Much of what I did was speculative; the only thing I knew for certain was that my spirit would not die. To answer your next question first, you are the only one I can communicate with in this fashion. One reason I taught you Legilimency in the last few weeks of my life was so that you would be able to unlock Hermione’s Memory Charm, but another was to increase my chances of being able to communicate with you in this way. You became familiar with my mind, and I with yours; that has helped us form this link. You are doing it too, it is simply unconscious on your part. I am very pleased that this is possible. I have seen how you have grieved, and wish you to know that you need do so no more. I am here; I simply cannot be with you in the physical world.”

Harry was amazed. “This doesn’t feel like a... oh, wait, you said it wasn’t a dream, I guess that explains it. Where are you now, if you’re not in this place with me? Can you describe it?” He looked around, and found it hard to believe that they weren’t really there. They both sat down on the grass. Harry picked a flower; it felt real enough.

“I am in a sort of in-between place, between the spiritual realm and the physical world; that is where the Veil takes us, and where we initially go when we ‘die,’ so to speak. We come here to get our bearings, to realize what has happened to us. We can stay here for a time if we wish, or move on, which is what most do fairly

quickly. This place is more closely connected to the physical world than is the spiritual realm; were I there, I could not be communicating with you. There is time here, though it works differently. I can move forward or backward if I choose, though I cannot do so in order to influence events. To do that, I must stay in sync with physical time.

“You see, when we reach this place, we generally do not attempt to interfere with events in the physical world. I am in a sense violating a guideline by what I do here. Not that there could be any sort of sanction on me for doing so, it is simply not normally done. But I am doing so, because this was my express purpose in coming here. It was I, of course, that caused Voldemort to lose consciousness. To do so was... very difficult. Even though I am not physical and know that my spirit is eternal, it was still a distressing experience. I can do it again, but only when absolutely necessary. I do not look forward to it.”

Harry wondered what could intimidate a disembodied spirit like that. “What was it you had to do, to do that?”

“To say that I entered his mind with my spirit is perhaps the best way to put it. You already know that I connected myself to him by creating a temporary physical link between he and the Veil—the energy thread you saw—and I reinforced the link by penetrating his mind just before entering the Veil. Having done so allowed me access of a sort to his mind, similar yet different to what I have with yours. If he cooperated, I could speak to him in his sleep, but there would truly be no point to doing so. He does not know what caused his unconsciousness, and it frightens him. In fact, it may amuse you to know that his best guess right now is that it was something you did, though he cannot imagine what. Hermione’s taunts reinforced that idea, which can only be to your benefit.

“As for the experience itself... the best physical analogy I can make is of diving into a body of ice-cold water, and then becoming so disoriented as to not know which way leads to the surface. It was like plunging into a sea of evil; for a time I did not know how to return to where I am, and I had the feeling that my

spirit could dissipate and be lost, even though I know such a thing is impossible. What caused him to lose consciousness was the same thing that caused him to be unable to possess you: love. His mind was invaded by love, which he cannot tolerate. He fled, in a sense, until I was able to find my way out.

“I would say that we have one more piece of the puzzle, the puzzle of how Voldemort can be defeated. It seems highly likely that my ability to incapacitate him will figure in his eventual defeat, if that is to occur, but we still do not know how it will be done. I remain confident, however, that when the situation is upon you, you will know what to do.”

“I’m very sorry to hear that incapacitating him is such a difficult experience,” Harry said, concerned for Dumbledore. “I can imagine it, though, since I was possessed by him before. It was really awful.” Harry looked at Dumbledore for a moment, still finding it hard to believe that what he was looking at was not a real body. Deciding it didn’t matter, he moved next to Dumbledore, and put an arm around his shoulder. Dumbledore chuckled, and did the same to Harry.

“This is a pleasant sensation, really,” said Dumbledore. “My current status is pleasant as well, of course; this feels like a sort of nostalgia, for when I was in physical form. You must have many more questions. Feel free to ask them, or I can tell you things I think you might wish to know.”

“Speaking of that... I was so moved by that book, Albus. It means so much to me... thank you.” He squeezed Dumbledore’s shoulder. “Did you really know that Neville and Hermione would want me to do the Joining for them?”

“I strongly suspected it; it was them I was referring to. And you are very welcome for the book; it was a pleasure to write it. It did not disturb me that its intended audience was so... exclusive,” he said, smiling with his eyes as he said the last word. “It matters less how many people read a work than how well it is appreciated by those who do. You are, of course, welcome to allow your friends to read it, or anyone you wish. Eventually, you could even have it published, if you feel

it suitable for a mass audience. It is entirely up to you. I did not know that I would be able to communicate with you as I am now, so I felt it best to write the book, just in case.”

Harry paused for a minute, just taking in the experience, reveling in the happiness it brought. “Will you be able to do this as often as you want?”

“Yes, though I will not be with you in real time, so to speak, indefinitely. As I indicated, I cannot move through time for the purpose of influencing physical events. I will stay with you in this way until Voldemort is defeated. After that, I will move on, though not in the time frame you might expect. I do not wish you to have to say a final goodbye to me, so while I will not stay with you day by day, I will... speed up my perception of time throughout your life. For example, let us say that Voldemort is defeated on your eighteenth birthday. Soon after that, I will move forward in time, so that I may talk to you next on your twenty-first birthday, but almost no time will have passed by my reckoning. I will do so in this way for the rest of your life; I will be like an old friend who stops by from time to time to chat and see how things are going.”

“That sounds wonderful,” said Harry. “I’m really happy, I don’t know what more I could have wanted, thank you.” He chuckled, then continued, “Boy, I hope I don’t wake up tomorrow and think this was a dream; it’s almost too good to be true.”

“In that case, I shall come back the next night to reassure you that it was not a dream,” said Dumbledore humorously.

“Where is this place, anyway? It’s so beautiful... I was surprised when Fawkes took me here, and amazed at what the phoenixes did. I got the impression from Fawkes later that I shouldn’t tell anyone about it, like it’s a private place for phoenixes.”

Dumbledore nodded. “Your nonverbal communication with Fawkes is strengthening; your impression was correct. As time goes by, you will become more and more comfortable with knowing how Fawkes feels about things. It will not be

long before it is second nature to you, as it was with me. I do not know the exact location of the place, nor is it important. Fawkes does us a great honor by taking us there, and it is only when there is a compelling reason.”

“There sure was this time; I never would have made it without that. That reminds me, you must have been very happy to see Hermione use those spells.”

“Yes, I was. You must make your own choices, of course, but I hope you will seriously consider what Minerva said last night. I feel sure that the use of the energy of love can be taught. Ironically, it will appeal to people because it will increase a wizard’s power, but its true value is spreading the message of love, of the primacy of love. You see, the spiritual realm consists entirely of love; love is our true nature. That is why it is so powerful. Those seeking greater power will find greater love, and once they have the power, they will realize that it is not important. Hermione is right; this could cause a true revolution in our society. You are perfectly suited to lead it, both because of your experience in discovering and refining it, and because your status in wizarding society will be such that your words will be listened to respectfully; they will have instant credibility. You can accomplish so much more than being an Auror, worthwhile as that is.”

“I understand... I did take seriously what she said, of course. It’s just a big decision to make in a day. But you saying it as well gives it a great deal of weight. And it would be nice to have Hermione as deputy headmistress.”

Dumbledore smiled. “Yes, indeed, it was very pleasant for me to have had Minerva as well. She was a wonderful friend; I’m sure you will convey my love to her when you talk to her next.”

“I definitely will. By the way, who do you think I should tell or not tell about this? My feeling is that I can tell certain people, but I don’t know if I want to go telling large numbers of people, who might not believe it. What do you think?”

Dumbledore appeared to shrug just by inclining his head. “It is entirely up to you; I have no opinion. Do whatever you think best. It is true that there will be those who will not believe you. The ones whom I told of my hopes to

communicate with you in this way are Minerva, Severus, and Kingsley; they will certainly believe it, and I imagine the rest of the Hogwarts staff will as well. I must request, though, that you do not display your memories of this to others in the Pensieve except in very specific circumstances; providing documentary proof of life after death is not my purpose here. People must discover such things for themselves, it is part of the journey of life. There is one general exception; you may show the memories to Ginny. She is your life partner, and she wishes and deserves to share your experiences, including this one. As for your other friends, they would believe you anyway, but I will provide small bits of information as evidence that this is not some creation of your imagination. For example, just to amuse Minerva, you should mention the phrase 'kitty-cat'; it was a nickname some friends had for her when she was young and had just become an Animagus. She will be mildly annoyed at me for telling you; it is my way of teasing her. Also, tell her that I disagree with her that she will never be as loved by the students as I was or you will be; it was something she said to me before going to bed last night. Tell her I said all she has to do is be herself."

Harry smiled. "I will. What about Professor Snape? Is there some message for him?"

"Not as such, but that is a subject I need to talk to you about. There is much you should know, now that I am gone. Before I left, I told him that I would tell you this if I could reach you in this way. He could tell you himself, but it is better that I do.

"I should begin by talking about what Voldemort referred to as the Cleansing. He is correct, from his perspective, when he says that it eliminates a person's 'weaknesses,' but of course he has a highly distorted idea of what is a weakness and what is not. Love, sympathy, kindness, caring, tenderness, and other such qualities are to him weaknesses. Voldemort cares only for how well his servants can serve him, and having such qualities, or even being able to have them, a person could become conscience-stricken at what he does to serve Voldemort,

and betray him. Even if that were not the case, they would still serve as distractions, reasons for possible failure.

“In his quest for obscure Dark magic—and I cannot say whether he discovered this or invented it—he came upon a way of modifying the minds and characters of those who serve him. I say ‘those who serve him’ because the process, fortunately, cannot be done to one who is not willing. What he refers to as the Cleansing is a process in which he enters the mind of the subject and somehow mutilates the person’s psyche. He summons up the feelings I listed just before and applies horrendous pain at the very thought or impulse of them. Whether it causes physical or only psychic damage I do not know, but when it is done, the subject is left utterly without the capacity for any thought or emotion which we would describe as happy or pleasant. We could say that there are similarities to what happened to Neville’s parents, except that in this case, only parts of a person’s personality are driven insane, not the whole personality. The subject is left well able to serve Voldemort, according to Voldemort’s needs, but useful for little else.”

Harry was horrified. The idea that people would voluntarily submit to that was unbelievable to him. He started to have an understanding of Snape’s behavior. “And this was done to Professor Snape, a long time ago,” Harry said.

“Yes, Harry. But this is the remarkable aspect of the story. When Voldemort was at the height of his power, sixteen years ago, Severus Snape came to me. He had been a Hogwarts student, of course, so I was familiar with him, but had not known him well. He told me that he wanted to oppose Voldemort, that he had come to regret having become a Death Eater. I was skeptical, of course, suspecting a Voldemort ruse. Desperate to persuade me of his sincerity, Severus laid his mind open to me, asked me to use Legilimency to examine his feelings and memories so that I would know he was sincere. It was then that I first became aware of the Cleansing, and naturally I was appalled; I had boundless sympathy for one who had made such a disastrously wrong choice and now regretted it. It was his hope, which he knew was probably impossible, that I could somehow reverse what had been

done to him. I later investigated the notion, but found that I could not. Even so, he wanted to oppose Voldemort, and after talking to him and searching his mind, I became convinced of his sincerity.”

“But how did he manage to do that? If he was Cleansed, shouldn’t he have become like the others, totally loyal to Voldemort?”

“It is very difficult to know,” said Dumbledore, “because we know little about how the Cleansing works. Those who have been Cleansed stay loyal to Voldemort partly because they were already inclined to before, partly out of fear, and partly because they know he will allow them to indulge their appetites for killing and cruelty. After the Cleansing, those are the only emotions remaining—anger, hatred, joy in the suffering of others, and so on—and they stay with Voldemort partly because they could not live any other way. Such a person would be poorly equipped to live a conventional life.

“Nevertheless, Severus somehow summoned the will and desire to turn his back on that life, all the more remarkable because it offered him the only real emotional nourishment his damaged psyche could now recognize. Somehow, he clung to the notion of love, of happiness, even though he could no longer feel them; he embraced them as abstract ideals, as it was the only way he could. I embraced him, and did my best to encourage his tenuous hold on these feelings. I opened my mind to him, allowed him to summon such feelings and experiences of love and friendship as he wished, to experience them from such a distance as he was capable. He still could not feel them, but he could imagine, he could conceptualize it. It was little, but no more could be done for him.

“Clinging to this tenuous thread, he went to work as a spy against Voldemort. He provided information that saved many lives, including Neville’s parents’ on one occasion. His information could only be used sparingly, of course, but it was still extremely helpful. What he did was all the more remarkable because Voldemort, at this point, had the upper hand in the struggle, and might well have emerged victorious in the end were it not for the curse failing against you. Severus

continued his efforts even though it appeared that he was on the losing side. I had no doubt of his loyalty to me.

“When Voldemort was defeated by the curse which backfired, Severus did not celebrate, because like me, he was sure that Voldemort would rise again. But now he had to wait, and try to figure out how to live a life in the meantime. I assisted him as best I could, regularly allowing him to enter my mind and see my memories, no matter how personal or intimate; that I was willing to do this demonstrated my commitment to him, and increased his determination to persevere in his damaged state. You see, Harry, it was difficult for most Death Eaters to be re-integrated into wizarding society; they had to pretend to be normal people, despite their disability. Some, such as Lucius Malfoy, were sufficiently good actors to even be able to simulate the feelings which they could no longer generate on their own. But they survived mentally by indulging themselves in thoughts and fantasies of evil, of cruelty. Severus did not do this, or at least, tried not to. But imagine what it would be like if a cruel or terrible feeling was the only feeling you could have. We need emotions, we cannot help but have them. Severus wanted to have emotions; he just could not have the ones he wanted. The emotional sustenance he received from me was barely enough to keep him afloat, to cause him not to descend into evil. It would be so easy for him. Every day is a struggle for him, Harry. Every day he must fight the impulse to be cruel, to do evil—not because he wants to be cruel or to do evil, but because he wants... to feel. It is the only way he really can feel, feel anything. I never stopped being in awe of the fact that he simply survives from day to day without sinking into evil.

“Almost six years ago, you entered Hogwarts, and this was an enormous challenge for him. He had always hated your father, and even before you came to Hogwarts, I knew he resented the attention given you. You were to him a baby who had done nothing but was adored and celebrated by all of wizarding society, whereas he had taken huge risks and endured enormous struggle, but was not recognized or rewarded; the fact that you were James Potter’s son added greatly to

this feeling. Difficult as it was for him not to give in to larger temptations on a daily basis, it would have been enormously difficult for him to treat you with the normal consideration with which one human being treats another. I could have insisted that he treat you properly, and he would have done his best to do so. But I knew what he endured, and I felt I could not ask this of him. I felt terribly for you, too, because you had already suffered at the hands of your aunt and uncle, then you came to Hogwarts, and one teacher treated you badly for no reason you understood. I know it was painful for you. But I knew you would have friends, that your experiences with him would not happen elsewhere. It was for this reason only that I agreed to Minerva's request that you be allowed onto the Quidditch team one year early; it seemed a small compensation for what you had to endure from Severus. But I weighed the harm it would cause you for him to treat you as he did against the harm it would cause him to overcome his feelings and treat you properly, and I chose him. You had burdens, but at that point, he had larger ones, and had been carrying them for much longer. I felt I could not add to them. I deeply regret that you had to suffer in that fashion, for that reason."

Harry's head was spinning; here, finally, was the reason for Snape's behavior toward him all these years. Now he understood, and even felt sympathetic to Snape. He tried to imagine what Snape's inner life was like, and felt he couldn't even do justice to imagining it. He was silent for over a minute.

"Of course I forgive you, Albus," he finally said. "I'm sure I would have done the same thing in your position. It was bad at the time, sometimes humiliating, but at least I had my friends, and I could commiserate with them. I can't even begin to imagine what it was like for him. I get this mental image of what his emotional life was like, and it's a desert, with the occasional cactus and tumbleweeds... and that's probably on a good day. Probably going into your mind was like watching a movie; you know you can never have a life like the people you see on the screen, but you can imagine that you can. Then, after two hours, you have to go back out into real life again."

Dumbledore looked at Harry, impressed. “Yes, those are both excellent analogies, especially the second. It was very much like that for him. And now, the movie theater has shut down, gone out of business. I am what helped sustain him over the past sixteen years, and I am gone. Through the years, we entered each other’s minds on a regular basis. He came to trust me implicitly, and... he cannot love me, as such, but he feels an attachment to me that is as close to love as he can come. Minerva told you that my passing would be as hard for him as for you or her; in fact, I think it is harder. He cannot mourn, he cannot weep, he cannot feel... except anger at me for leaving him, which I know he does, to an extent. In a way he feels abandoned, emotionally.”

Again, Harry tried to imagine it, and again, he failed. Suddenly, a memory from early in the year popped into his head. “For the demonstration of my new spell, the first one... you said there would be a cost to him if he did it, one I couldn’t know. I guess I do now. You didn’t want him doing it because it would cause him to have to sink more into evil, making it that much harder for him to climb back out, is that right?”

“Yes, exactly,” said Dumbledore. “He was right, that it was less difficult for him to do than I, but it was still difficult for him. How hard he argued against my performing the Curse on you was very indicative of how he felt about me, even if he could not express it, or actually feel it in the same way you or I would.”

“What’s he going to do now? How will he get along?”

“I talked about this with him before I left, of course. I could think of only one possible solution. He naturally disliked the idea, and I understand why. I simply felt that there was little or no alternative. He must have support, or he may descend into evil, despite his wishes. Not that he would return to supporting Voldemort—he feels hatred toward Voldemort for what was done to him—but he would lack the emotional fortitude to continue to function as a Hogwarts professor and a spy against Voldemort. We would lose him as a resource, and you already know how immensely valuable he is.”

“I understand. So, what’s the solution that you...” He trailed off as he saw how Dumbledore was looking at him; his eyes widened. “You can’t be serious,” he said quietly, with astonishment.

Dumbledore looked grave, understanding Harry’s reaction. “I do not know for sure that it would work; I only know that I could think of nothing else. I know it would be a very heavy burden for you. I was sixty-eight years old when I started doing it; I was equipped emotionally to handle the invasion of my privacy that it required. I also did not have the history with him that you have. It would be much harder for you than it was for me. I do not insist that you do it; I do not even specifically request it. I simply present it as a possibility; if it is to happen, you must both choose to do it. I do not know that he would agree even if you did. However, he knows as well that something must be done. You are the best person for two reasons: you have a full and rich emotional life, especially this past year, and you now practically radiate love. You could support him, and he could be nourished from your experiences, from your life. The challenge for him is that he has always detested you, but now he would have to regard you somewhat as he has me. Intellectually, he knows that you are a good person. So many love you, including myself, Fawkes chose you, and so on. He understands that if he were to depend on you, you would do your best for him, and his faith would not be misplaced. It is simply a matter of whether he can change his perspective to what would be required.”

Harry was silent, thinking. He had a visceral discomfort regarding anything to do with Snape; even the idea of spending time with him was disturbing. The situation had gotten better over the past year, because of Snape’s change in attitude; it was no longer the case that a mere glimpse of Snape touched off Harry’s adrenaline, put him on the defensive emotionally. He had seen Snape almost every day in the staff room, and had more or less gotten used to having Snape around, even though they hardly spoke to each other. But to let Snape into his mind, to have

him rooting through Harry's worst memories, like in the fifth year Occlumency lessons—

“It would be very different from that, Harry,” Dumbledore assured him. “If this were to happen, he would not, could not, treat you negatively. Since he cannot have positive emotions, his ‘best behavior,’ as it were, would be a total absence of emotion; that is what he would do his best to project when dealing with you. Were he to treat you badly, this could not work; he knows this. He would be looking at everyday memories, and more specifically at memories in which love and friendship were involved. That is what he needs, to help counteract the negative impulses he constantly feels.”

“But why me, instead of anyone else?” asked Harry, still in disbelief. “After all that time of him treating me the way he did... I mean, I understand the reasons for it better now, and I do feel bad for him, for his situation. I can't even imagine what it must be like. But I seem like the least likely person to do something like this.”

Dumbledore nodded patiently. “An understandable feeling, to be sure. But you know the consequences if this is not done, if it is not done successfully. Is there anyone you can think of with whom this would have a better chance success?”

Harry thought, and started to understand the problem. It couldn't be someone who didn't know Snape; not only for security reasons, but because Snape would need to know and trust the person who helped him. That limited the choices to a very few people. He thought about Hermione, then realized that he wouldn't feel right about asking her to take on a difficult task so he could avoid it, not to mention that given how Neville felt about Snape, it could possibly destroy their relationship. He thought about McGonagall; it seemed possible...

Dumbledore shook his head. “I discussed this with Minerva. She would be willing to try, but her personality is not suited to something like this. Severus knows this, and so would not be willing to accept her as the person to help him. You see,

Harry, you learned to ‘come from a place of love’ during the Voldemort trial in September, and later, you correctly speculated that that was my normal state, more or less. As much as anything else, that is what he needs. His own ‘emotional environment’ is very negative; a very positive one is necessary for him. With the right mental preparation, you could provide that, in a way that Minerva could not, nor could anyone else that he knows. I have touched your mind with Legilimency, and of course, much more deeply now. He saw through me what I saw in you; he was no less resistant to the idea at first than you, but he knows it could work with you, and that it could not with anyone else. I do not say it will work, but I do know that it could, and that you are the only one with whom it could. I very much understand your emotional reaction to the idea, and I assure you that I would not even suggest it were there another alternative.”

Harry began to see a correlation between what Snape needed, and the ability to use the energy of love. It was only he, Dumbledore, and now Hermione. “That is a good point, Harry,” agreed Dumbledore. “The frame of mind necessary to use the energy of love is very similar to what is required for this.” Harry again considered, and again rejected, the idea of asking Hermione. He didn’t see how he could do what Dumbledore was asking, but at the same time, he didn’t see how he could not do it; Snape’s continued functioning as a spy was vital to the Order, to the fight against Voldemort. It was an incredibly daunting task, but against the stakes... why does everything have to happen to me? he thought.

“It does seem that way, doesn’t it?” agreed Dumbledore sympathetically. It occurred to Harry only now that Dumbledore had been answering his thoughts, not his words. “Remember, Harry, that you are not really here, in physical form,” explained Dumbledore. “I am understanding your thoughts whether you vocalize them or not.”

Harry nodded. “Sitting here, I guess it’s easy for me to forget that. I don’t know... I just don’t know how I’m going to ‘come from a place of love’ with someone who’s been like he’s been to me all my life.” As he said it, though, he

realized that he had done just such a thing with Voldemort; the difference would be that it would be in support of someone, not in opposition to them.

“It would be quite a challenge,” agreed Dumbledore. “It may help to keep in mind how wounded he is, and how hard he has struggled. Also, that he had some legitimate grievances against your father; if you wish, you could see this as an opportunity to correct whatever wrongs your father committed against him. In addition, there is someone here who may be able to give you some assistance. It is not difficult for me to commune with others in this particular realm; I can help you to talk to them. Your parents and Sirius have already moved on, but a few individuals are here whom you could benefit from speaking to. I will summon one now.”

Dumbledore appeared to concentrate, and slowly, someone shimmered into existence next to him. As the form solidified, Harry gaped in astonishment: it was a smiling, happy Severus Snape.

Finally recovering enough to speak, Harry stammered, “I... I saw you, in my dream last night... but how...” Understanding slowly dawned. “You’re not him exactly, you’re part of him... the part that was driven out by the Cleansing.”

Snape sat down on the grass opposite Harry. He looked around in pleasure. “This is very nice, I’ve never seen such a beautiful place.” To Harry, he said, “Yes, that’s right. I am not dead, as such, since part of me still lives within my body, but I have sought refuge here. My body, my mind, cannot accept me now, after what was done. If I tried to re-enter, it would cause something like what Albus did to Voldemort. When my body dies, I will be able to re-integrate with the part of me that still exists in the physical world, and I can move on. For now, I must remain here; I cannot move on without the rest of myself. It is no hardship; this plane is very pleasant, and there are many ways I can occupy myself. For example, I can commune with others, now including Albus here.

“Harry... my other half can never do this, but I would like to apologize for the way I have treated you, he has treated you. It’s difficult to know which pronoun

to use; I have not used words to communicate for such a long time. Your father was abusive towards me, it is true, but I was no less so towards him. He simply had the upper hand because he had friends to support him, and I did not. My life was much harder than his. This is not an excuse, just an explanation. You in no way deserved what I did to you. I think I will choose the pronoun 'I' because while I did not personally do those things to you, I would apologize to you on behalf of both of us, or perhaps, all of me, if I could be re-integrated with my other half. I know that is impossible, so I do what I can. I have followed your life from this side with great interest; you are an exceptional person, more than worthy of all the love you receive. I have always regretted how you have been treated, and I was pleased that my other half was prevailed upon by Albus to treat you at least civilly this year. It was difficult for him, but he did well, as you have seen. I am proud of him, of myself, for that. I would be pleased if you could help him, and I could help you to help him.”

Harry was amazed to see someone who looked exactly like Severus Snape speaking like this. He exuded warmth, peace, and love, and Harry could not help but wonder what Snape would be like if he still had this part of his personality. Somehow, seeing so clearly what Snape was missing made Harry feel more sympathetic to Snape; Harry also wondered how life would be for him if somehow this part of his personality could be taken from him. He knew that Snape had at one point chosen to have it done, but he could understand the idea that someone could realize too late that they had made a terrible mistake. Spurred by his emotions, he said, “I’ll do it, I think I can now. I don’t know if I could do it just if it was him as he is now, with what he’s done to me... but now I know that he has this other half that was ripped away from him, that the real him is both of you combined. If I focus on that, I think I can do it. Will you be able to talk to me sometimes as well?”

“Yes, I will, through Albus. And thank you, Harry. I know that it is difficult for you. Albus was most impressive... he was able to love my other half without

even knowing for certain that I existed, his capacity for love is so great. Yours is too, but you are still young, and your situation is difficult. I do not mean to criticize you for relying on me to help you do this, for us. It is most amazing that you do what you do.

“Yes, I can give you help as time goes by. I can give you advice as to how to handle certain things. Albus could too, of course, but it may seem more helpful coming from me. Remember, Harry, he still may reject your help, at least at first. Accepting it will be very difficult for him. You should not force your help upon him; simply offer it, and keep the offer open should he refuse. He must accept it in his own time.”

“I understand,” said Harry. “Does he know that I’ll have talked to you?”

“Yes, he does,” said Dumbledore. “When you told us about that aspect of your dream this morning, we both knew what it probably meant: that whether my plan worked or not, I would in fact be able to reach you. He was reluctant to discuss it, even with me; it may be hard for him to accept that the ‘other half’ that he would like to have back is there, out of his reach. You may show him these images in the Pensieve if he would like to see them.”

“If I do this, and he agrees, is there any advice either one of you can give me? What should I do, or not do?”

“Just be there for him as he requires,” said Dumbledore. “Do not attempt to have exactly the same relationship with him as I did; these are very different circumstances. He may look or act hostile to you at times; understand that he is doing the best he can, and accept it with as much love and understanding as you can manage.

“One difficult aspect of this for you will be that you must allow him access to any of your memories, with no exceptions, no matter how private. I know that you have as yet had only the mildest of sexual experiences so far with Ginny, and that you will have more and stronger ones over the summer. He must be allowed to see those if he wishes; he sometimes accessed sexual memories of mine, though

not unduly often. Part of what you will be doing for him is allowing him to vicariously experience a life with the fullness and richness that he lacks. I should mention that part of the Cleansing involves stripping away the person's sexual desire except as it is connected to violence; the only sex a Death Eater could enjoy would be rape. In any case, it is part of the human experience, a part he has never known. It cannot be hidden."

Harry felt his stomach churn. He hadn't thought of that, and found himself wondering if he could do it. Let Snape see things he did with Ginny? Worse yet, be doing the things with Ginny, knowing they could be viewed later? He wondered whether he would feel as though there were someone else in the room, and whether it would inhibit him.

"Your reaction is very understandable," said Snape, and Harry realized that he had forgotten that his thoughts would be as understood as his speech. "That is something extremely private, and I know you're concerned for Ginny's privacy as well. But you should understand, my other half is not a voyeur. He will be looking at all aspects of your life, not only that one. You said once that you viewed allowing him to see private memories in the Pensieve as similar to taking off your clothes when you went to the doctor; you may want to think of this in the same way. No more or less than your other memories, it is for his sustenance, not his amusement."

"By the way, Harry, this prompts me to mention something else, something somewhat connected," said Dumbledore. "You may need someone to talk to about this, if it is to occur... someone in physical form, that is. Minerva knew about my arrangement with Severus, and I was able to discuss it with her if I chose. This will be much more difficult for you than it was for me, and he will accept that you must have someone you can discuss it with. You may choose that person. My suggestion, which you may disregard if you choose, is that the person be Hermione. Ginny may not be a good choice for two reasons: one, it will be easier for her not to know that her private moments are being viewed in this way, and two, if you continue to practice Legilimency with Hermione, she will see your memories of your

relationship with Severus, and so must be the one you choose. If you choose Ginny, for example, you will have to cease practicing Legilimency with Hermione. Of course, you will also now practice Occlumency and Legilimency with Severus, but you will find it more pleasant to do so with Hermione as well. You can still change your mind if you wish; you said yes a moment ago, but that was before you were reminded of this aspect of it. It is quite a lot to ask of anyone.”

Harry reluctantly shook his head. “But you said that you couldn’t think of any alternative, and this has to be done. And you’re right, it would make sense to choose Hermione. But I must say, I don’t look forward to, after this is all over, saying to Ginny, ‘Oh, by the way...’ She could be really angry, and with reason; partly because I did this without telling her, and partly because I picked Hermione instead of her to tell.”

Dumbledore nodded. “I cannot predict how she will react, of course, but you know that she has always been understanding of your doing anything necessary for the fight against Voldemort. I do believe that she would understand that this was one such thing, and why it was important that you be able to continue practicing Legilimency with Hermione. Your intentions are good, and she will recognize that.”

Harry took a deep breath. “I suppose so,” he agreed. “By the way... was that you, in my recent dreams? I mean, the you that died? How did you reach backwards into my dreams?”

“As I have said, I cannot move through time, right now. But I was able to... one could say, give a shout into your past consciousness. Naturally, it was strongest in the days closest to my death, and more vague as it went back into the past; you simply experienced it forwards, not backwards. I like to think it may have helped a bit.

“Well, Harry, we should not keep this going too much longer. As I mentioned, this is not a dream, and you need to dream a certain amount each night;

if we talked like this all night, you would suffer a form of sleep deprivation, despite actually sleeping.”

“I really don’t want to stop talking, though,” said Harry. “I still have so many questions... funny, I feel like a kid asking if he can stay up just a little longer.”

Dumbledore and Snape chuckled. “There will be other nights, Harry, I promise,” assured Dumbledore. “We are with you in real time. We will meet like this any time either of us has anything to say to the other. I believe we will, for quite a while. We must remain a bit longer; there are a few things to take care of. First of all, you will have to be precise when distributing these memories into the Pensieve. As I mentioned, you may show Ginny all parts of this which do not involve Severus. To save you the effort of explaining this to Hermione, you may show her the parts referring to Severus. And there is another person to whom you may show what you are about to see.”

Snape disappeared, then after a few seconds, two more figures shimmered into existence. Harry did not recognize them at first, then his jaw dropped as he did. As one of them spoke, all Harry could think was, thank goodness this isn’t just a dream.

CHAPTER 24

BACK TO THE BURROW

Harry awoke at his usual time of six forty-five, and as soon as he realized that he was awake, he opened his eyes wide. Memories flooded him, and he felt a huge surge of joy and adrenaline. He's alive! Well, not really, but close enough!, he thought. He felt like dancing with joy, running through the halls of Hogwarts. He suddenly realized that that might not be such a good idea for one who was supposed to be grieving, and he couldn't exactly tell everyone what had happened. He knew he would be believed by many students, but he also knew that to tell enough people would mean it would become public knowledge, and this was not something he wanted to explain in the Prophet. But none of this took away from his happiness. He had to tell the others, right away. He got out his Hogwarts map. Ginny, Hermione, and Neville were in the common room, no doubt waiting for he and Ron; Pansy was in the Slytherin common room. Harry immediately conjured his dog and sent it to request Pansy's presence. He quickly changed into his day clothes and pulled back the curtains on his bed.

"Morning, Harry," said Ron, who had just pulled his curtains back as well. "Get a good night's sleep?"

Harry smiled, a brilliant smile that he knew would confuse Ron, but he didn't care. "What?" asked Ron. "What are you so happy about?"

"We need to go to the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom," said Harry. "C'mon."

"Before breakfast? You know I'm no good until I've had my three cups of coffee," joked Ron.

“You don’t drink coffee,” said Harry, going along with the joke, as he put an arm around Ron’s shoulder and guided him toward the dormitory door.

“Yeah, but I’m thinking of taking it up,” replied Ron. “I’m seventeen, an adult, so I should have a vice. Don’t think I want drinking, look what happened to Mundungus.” They stepped into the common room to see the other three looking at them.

“The dog was for Pansy, I assume,” said Hermione. “What’s going on?”

“Harry’s very happy about something, and it’s something he can’t tell us at the breakfast table,” explained Ron. They headed out of Gryffindor Tower.

They had been waiting for less than a minute when Pansy walked in. “You know, the Slytherin firsts are all hoping they’ll get summoned by the dog at some point. They really like it, they were all petting it. So, what’s up?”

Smiling broadly, Harry told them. He got the reaction he expected: utter astonishment. Like him, none had contemplated such a possibility. “Can you show it to us in the Pensieve?” asked Ron.

“I have very specific instructions about that,” Harry said apologetically. “He doesn’t want me showing it to everybody. Apparently, there is sometimes communication between people who have died and those still living, either by mystics or in people’s sleep, but one sort of rule is that people on the other side aren’t supposed to let there be solid proof of any afterlife. I’m not sure why; he said something about people having to find out for themselves. In general, I’m only allowed to show Ginny, since she’s my life partner. I’d like to show all of you, of course, but I don’t want to violate his wishes. I am sorry about that.”

“I guess he has his reasons,” said an obviously disappointed Ron. “But, wow, it’s so fantastic. Are you going to tell everybody?”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” said Hermione. “A lot of people would think he was crazy, and he doesn’t need that.”

“That’s pretty much what I think,” Harry agreed. “I’m going to be very careful who I tell.” He went on to relate most of the conversation which didn’t

involve Snape; they listened avidly. “Incredible, that he managed all that,” said Pansy when he finished. “But he was such an amazing person when he was alive, I guess we shouldn’t be surprised.”

“There was one other thing that was talked about that I haven’t mentioned yet,” Harry continued. “You know how Dumbledore’s always trusted Snape, had this relationship with him, that there was more to than we knew? Well, now I know, and you probably won’t be surprised to hear that I’m not allowed to tell you what it is.”

“Figures,” said Ron.

“I can tell you this much: as I said, Dumbledore had a certain relationship with Snape, and it was important to the success of the Order, important to the fight against Voldemort. Somebody has to replace Dumbledore in that relationship.”

“And it’s going to be you?” asked Pansy incredulously.

Harry nodded. “Dumbledore thought it was best that it was me. I think I’m allowed to tell you, and I think you won’t be surprised, that it’s going to be difficult for me. Of course, I can’t tell you exactly how.

“Dumbledore told me that McGonagall knew about his relationship with Snape, that he could talk about it with her. He told me that I’m allowed to pick one person to talk about it with. I can choose who it is, but he had a recommendation.”

“Hermione,” guessed Neville. Harry nodded, and turned to Ginny. “In a way, I’d rather pick you; I don’t like the idea that there’s something like this going on in my life that you don’t get to know about. I don’t like it a lot. But there are excellent reasons for it being Hermione. Unfortunately,—“

”You can’t tell us what they are,” Ginny finished, then sighed. “I can’t say I’m happy, either. But I shouldn’t be selfish. It sounds like this is going to be hard for you, and I want you to have the best help you can—“

”This has nothing to do with Hermione being ‘better’ than you in any way,” Harry interrupted. “It just has to do with the facts of the situation. It’s more as if I needed someone with brown hair rather than red hair. But I appreciate your being

understanding about it. It wasn't my idea, and I don't know how well I'm going to do, but it has to be done."

"You'll do well, Harry," said Pansy. "You do well at everything you try."

"Thank you," he said. He was grateful for her support, though he wondered if she would be so sure if she knew what it was. "Hermione, there's a section of what happened last night that has to do with this; Dumbledore said I could show it to you. I think it'll take about five minutes. Do the rest of your mind if I show her now?" They said it was all right, and he did. Five minutes later, they took their fingers out of the Pensieve, and Harry put his memories back.

Hermione still looked astonished. "That was... extraordinary," she said. "But I agree, it needs to be done, it makes sense that Harry do it, and that I be the one he talks to about it." Harry looked at Ginny, trying to gauge her reaction. She saw this and said, "I'm all right, Harry, really. Don't worry about it. I can tell you feel bad, and that makes me feel better." She gave him a smile, and he smiled back his gratitude.

"The rest of it is stuff only Ginny gets to see, except for one thing. There's a two or three-minute section that's meant for Neville."

Neville looked startled, as did the others. "Why me?" he asked.

"You'll know when you see it," Harry assured him as he put the memories into the Pensieve. Neville joined him, and they put their fingers in.

They were back in the phoenix place, which was how Harry was coming to think of it; Neville, Hermione, and Ginny would see it, but just think of it as an idyllic setting, not connecting it to phoenixes in any way. The 'good' Snape had vanished a few seconds before this scene started. Neville looked around, and at Dumbledore, in astonishment. Then two figures slowly came into focus, and when they did, Neville's expression suggested to Harry that he literally did not believe what he was seeing.

"Hello, Harry," said a young man, dark-haired and handsome, in his mid-twenties. "I'm Frank Longbottom, and this is my wife Alice. We want to use this

opportunity to say a few things to Neville, but first we want to thank you for all you've done for him. We know that you love him and care about him, and we couldn't be more pleased that he has friends like you and the others. Now we're going to speak directly to Neville." They turned a bit, looking at a spot close to where they were standing. Both Harry and Neville moved so it appeared the Longbottoms were looking straight at them.

"Neville," said Alice, "We're so glad Albus has formed this link with Harry so we have the opportunity to do this. You may wonder why we're here, since this seems to be where dead people go, and we're not dead. The fact is, our spirits can't stay in our bodies, really... well, we can for short times, but there's not much we can do there. Our minds were too damaged by what happened, it's as though our minds and bodies are equipment we can't use anymore. We can't move on, to the spiritual realm where most people go from here, because our bodies are still alive, and we're sort of tethered to them. We don't mind, we're happy here, and we can follow what happens in the physical world, including your life.

"First of all, we want you to know that we love you, and we always will. We wish we could have been there for you. When I got pregnant, Cassandra was happy for me, but really worried; she had asked me before more than once whether I thought it was a good idea, since that was the most dangerous time ever to be an Auror. We knew that, but we wanted a child, and did what our hearts told us to do anyway. We're sorry that we had to leave you, but we're still very glad we had you. Your grandmother may be a bit strict, but she loves you, and has done the best she can. We're very grateful to her for what she's done."

Neville still looked agog, which Harry could completely understand. "We also want you to know that we're very proud of you," said Frank. "Not only for what you've done in the past year, which has been wonderful, but just for the person you are. You've always been kind and loving, and that's what's truly important. We're also proud that you're the sort of person who could attract someone like Hermione, whose heart is as good as yours.

“There’s something you’ve wanted to know for most of the past year, so I feel that we should tell you. This did happen to us while the Lestranges were trying to find out your location. But you should never feel badly about that, as if you were responsible somehow. It’s not as though they needed a reason to do what they did; that’s what they do. They would have just killed us anyway, even if we had told them. But it was never really an option. You understand that, Neville; last year in the Department of Mysteries, you insisted that Harry not hand over the prophecy no matter what they did to you, and you didn’t even know how important it was. This year, you risked your life to save his, and you would have run into certain death to help Hermione. You can imagine how it is with a parent and a child; there was nothing we wouldn’t have done for you. We know how proud of us you are, and we’re glad.”

“What we really want you to know,” said Alice, “is that we’re here, we’re all right, and we’re happy. Frank and I still get to be together, just in a different way. You shouldn’t feel bad for us. We’ll be watching your life, but we promise not to look too closely, at certain times.” She and Frank exchanged knowing smiles. “Again, remember... we love you, and we’re always with you. Oh, and tell Cassandra to give you the five Galleons she owes me. And tell her I appreciate how she’s looked after you, and that I love her. We’ll be around, and we’ll keep you in our hearts, as you keep us in yours. Goodbye, for now.” The memory stopped.

Harry looked at Neville; he could only imagine what was going on in Neville’s head. Neville looked at Harry, and Harry could hardly remember seeing a face with more emotion in it. Neville left the Pensieve, and Harry followed.

Hermione got up and walked to Neville. She looked concerned; it looked as though she couldn’t tell from Neville’s face what kind of experience it had been. He started to cry, and she held him. He tried to speak through his tears but couldn’t; he finally managed, “Harry...” with a gesture to indicate that he should explain it. He did, and again, the others were amazed. “So it’s not only dead people who go there,” marveled Pansy. “Incredible.”

“I wonder why this kind of thing isn’t more commonly known,” wondered Ron. “Then again, most people don’t manage what Dumbledore did, or use the Veil for this kind of purpose.”

“He told us at one of the dinners, the mystics know, and they tell people. Most people just aren’t that interested, or don’t take it seriously,” said Ginny. “I mean, I never thought about it much. I will from now on, though. We’re pretty lucky that we got to experience this.”

“I guess it’s one of the compensations for the dangers of being a friend of Harry Potter,” said Harry wryly.

Pansy looked at him sternly. “There are lots of compensations, and if you keep making comments like that, I’ll list them in great detail.”

Harry gave her a small smile. “Maybe later.”

Neville had stopped crying. He kissed Hermione and said, “They said a lot of things, but one of the things they said was that they’re proud that I’m worthy of someone like you.” Harry knew that that would make Hermione cry, and it did.

“We’re all really happy for you, Neville,” said Ginny. “You deserve to have had that happen.”

“Thank you, Ginny,” said Neville. “I’ll tell you some of what they said, but later... I feel like I need to take some time to digest it. It was...” He trailed off and shrugged, making it obvious that he couldn’t think of words for what he wanted to say. Harry could understand that feeling, as he had felt it a lot recently.

They went to the Great Hall for breakfast, and while Harry was hungry, he couldn’t eat until he told McGonagall. She was at the teachers’ table, at the end near the Gryffindor table. As his friends sat, he headed over to her. “Professor, I have to talk to you, privately,” he said with some urgency.

“I am in the middle of breakfast, Harry,” she said, gesturing to her plate. “This really cannot wait for that?”

Now Harry's brilliant smile from the morning returned. "That depends... does the phrase 'kitty-cat' mean anything to you?"

Her eyes went wide, and she immediately put down her fork and headed out of the Hall, Harry following. They walked to the Transfigurations classroom, the one nearest the Hall, and she closed the door. "He talked to you?" Still smiling, Harry nodded. "I knew he hoped to do it, but... frankly, I never thought such a thing would be possible. I may have to give serious consideration to having Mysticism as a subject at the school." Harry wasn't sure whether she was joking or not. He spent several minutes telling her about what Dumbledore had said; she shook her head in amazement every minute or so. "I am overjoyed that he is... alive, I want to say, but you know what I mean."

"Me, too," enthused Harry. "When I woke up, I wanted to go running through the halls, shouting about it."

She chuckled. "I understand the feeling. By the way, did he discuss Professor Snape?" Looking more somber, he nodded. "I take it, by your expression, that you are going to assume Albus's role." He nodded again, and she took his hand. "It is very good of you, Harry. I wish I could help you, as I helped Albus, but you will probably want to choose someone else... Hermione, I would guess."

"Yes," he said. "Also, he said to be sure to convey his love to you." Harry saw her love for Dumbledore in her eyes. "And he said you talked to him before you went to sleep last night, said something you were concerned about. He says all you have to do is be yourself."

She fought back tears, then gave Harry an affectionate look. "Thank you for the messages, Harry. We should go back now, you should get some breakfast." As they did, he thought that the next person he visited with this news might not be quite so happy about it.

After breakfast, Harry asked Hermione to join him in his office. They walked in, sat down, and he locked and soundproofed the doors. "I'm going to go

talk to him after I talk to you,” said Harry. “I just wanted to talk to you first. Since you’re going to be my advisor,” he continued with a small smile. “I want to know what you think.”

She looked overwhelmed, which he could understand, as he felt that way himself. “It’s hard to say,” she said after a pause. “I doubt this has ever been done like this, until Dumbledore did it. It’s an amazing thing he did for Snape, what you’re going to do. I’m not surprised you agreed, though,” she said admiringly. “I don’t think you’d ever back down from a challenge, and as he said, there doesn’t seem to be much choice. But it’s going to be really hard.”

Harry chuckled. “If Ron were here, he’d say, ‘Way to buck him up, Hermione.’”

She gave him a half-fond, half-annoyed look. “I was going to say that my job here is to give you advice, but I guess bucking you up is really a part of that, too,” she admitted. “I do think you can do it, Harry. I just meant that it would be hard in an emotional way—“

”I was just kidding,” Harry said. “But go ahead, what were you going to say?”

“Well, I mean, you already knew it was going to be hard, for example, to accept the idea that this is Snape you’ll be letting look at your memories. Even though you know he won’t be like he used to be, it’s the emotional association you have to get past, which isn’t easy. I gather from what I heard in the Pensieve that you’re going to think of the Snape where Dumbledore is as being as much the real Snape as the physical one, and that’ll help you get past most of your emotional reactions. I do think that’s something you can do, with time. But I was referring to other difficulties, things you might not have thought of.”

He gestured for her to continue. “One thing that’ll be really hard is that you’ll have to always be in control of your emotions,” she explained. “Dumbledore would never have gotten emotional, gotten angry at Snape, never displayed impatience. He would have been a rock, emotionally, for Snape. You’ll have to do

your very best to do something similar. Now, if this had happened last year, I would never have thought you could do it, no offense. You know how you were emotionally, then. Now, I think you can, you're so used to focusing on love, you can do that when you're with him. But you'll have to try hard to stay in that state whenever you're with him, whenever you deal with him.

“Just for an example, let's say he agrees, and you start doing this with him. Now imagine a day a few weeks from now. You're at the Burrow, Mrs. Weasley's off doing something. You and Ginny are sitting around, enjoying being with each other. It occurs to both of you that you can go up to her room and really be alone.” Hermione didn't elaborate, but Harry understood what she meant. “You head upstairs, you're really looking forward to it... and Snape signals you, he needs to see you as soon as possible. Your reaction is going to be one of frustration, annoyance. That's human, it's very understandable... but you have to not do it, or do your very best not to. Even if you compose yourself by the time you get there, he'll still know, and your being there isn't going to do him any good, I'd guess. Part of the point of this is that you're doing this to support him, that it's important to you to make sure he can get by from day to day. That's how it was with Dumbledore, and you have to do your best to be that way. It's not just a matter of controlling your feelings, or hiding them, but of having different feelings in this situation that you normally would. That's what'll be hard.”

Harry slowly nodded. “I hadn't thought of it that way,” he admitted. “But you're right. I mean, I really do want to help him, and I don't mind whatever time I have to put into it... but I can really see that situation happening, and you're right, that would be my natural reaction. I suppose it would be anybody's.” He paused. “How do you think I can change that?”

She thought for a moment. “Here's an idea... let's suppose that I had some chronic illness, and I needed to be treated with a certain kind of magic, one that only you could do. I had to call you every time my symptoms got bad, and I

interrupted you in the same kind of situation. Do you think your reaction would be different?"

He nodded. "Yes, I'm sure it would. I really care about you, and I'd hate to think of you being in pain, I'd want to come help. And of course, I see your point, that's how I should think of it with Snape."

"That's right," she confirmed. "Also, especially at first, he's probably going to be a bit reluctant to call you, more than he would have been with Dumbledore. It's going to be hard for him to get used to it being you, so his symptoms, if you want to call it that, may be more acute by the time he calls you. So the analogy may not be such a stretch. So for the time being, you might want to imagine that the Snape up with Dumbledore is the one suffering, and you want to help him. Even if the physical Snape looked into your mind and saw that, I don't think he'd mind; he'll have to know that this'll be hard for you too, and that you're doing your best."

Harry paused again, then decided to say what was on his mind, though he was reluctant. "You know, what you said about going upstairs with Ginny reminded me, there's something else I'm worried about. The first time I get together like that, with Ginny..." He trailed off as she nodded sympathetically, obviously understanding what he meant.

"You're afraid you're not going to be able to..." She searched for a delicate phrase. "...respond like she'll expect. It'll seem like there's someone in the room. I'm sorry, Harry. I can really understand that. Well, maybe not exactly," she said with a small smile.

Harry nodded. "She's going to think there's something wrong with me, she won't know the reason, and I won't be able to tell her."

She looked concerned. "I'm sorry, Harry, but... there's a decent chance that she won't think there's something wrong with you. She may think there's something wrong with her... that she's not attractive enough for you, that she doesn't excite you. I know that's worse, and I hate to tell you, but it's true."

“Great,” said Harry, frustrated. He put his head in his hands. He looked up, and could see that Hermione’s heart went out to him. He felt a bit better, and managed a grin. “Boy, I never imagined I’d be talking to you about this.”

“Me neither,” she agreed, grinning as well. “But, since I’m the only one you can... I know you’d rather talk about it with Ron if you could.”

He gave her a quizzical look for a second before realizing she was joking. Then he laughed, releasing the tension he felt. She did as well. “His head would explode,” said Harry, still laughing.

As their laughter died down, Hermione said, “It may not be so bad, really. You just won’t know until you’re in the situation. I think it’s far more likely that, especially if you try not to think about it, your body will do what it wants to do. You shouldn’t assume there’ll be a problem; probably worrying about it a lot would make it worse. The best thing to do is assume it won’t be a problem, have confidence in that.”

“I’ll try,” he said, wondering if he could manage. “It seems like this whole thing is such a huge challenge, but it’s all a challenge mentally. It’s almost like I have to become a different person or something.”

“Not exactly... I think it’s more like you have to become the person you would have become in the future, just faster. Like with the Voldemort dreams, you’re being tested in ways that make you have to try as hard as you can. And like at that time, you’ll be supported. Not only by me,” she added, seeing his expression, “but Ginny and the others will too, even if they don’t know exactly what’s going on.”

He knew it was true, and it bolstered his mood. “I appreciate that,” he said sincerely. “It always helps.” They were silent for a minute, then he said, “Well, I’ll stay here for a bit and get mentally prepared, then go see him. Any other advice?”

She thought for a minute. “Probably you understand this already, but he may be reluctant, he may question your ability to do it. He may even, intentionally or not, say things that’ll upset you. He might try to see if you’re going to get angry

easily, because he knows that it won't work if you do. This is a big thing for him, and he may want to kind of test you before putting that much trust in you. So, and you would have done this anyway, but the thing is to keep calm no matter what he says or does, come from a place of love. Remember the other Snape, remember how wounded this one is. I think you can do it, Harry, I really do."

"Yeah, I guess I can see why he would do that," agreed Harry. "It's such a standard reaction, to get angry at him if he's being insulting, but I know I have to change a lot of reactions. I'll keep it in mind."

She got up. "I guess that's all I can think of." He nodded and got up as well, and she headed to the door, stopping to give him a last supportive look. "You can do it," she said firmly, and left the room. He sat down again, and focused on love.

Harry knocked on the door of Snape's office. The door opened, and he took a step in. Harry had never been there before; it was very neat and spartan. Snape silently motioned Harry to a chair, and closed and locked the door with his wand. He sat down and stared at Harry, expressionless. Harry tried to keep his expression neutral; he had spent the last ten minutes trying to develop a state of calm and love. Dumbledore had told him to have no expectations or needs from Snape's behavior, that if he helped Snape, it had to be unconditional. It was counter to Harry's experience, but he had resolved to try.

Finally, Snape spoke, his tone even. "The headmaster talked to you."

"Yes," Harry said.

"Was it a one-way conversation, or two-way?"

"Two-way."

"He told you about my situation."

"Yes."

"I assume from your presence here that if I agree to it, you will do as he asked."

"Yes. Well, he didn't exactly ask it, more like, raised it as a possibility."

Snape smirked a little, and looked at Harry as if he were slow. “It is the same thing. If he but ‘raised the possibility’ that you run through fire, you would do it. He was making a request, just very politely. You know, very clearly, what this would involve?”

Harry nodded. “He was very clear about that.”

Snape looked at Harry with a penetrating gaze. “When the headmaster suggested this arrangement sixteen years ago, I was astonished that he would agree to such a thing. I felt that it must take supreme self-confidence, total comfort in one’s own skin, and a lack of embarrassment, and in fact, I came to understand that he possessed all these qualities. I am sure that you would agree that you possess none.” Harry nodded. “Why, then, would you agree to this? And I do not mean for you to answer, because he asked me to. I mean, what makes you think you can do it?”

Harry felt it was a good question. “I guess I don’t know for sure that I can. But I think it’s worth doing, and if he asked me, he must think I can do it, or at least that I have a better chance than anyone else. When he asked me to become a professor, I was sure I couldn’t do it, but he was right. I believe I can do this.” This was true, but Harry particularly wanted to come across as confident. He knew Snape would have to place a great deal of faith in him, and he didn’t want Snape to think he was anything but determined.

Snape smirked again, and it occurred to Harry that it was probably his equivalent of a chuckle, as close as he could come. “Fate can be quite cruel; it has been to me, many times in my life. The only time it was not was when it steered me in the headmaster’s direction. Now it asks me to entrust my... continued ability to function to a sixteen-year-old boy, the son of my hated enemy.” He looked at Harry again, and said, “In a way, though, it has been cruel to both of us, in this instance.”

Harry gave a small smile. “It did occur to me that there’s a lot of irony in it, at least. But I’m not my father, you know that.”

“No, you are not,” agreed Snape. “I see in your eyes your shame at what your father did. But you have been him, in my mind, for most of your time at Hogwarts. It was too good an opportunity to exact revenge on him to pass by, and it did not help you that you resemble him so strongly. It is simply not easy for me to change an... emotional perspective that I have held for so long.”

Harry felt he understood, even if he couldn't empathize. “Maybe if we do this, you'll understand my life enough that I'll seem more like who I am, and less who he was.”

Snape shook his head. “You do not understand. Intellectually, I know exactly who you are, and who he was. I know you are very much like him in some ways, and very different in others. The adjustment is an emotional one, and not as easy as simply realizing something, or accepting a fact.”

“Sort of like my adjusting to the idea that anything that happens in my life from now on, no matter how intimate, is something you could see,” suggested Harry.

Snape nodded. “You seem to be understanding a little better. Yes, it is much like that. You cannot simply decide not to feel a certain way. There must be a process of adjustment, if it is to happen at all.”

Harry nodded. “That's up to you, I guess. I still don't know what you want to do.”

“What I want to do, and what I end up doing, may be two very different things. I will ask you some questions, and in your answers I expect the unvarnished truth. No softening, no equivocation.”

“You'll get it. Go ahead.”

Snape eyed him carefully. “How do you feel about me?”

Harry raised his eyebrows a little at the question, then thought for a few seconds. “Right now, it's hard to put into one or two words. I found out so much last night, it's like I'm still getting used to it. I guess the best word right now is ‘sympathetic.’ I had this image of you, based on six years of experience, and now

that has suddenly been overturned. It's confusing. But I feel extremely sympathetic when I think about what your life is like, how difficult it is. People said that what I suffered when Voldemort attacked me in those dreams inspired them to overcome their fears and say his name. When I think about what you do every day, how hard it must be, it inspires me to be willing to do this, to give up my privacy like this. I think that's the best answer I can give you."

Snape seemed to be trying to keep any emotion out of his voice and off his face; Harry assumed it was because any emotions Snape had would be bound to be negative ones, and Snape must have decided to avoid being that way with him. The thought rekindled Harry's sympathy for Snape; he realized that for Snape, any genuine display of emotion when dealing with others would be something bound to evoke a negative reaction.

"And how I treated you for five years does not figure into this?" asked Snape.

Harry thought again. "Like I said, it all seems different now. It's like a kind of emotional adjustment like you talked about is going on, but fairly quickly. I feel like I'm able to separate how I felt at the time from dealing with you now, knowing what I now know. You may be the same person, but if I'd known then... and if I'd been mature enough to understand it, I would have seen it much differently, like I'm starting to now."

"Is there anything," asked Snape, "for which you hold a grudge against me, or did until very recently?"

Harry realized that Snape was trying to determine what hostility Harry still harbored toward him; he guessed that even though there seemed to be no one else but Harry who could do this for Snape, Snape still felt it was important that he had confidence that it would work. "Not a strong one, but your letting it be known that Remus was a werewolf, that stuck with me. The main one, I guess, would be the fact that I held you partly responsible for Sirius's death."

Snape raised his eyebrows. "In what way did you feel me responsible?"

“More emotionally than rationally,” Harry answered. “Partly because you taunted him about staying in Grimmauld Place all the time, and I wondered if that made him want all the more to get out, and come to the Department of Mysteries. Partly because you didn’t teach me Occlumency properly, and I might have stopped having the dreams if you had, if I had learned it. But I know there are flaws in both of those thoughts. Sirius was itching to get out of Grimmauld Place, and I know you asked him to stay behind; even if you hadn’t taunted him, he would’ve come anyway. And while it’s true that you used the Occlumency classes as more of a weapon against me than anything else, the fact was that I wanted the dreams to continue. I wanted to know what was behind that door, and I might not have practiced before bedtime anyway. But I think the bottom line was, I wanted someone to blame, and you were a good candidate.”

Snape nodded. “Having blamed you for your father’s sins, I do not find that difficult to understand. It may interest you to know, by the way, that a few weeks after the Dark Lord’s return, Black attempted to... reach a sort of peace with me. He was doing it more for the headmaster’s sake than for his own, or mine, but he was genuine nonetheless. I harshly rebuffed him, with as much abuse as I could muster.” Snape gave Harry a look that suggested he wanted to know what Harry thought of what he’d said.

Harry continued to focus on love. His emotions were aroused when anything had to do with Sirius, but he reminded himself to be compassionate. Still, it was difficult. “Before yesterday, if you’d said that, I would’ve been angry. Now, I completely understand why you did. You’d always hated him anyway, and even someone... not in your condition would have had to make some effort to... make the emotional adjustment, I guess you would say. You couldn’t afford to spare the effort to make that kind of adjustment, and from your perspective, there was no reason to. It made much more sense to keep hating him, since he gave you a legitimate excuse for hostility.”

Snape looked mildly impressed, as if he hadn't thought that Harry would work that out. "Why did you look at the memory I had placed in the Pensieve?"

Again, Harry thought before answering. "I was very curious to know what could be so important that you would go so far out of your way to hide it. At the time, I justified it to myself with the idea that you were rummaging around all my worst memories at will, so I should be able to look at one of yours if I could."

Snape looked a bit angry; Harry wondered if it was real anger, or anger serving as a kind of default emotion. "The headmaster had much the same thought," he said. "He was unsympathetic when I told him what you had done; he said that if you do not treat a person with respect, you should not be surprised when they do not do so for you. He was correct, of course." He paused. "Is this something you wish to do, or something you do because you feel it must be done?"

"I'm not sure I can say," Harry answered. "Maybe some of both. I know it has to be done, and I don't think Albus would have suggested I do it if he didn't think I was the best person for it. Or, at least, the only person for it. Obviously it's not going to be easy, or enjoyable. But I had a strong feeling of wanting to after talking to your... other half, I guess you could say. I assume that you knew who I'd seen in the dream yesterday, even if I didn't. Hearing him talk reminded me that you're not just who you seem to be. I can't begin to imagine what you've been through, what you go through every day. Whatever I go through to do this won't be a tenth of what you do."

Snape was silent for another minute or two; Harry focused on love while waiting for Snape to think about it. He thought about the Snape who had been banished, how he appreciated Harry's willingness to do what he was doing. He thought about all that this Snape had been through; he found that if he felt his determination waver, a look at the emotional desert he had visualized strengthened it again. He realized how lucky he was, not only compared to Snape, but compared to most people; not because he was Harry Potter, but because of those who loved him, and because he loved them. He thought about Dudley. Dudley had friends, but

Harry was sure it was nobody who he shared any emotional closeness with. He knew that most people didn't have what he had.

Snape took out his wand and quietly said, "Legilimens." Harry looked straight ahead and continued to focus on love, not resisting the intrusion. Memories began to appear in his head, and he soon discovered the common theme: mistrust or hatred of Snape. He saw himself agreeing with Ron, in his first year, that Snape must be trying to steal the Sorcerer's Stone. He felt himself burn with anger as Snape read the Rita Skeeter article about him aloud to the class in his fourth year. In his third year, he saw Snape give Ron detention for defending Hermione. He saw himself shouting at Dumbledore that Snape was responsible for Sirius's death. Some memories were only a flash of a few seconds, others showed a scene that played out for as long as a minute or more. Some were simply feelings, not associated with a particular memory; he remembered his frequent feelings of hurt, anger, and confusion at how Snape treated him, especially in his first year. Finally, the images and feelings stopped, and Snape was looking at him again.

Snape cast the spell again, and Harry saw Snape's other half talking to him, and smiling when Harry assured him that he would help the damaged half of Snape. He saw himself and Snape in Dumbledore's office, trying to talk Dumbledore out of performing the Cruciatus Curse on Harry. He saw himself, that morning, telling his friends that he would assume Dumbledore's role with Snape; he felt his determination, his sympathy for Snape. He saw himself and Hermione in the Pensieve, the horrified look on her face as she learned the truth about Snape, a horror he shared. He felt his own discomfort as he weighed this new responsibility against his responsibilities as Ginny's life partner, hoping what happened would not affect his relationship with her negatively. Harry realized that Snape was trying to gauge Harry's past feelings about Snape against his present ones. Is he trying to figure out how hard this is for me, Harry wondered, or is he trying to decide if he can trust me or not?

Snape finally spoke again. “Why is it so important to you that Miss Weasley know every last detail of your life?”

“It’s not exactly that, of course, but I want her to know the important things. What her parents said, and it makes sense to me, is that the more of each other you share, the closer you’ll be. I want her to know what’s going on with me. If we start keeping things from each other, we could start drifting apart. That’s part of what having a partner is all about.”

“Yet you value Miss Granger’s advice, and the continued ability to practice Legilimency with her, above this consideration?”

Harry nodded. “It wasn’t an easy decision, and it was mainly the Legilimency that made me decide that. I think it’ll be much better if I can do that with two people, and considering how skilled Voldemort is at Occlumency and Legilimency, I think I need to get as good at those as I can; it could be important. Also, Hermione can give me advice and feedback that would be... more objective, I guess, since she isn’t my life partner.”

Snape thought, then cast Legilimens again. Harry saw himself in the infirmary, telling Ginny he was in love with her. He saw her kiss him while they told her parents. He saw them looking into their hands just after having been Joined. He saw her that morning, saying she shouldn’t be selfish and that he should do what he thought was best. He saw himself talking to Hermione a short time ago, worried about how this could affect his sexual relationship with Ginny.

“If you were authorized to tell Miss Weasley of this, would you, in spite of the fact that she would then suffer some of the same discomfort you will?”

“Yes,” said Harry without hesitation. “She would want to know, and want to experience what I was experiencing, even if it was difficult. I would want to with her as well.”

After another silence, Snape said, “I have decided to accept the headmaster’s suggestion that you assume his role. I feel I must further recognize that you are not he, and that this will be difficult for you in a way that it was not for him. I am

prepared to make certain concessions to this, and one will be my approval for you to inform Miss Weasley as well as Miss Granger of the situation. I understand that you will require more support than did the headmaster.”

Harry felt a surge of relief. “Thank you,” he said.

Snape raised an eyebrow. “That is hardly necessary; you should know that I am incapable of an act of kindness, which your response seems to suggest you believe this to be. This is simply an action taken to ensure the best possible chance of success of this effort.”

“I know that, and I didn’t think it was an act of kindness,” affirmed Harry. “It’s just that the custom is to thank someone in that situation. I have a feeling Albus thanked you for things like that.” He took Snape’s silence as agreement. “How often should we do this?”

“It varies, depending on my need,” answered Snape. “It could be as seldom as once a week at some times, as much as every day at others. Before you leave for the summer, I will arrange a way for me to signal you that I wish to meet. You will be able to signal me back, informing me of the earliest time you can meet. Is that acceptable?”

Snape’s tone was much like that of a person concluding a business arrangement, but Harry reminded himself that that was as friendly or polite as Snape could be. “Yes, that’s fine,” Harry said. “What about for the next few days? You could always go to Albus’s office, but you can’t go into Gryffindor Tower. Too bad you don’t have a dog spell.”

“That is just as well,” replied Snape, “as my dog would probably bite the leg of the person it was seeking.”

Harry chuckled, then looked at Snape quizzically. “That was a deliberate joke, wasn’t it?”

“I am capable of humor, as you should know. It is simply not a sense of humor that would be to most people’s taste. In any case, if I require you while you

are in Gryffindor Tower, I shall speak to the headmistress.” He paused, then said, “Was there anything else?”

Ah, so we’re done for now, Harry thought. “One thing, I wanted to make sure you knew... Albus doesn’t want me showing my memories from meeting him to people in the Pensieve, for the most part, but he said I could show you the section that had to do with you if you wanted.”

Snape shook his head. “That is unnecessary, though I suspect I may be seeing some of it soon enough.”

Harry thought to say something like ‘see you later,’ but realized that it didn’t seem appropriate with Snape, so he just nodded and left. That could have been worse, he thought.

Harry walked down the corridor leading away from Snape’s office. After turning the corner, he looked at his left hand, and saw Ginny smile. “If you can, I need to talk to you and Hermione, in my office,” he said.

“That’s convenient, I’m talking to her now,” Ginny replied. “We’re on our way.”

When Harry walked into his office, they were already there. Harry conjured a third chair, and they all sat down. “I just finished talking to Snape, and he’s going to accept me as the person to do it.”

“Harry... I thought this wasn’t supposed to be discussed around Ginny,” said Hermione, with an apologetic glance at Ginny.

“That’s part of what I wanted to talk to you about. I think at first he didn’t understand that it would be difficult for me not to talk to Ginny about this, but he realized it at some point. He gave me permission to tell Ginny as well.”

Hermione raised her eyebrows; Ginny said, “Well, I am Harry’s partner, that’s not so strange, is it?”

“It’s a pretty big concession on his part, which you’ll understand after you hear what the situation is,” said Hermione.

“I’m going to show her what I showed you in the Pensieve,” said Harry. “I know Dumbledore said only to show you, but he didn’t know Snape was going to let me tell her as well. I can’t explain it nearly as well as they did.” He started putting his memories into the Pensieve, which he now kept in a desk drawer.

“What do you mean, ‘they?’” asked Ginny. “I thought it was just Dumbledore. Were there more people, like Neville’s parents?”

Hermione shook her head, still amazed at what she had seen before. “That sounds like an easy question to answer, Ginny, but it’s really not.” They entered the Pensieve, and when they came out, Ginny was as obviously astonished as Hermione had been. But, Harry knew, she was also disturbed. They sat back down in their chairs.

“I don’t know what to say,” she said, “either about the thing with Snape, or what you’ll be doing because of it. You were really going to not tell me about this?”

Harry found himself hoping that this would be as angry as she would get. “Like I said earlier, I wasn’t happy about the idea of not telling you. I just didn’t see that I had much choice. I need to practice Legilimency, and I need to do it with Hermione.”

“So, from now on, everything we do... I mean, this conversation, right now, he could be watching this! He might as well be in the room right now. How in the world are we going to...” She didn’t finish, but her meaning was clear to Harry.

Harry took a deep breath. He barely managed not to say, ‘how do you think I feel about it?’ Instead, he said, “Right now, I’m glad we had the Joining done, for some of the same reasons you were, when we had it done.”

Ginny rolled her eyes. “Don’t be ridiculous, Harry, I wouldn’t leave you, even if I could. I’m just upset right now, I don’t think you can blame me for that.”

“No, I don’t,” he said, and couldn’t think of anything to say after that. Hermione looked awkward, as if she didn’t belong there, but Harry was glad she was. Ginny put her head in her hands.

After a minute of silence, Ginny said, “So, what do we do now?”

“What I would say,” said Harry, “what I tried to do when I thought about this, is put yourself in his shoes, I mean, really try to imagine it. Yes, he didn’t have to choose to be a Death Eater, he made a mistake. A really big one. But imagine this has been done to you, and you realize that it was a mistake. In a way, your life is over, you can’t live like people are supposed to live. The best you can do is imagine that you could live another way. Try to imagine what that would be like.”

She thought for a minute. “I don’t know if anybody could, really imagine that. I’m not saying it’s not horrible, and I’m not saying I don’t feel bad for him. I do. But...” She sighed. “I just can’t get used to the idea in five minutes, Harry. I know all the facts now, and it’s true, I don’t know who would do this if not you. I can’t imagine anyone else doing it, it’s such a huge thing.” She chuckled. “I knew when I got you for a partner that I was getting myself into a lot. I just never imagined that it would be anything like this.”

“Neither did I,” he agreed.

“You saw his face when Dumbledore said this,” said Hermione quietly to Ginny. “He felt a lot like you do now, he’s just had time to get used to the idea. I’m not saying it’ll be easy, but—“

”Yeah, but you don’t know what it’s like, to have to imagine someone seeing you, in a really private moment,” Ginny responded.

Hermione raised her eyebrows at Harry. “You never told her?”

“It never came up,” he replied.

“Ginny, you know that a few weeks ago, Harry started practicing Legilimency with me,” said Hermione. “The first time we did it, he stumbled across an image... remember that day you arranged for Neville and I at the Burrow?”

Ginny’s eyes went wide. “What did you see?” she asked him.

Hermione answered. “Neville and I, kissing, with our shirts off.” Ginny looked even more surprised. “He didn’t mean to, of course, he felt terrible,” continued Hermione. “It took me ten minutes to convince him he shouldn’t feel bad. I knew it was important for him to learn it, so I took the risk of what he might

see. But you see my point; I do know what it's like, to imagine that. I would do it again. In fact, I will do it again. I'm still going to practice with him, he needs to practice. I'm going to do more than that with Neville over the summer, but I don't care."

Harry looked confused. "But we can put your memories into the Pensieve, we already talked about that."

"No," she said. "I'm not going to do that. I'll take my chances."

"What?" Harry blurted out. "What's the point of that? How's it going to help me if you do that?"

Ginny looked at Hermione, obviously touched. "She's not doing it for you, Harry, she's doing it for me," said Ginny. "She's saying, she'll take the same chance voluntarily that you and I have no choice but to take."

Harry should have recognized that sooner, he thought, but in his emotional reaction he missed it. "Hermione, that's sweet, but you don't have to," he said. "It's not like that's something I really want to see."

"Of course not, Harry, that's part of the point," said Hermione. "I think that you and Ginny, doing stuff like that, isn't something he really wants to see, either. But it's part of your life, or it's going to be, and what he needs is to see your life, all of it. I think the other Snape is right, thinking of him like a doctor isn't a bad idea. When we practice, you could stumble across something else, I know it isn't something you want to do. You heard Dumbledore, he didn't look at it any more than anything else. I know the hard part is the idea of someone looking at all. But at least I'll be with you."

Harry had not expected the conversation to go this way, to put it mildly. "So, you'll give us moral support by doing something that could completely embarrass me?"

Ginny smiled a bit, and so did Hermione. "Ironic, isn't it?" said Hermione.

“It does make me feel a bit better, to tell you the truth,” said Ginny to Harry. “Now I feel like, she knows what it feels like. I won’t be alone. I mean, I’m still not happy, but...” She trailed off.

Well, at least it makes her feel better, Harry thought. He didn’t fancy the idea of seeing any more of Hermione and Neville than he already had, but he couldn’t deny that it was a kind gesture on Hermione’s part. He also knew that despite what had happened with Hermione before, the chances of actually seeing that kind of memory weren’t high. “This kind of reminds me,” he said to Ginny, “of when I was telling the first years how I used thoughts of love to drive Voldemort out of my mind, you just came up and told me you loved me, so I wouldn’t be so embarrassed.”

She smiled. “Well, I would’ve done that anyway, but I can’t deny that I was happy for an excuse to tell you I loved you.”

He smiled back. “I guess that makes sense now, but I wouldn’t have imagined it then. I guess it’s safe to say that Hermione isn’t looking for an excuse to show me what she and Neville are going to get up to.”

“Yes, that’s safe to say,” agreed Ginny, “which makes it more impressive. You’re such a wonderful friend, Hermione. We couldn’t want a better friend than you.”

“Or imagine one, I’d say,” agreed Harry.

“Thank you, both of you,” said an obviously touched Hermione. Harry went on to tell them the rest of what had happened in the meeting with Snape, and they talked about it for a while. Harry felt that Ginny was slowly starting to get used to the idea, or at least wasn’t as acutely uncomfortable with it as she had been at first. I hope we can both get to where it doesn’t bother us, he thought. He knew it wouldn’t be easy.

The three of them went back to Gryffindor Tower after they were finished talking about the situation with Snape. Ron suggested to Harry that they have a fly,

and Harry agreed. They invited Ginny, but she declined; Harry wondered whether she needed time alone to think, or just wanted to make sure Ron had some time with Harry. They took their brooms and headed toward the castle entrance, but when they got near it, they were twice stopped by official-looking wizards who were obviously there early for whatever ceremony was planned for Dumbledore. Harry didn't know them, but they introduced themselves and offered their condolences, which Harry politely accepted and moved on. When they got out of the castle, Harry muttered, "I really should have used my Invisibility Cloak." Ron chuckled.

They flew and raced for about forty-five minutes, then headed back down. Harry wanted to sit for a minute, so they took seats in the stands surrounding the Quidditch pitch. Harry looked around, enjoying the pleasant weather, thinking of Dumbledore.

Ron looked at him and asked, "Are you going to have to pretend you're sadder than you are at the ceremony, since you can't tell them that he's alive, well not really, but—"

Harry nodded. "I keep thinking of him like that, too. Hard not to, since I talked to him, he looked pretty alive. Well, I won't have to pretend too hard. I still wish he were here. But I can't smile, I know that. It just all seems so pointless, this ceremony. A lot of these people, especially Ministry people, didn't know Dumbledore that well, they're just here because he was important."

Ron looked thoughtful. "I wouldn't be so sure, Harry. Remember, Dumbledore had been headmaster for forty years, and a teacher for another fourteen. That means anyone under the age of... let's see... sixty-five was at Hogwarts for all seven years with him, and that's a lot of people. I think most are coming not because they have to come, but because since they're Ministry people, they can. I bet more than half of the wizarding population of England would come if they could. Even if they were on Fudge's side last year, I bet they still respected and liked Dumbledore."

“Maybe you’re right. I hope so. I wish I could tell everyone what happened last night... but I know I can’t.”

“I’m surprised he didn’t just give you bits of information to tell certain people, so they would know for sure it was true. Did that have to do with that thing about not wanting to give proof?”

“No,” said Harry, “anything spoken wouldn’t be proof anyway, not real proof. I think he knew most people I told would know me well enough to know that I know the difference between that and a dream. But he did say a few things like that anyway, just because he wanted the people close to me to be sure, if they had any doubts. He had one for McGonagall, for Pansy, for you, and a couple of other people. There wasn’t one for Ginny, Hermione, or Neville, because they got to see stuff in the Pensieve.”

“What was the one he said for me?” asked Ron, obviously curious.

“It’s kind of personal,” Harry warned.

Ron rolled his eyes. “Harry, if it’s about me, then I know it, and if he told you, then you know it. I’d just as soon know what you know about me anyway, not to mention I’d want to know no matter what it was.”

“Okay,” Harry agreed. “He said that you were thinking about death because of what happened with him, that it could happen any time, and it made you wonder whether you were waiting too long to tell Pansy how you feel about her.”

Ron looked a little embarrassed, but smiled. “I bet the rest of you are wondering that too. I have a feeling the way I feel about her isn’t any secret.” Harry shook his head with a small smile. “I’m pretty sure she knows, too, and I think she feels the same way. She held my hand at your Joining, that gave me a pretty good idea. I guess I’ve been waiting to do anything because... I don’t want either of us to feel like we did it for the wrong reasons. I mean, there’s six of us in our group now, and Hermione and Neville were a couple, then you and Ginny... it’s like, people will look at it and say, ‘well, it’s obvious that Ron and Pansy should be together,’ like it

had to happen. I didn't want either of us to wonder whether it was like that. But she knows I like her, I think she knows why I'm being slow about it."

Harry grinned to make sure Ron knew what he was about to say wasn't serious. "So, it's not because you're scared in any way."

"I totally deny that," Ron replied, also grinning. They were silent for another minute. "I have to say, Harry, I envy you that you still get to talk to Dumbledore. Don't get me wrong, you deserve it... I think you know what I mean."

"Yeah, I do," said Harry. "I'm so happy about it. I mean, I would have just been happy to know for certain that he still existed, in some way. But this... I couldn't have hoped for anything like this. He's just... amazing, no less so now."

Ron nodded, and they were silent again. "I guess we should be getting back. But we should do this a few more times before the term ends," said Ron.

"Yeah, I agree, we should talk like this more," said Harry with a smile, letting Ron know he knew that Ron meant the flying, not the talking. Ron shook his head and chuckled, and they headed back to the castle.

Harry looked around and saw Dumbledore standing by the stream he had first noticed when Fawkes had taken him there. He walked up to Dumbledore and hugged him; he knew that he would be wishing he could if Dumbledore was beyond contact. "I felt like I wanted to ask you how you were doing, but it occurred to me that the answer would be the same every time, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, it would," answered Dumbledore. "Even in the physical realm I was fairly even-tempered, but here, there is no such thing as pain or discomfort, and one is constantly reminded that one's spirit is eternal. It would be impossible not to relax here, to not feel rejuvenated."

"And it's the same for the other... realm? The one you go to after this?"

"Indeed, even more so," replied Dumbledore. "This place has qualities which are a mix of the physical and the spiritual realms. In the spiritual realm, one is constantly in an atmosphere of love. People in physical form talk about the

physical world being ‘real’ and imply that anything else is not, but the fact is that the spiritual realm is what is truly ‘real.’ The physical world, the physical universe for that matter, is but a construction for our experience and edification. It is real in its own way, but the spiritual realm is our true home. The physical realm is simply a place we go once in a while, much as we go to our jobs while in physical form.”

Harry tried to wrap his mind around the idea, and couldn’t quite do it, but he knew he would have many more visits to work on it. “If there’s no pain, or anything but love, in the spiritual realm, why do we even go to the physical world? Why not just stay in the spiritual realm?”

“Some beings do,” said Dumbledore. “But part of why we are here is to learn, to experience. You know very well from your experience that we learn more when we have challenge, when we are pushed. We can learn much faster in physical form than we can as our true spiritual selves.”

“In that case, I must be setting some kind of record for learning,” Harry joked.

Dumbledore laughed. “It does seem that way, yes. I take it you have more questions about the situation with Severus.”

Harry had noticed that from this place, Dumbledore had totally dispensed with the using of titles; he imagined that such things weren’t important in this realm. “Yes, could we call...” He trailed off as the smiling Snape shimmered into view.

“Hello, Harry,” said Snape, walking forward to embrace Harry. Harry hugged him back happily, though feeling a bit odd in hugging someone who looked exactly like Snape, and he wondered what the physical Snape would think if he saw this image in his mind.

“It’s a good question,” said Snape. “But that is a part of what the whole process is about, for him; it’s a different perspective. He cannot conceive of embracing you literally, but if he sees this, he will see that there is, or was, a part of him who can. That is something worth knowing.”

“Yes, but that’s part of something I was wondering when I was talking to Ginny and Hermione about it. He can see memories of my talking to people about his situation. Couldn’t that affect the situation itself?”

“Only if you act differently than you otherwise would because you know he could eventually see it, which you will not,” said Dumbledore. “Today, you did nothing differently because you knew he might see it, and I am sure you will continue to do that. One of the reasons you were appropriate to take over for me was that you have become so open a person; due to the Voldemort trial in September, you had no choice. It was an adjustment for you to know that anything you do could be seen, but it was an even bigger adjustment for that person to be Severus. If it had been me, I suspect that even the sexual aspect would not particularly disturb you.”

“No, because I trust you completely,” agreed Harry. “Like... like Hermione trusts me, that she’s willing to do what she’s going to do.”

Dumbledore nodded. “I see you had not quite thought of it that way until now, but yes, it is very similar. It is an extraordinarily high compliment that she pays you, as well as a gesture of support to Ginny, that she will compromise her privacy even though she need not do so. Getting back to the issue of trust in your situation, you should understand that you can trust Severus, even if your experience tells you that you should not. Before, as he said, he thought of you as if you were your father; he knows that he cannot do that any longer. Nor, now that he has accepted you as the person to replace me, will he wish to. He will, as he said, have to make an emotional adjustment, and he is in the process of doing so.”

“From a purely rational point of view,” added Snape, “he won’t want to do anything to cause you distress, as he will now depend on you, in a very important sense. You saw that today when he gave you permission to tell Ginny about the situation; he did so because he realized that not doing so could cause you a great deal of stress. It was not easy for him, because it meant having to trust one more person with such an intimate secret, but he did it anyway. He actually contemplated

assuring you that he would not access sexual memories at all, but he realized that it is part of what is necessary for him, that it would not be the same if access to any particular thing were restricted. He is concerned that you and she will act differently than you otherwise would because of him, but he understands that there is nothing he can do about that, that you and Ginny must overcome this obstacle if it is to be overcome.”

“I have a feeling you will,” said Dumbledore with a knowing smile. “The teenage sex drive is quite powerful. At some point, you will almost certainly decide that you do not care who sees what, that you will do what you want to do.”

Harry hoped that Dumbledore was correct. “Well, I am glad to hear that he at least considered not looking at sexual memories; it may make it easier for Ginny and I to just consider it another part of our lives, that to him is no more special than anything else. I was glad that she didn’t have any worse a reaction than she had today.”

“Indeed, many would have reacted very badly to such information,” agreed Dumbledore. “She could not adjust instantly, as she pointed out, but she did quite well given the circumstances. She has been looking forward to this greatly, and to have it disturbed in such a way was a great disappointment. She will eventually realize that it need not affect her enjoyment of the experience at all; it will just take time.”

Harry fervently hoped so. “You said yesterday that you looked into his mind too. Why did you do that? Is it something I should do?”

“He did not mind my doing so; I did it in order to check on his emotional state, out of concern. It was not strictly necessary, but he appreciated the thought behind it. I would not recommend that you even consider doing it until you are more used to each other in this situation. He gave me a certain deference that he will not give you, especially at first.”

“You should know, though,” said Snape, “that while he cannot like you, he has considerable respect for you, both who you are as a person and for the effort

you make in doing this for him. He simply relied on Albus in a way that cannot be the same with you, due to your age and relative lack of maturity. Bear in mind, you are unusually mature for a sixteen-year-old; you are simply not as mature as Albus was, and that was what Severus was used to. He will adapt; what you are doing for him was by far the most important part of what Albus did for him.”

Harry understood. “Obviously he wouldn’t deal with me in just the same way he did with Albus.” He thought about the physical Snape for a minute, then asked Dumbledore, “There was something I was wondering about yesterday. Last night you mentioned that how hard he argued against you doing the Curse on me for that demonstration was an indication of how he felt about you. But it seems like that requires him to have some qualities that should have been banished by the Cleansing. He was obviously concerned for you; it certainly seemed as though he cared about you and didn’t want you to suffer. How could he do that?”

Snape answered. “When people lose limbs, or sight or hearing, they can often find ways to do what they used to do; this is very much like that. He knew that if he were not handicapped in this way, he would be concerned about Albus. He was able to know what to do if he could feel that way; it’s very much like acting. If you had to act like you hated someone, you could probably do it if you really tried. He can use what emotions he does have, just in a different way. So, when he was arguing with Albus, he was angry with him—since he can be angry—for not doing things the most reasonable way. It wasn’t such a stretch, since you may recall you too were angry with him at the time. He can choose any action he wants, and he can give any appearance he wants; it’s just what he actually can feel that’s restricted. It’s rare for him to ‘act’ in that way, though, since most of the time it’s not necessary, and it requires a certain effort. He did at times this year, after Albus insisted that he treat you with the respect your position merited. He was so used to hating you that at first it required an acting performance to give the impression that he did not. As time went by, it became less and less an act, so the adjustment he must make now to accept you in this role is not nearly as large as it might have

been. Even now, it's a significant emotional adjustment; last September, it simply would not have been possible for him. It would have been too much."

"I guess I can understand that," said Harry. The more he heard about how it was for Snape, the more determined he was to do what was needed. Still, he knew it would be hard.

Harry and Neville walked out of the Aurors' fireplace at the usual time of nine o'clock the next day, and were greeted by Kingsley, Cassandra, and Tonks. "We were sorry we couldn't make it to the ceremony yesterday," said Kingsley. Cassandra and Tonks looked at Harry sadly, and kissed him on the cheek; Harry realized that he tended to forget that there was a purple dot on his forehead, which served as a vivid reminder to others of his loss.

"Thanks, I appreciate it," he said. "But something really good happened the night after he died." He told them about it, and like everyone else he had told, they gaped. "I wouldn't have believed it was possible," said Cassandra.

"He told me that he would try," said Kingsley, "and I thought, if anyone can, he can. But it's just amazing. What did he say?"

Harry gave them a recap of the parts not having to do with Snape, and finished by saying, "...and it turns out that there are other people there, and he can let me talk to them if I want." Harry had talked to Neville before they had left, so he knew that Neville intended to tell them what he had seen. "Who did you see?" asked Tonks eagerly.

"Well, I was surprised because they're not dead, but their spirits are where you first go after you die," Harry explained. "I saw Neville's parents. They left a message for Neville in my memory, he saw it in the Pensieve."

The Aurors were astonished. "How is that possible?" asked Tonks. Harry explained what he understood of it.

"What did they say, Neville?" asked Cassandra.

With a small smile, Neville said, “My mum said that you should give me the five Galleons you owed her.”

Cassandra put her hand to her mouth and gasped. “I’d forgotten all about that,” she said. She reached for her money pouch and looked for the Galleons as tears rolled down her cheeks.

“You shouldn’t cry, Cassandra,” said Tonks. “It’s only five Galleons, after all.”

Kingsley chuckled as Cassandra smiled through her tears and said, “Shut up, Tonks.” She handed Neville five Galleons.

“I’m not going to spend them, of course,” said Neville. “I’m just going to keep them, to remind me of her.”

“I hope that wasn’t all she said, Neville,” said Kingsley humorously.

“No, Cassandra, she said to tell you that she appreciates how you’ve looked after me, and that she loves you.” Obviously overwhelmed, Cassandra struggled to hold back more tears.

Near the end of the day, when their training was finished, Harry and Neville went back to the room with the fireplace in time to greet Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and Pansy, who had just arrived. Kingsley walked in and said, “Thanks for coming. I assume Harry told you that we wanted to test you, to see if Hermione’s theory about the energy of love is right. Certainly it’s started to look that way; Neville is obviously stronger today than he was last week. It’s not a huge jump in power like Harry’s in April, but it’s very noticeable. We’ll be very interested to see what the tests show.”

He cast the test spell on himself, and asked Harry to go first, as a test. Harry silently cast Blue on him, and saw a gold 100 appear in the air next to Kingsley. “Okay, Hermione, you next,” said Kingsley. She pointed her wand at him, and another gold 100 appeared. Hermione smiled broadly as Kingsley said, “Looks like you’re right. Neville, you now.” Neville took his turn, and there was yet another 100. “Amazing,” said Kingsley. “Do you know how few wizards ever get 100, and there

are three right here? Harry is obviously very much on to something. Ron?” Ron fired the spell, and a gold 94 popped up. Ron looked disappointed, but Kingsley said, “That’s still really good, Ron, we have some Aurors who don’t get 94. Ginny?”

Ginny stepped forward, cast the spell, and saw yet another gold 100; she smiled as she stepped back. Pansy tried and got 87, but was happy. “That’s really good; when I did it in class at the beginning of the year, I only got 55. I’ve never been that good with a wand.”

“Looks like you’re getting better,” said Kingsley. “Now the question is, could Neville and Ginny use Harry’s new spells as well. What were your initial scores on this test?”

“Mine was 79, and Ginny’s a fifth year, so she hadn’t done it yet,” said Neville. “As for whether we could use his spells, I want to try.”

Most people there looked surprised, but Harry wasn’t; he had expected Neville to want to try, but he didn’t know about Ginny. Kingsley said, “Are you sure, Neville? I tried it once, and I was wrong. It’s pretty bad if you are.”

“I think I can do it,” said Neville determinedly.

Hermione took his hand, concerned. “You may be able to, but you have to remember that it doesn’t completely work the first time; it didn’t for Harry, or I. Even if it works, you’re going to get a real blast of pain.”

He nodded. “I know. But don’t you think it’s better to have that happen now, rather than in a real-life situation?”

“Yes, I see your point,” she agreed reluctantly. “But it’s still very brave.”

He looked at Kingsley, who said, “All right, Neville. Let me know when you’re ready.”

Neville concentrated, then looked up. “Go ahead.”

Kingsley counted down, and to Harry’s relief, the shield came on just as Kingsley said the word ‘Crucio.’ As had happened with Harry and Hermione, some of the spell got through, and Neville screamed, but for less than a second, and fell

to the ground. His shield faded, and Hermione helped him up and hugged him. “That’s wonderful, Neville, I’m so glad you can do it.”

He let her go after a few seconds and asked Kingsley to do it again. “I know it’ll work, but it’s just for my peace of mind, to have had one time where it worked completely.” Kingsley did it again, and as expected, it worked perfectly. Very satisfied, Neville stepped back, and was rewarded with a kiss from Hermione.

“I want to do it, too,” said Ginny, looking at Harry. He understood, but was still concerned for her. She gave him a reassuring smile, and faced Kingsley. It went exactly as Neville’s had; the shield came on the first time but she suffered a short burst of intense pain, then it worked perfectly the second time. Harry proudly put an arm around her.

“That’s pretty amazing,” said Ron. “I’d like to try too, but I have a feeling it wouldn’t be a good idea, not until I get to 100.”

“That’s okay, Ron, I would have refused to do it anyway,” said Kingsley. “New rule, no one gets to try this until they’re at 100. Funny, I’ve been at 100 for years now, but I failed when I tried.”

“What I’d assume,” said Hermione, “is that you can get 100 without using the energy of love, though it’s very rare, but that you will always get 100 if you’re using it completely. Maybe Ron and Pansy are well along the way, just not quite there yet.” Harry grinned to himself, knowing that there was a joke begging to be made about how if Ron and Pansy would just get together they would reach 100, but he knew no one would make it. Ron had a somewhat embarrassed look, as if he expected someone to do so.

“Looks that way,” agreed Kingsley. “Also, it’s hard not to notice that the four of you with 100 are the ones in relationships. Probably it helps a lot if you have a particular person to focus on. We Aurors may be disadvantaged in that area; the married ones may have to show us the way.” He looked at Cassandra, who smiled.

“But I had 100 long before I was in a relationship,” pointed out Harry.

“Well, he said it helps, not that you had to be,” said Hermione. “Besides, you had extreme motivation of another kind.”

“That’s true,” Harry said. “But I was thinking about something else last night, since I thought something like this might happen. Aurors have to know Dark magic, and sometimes you use it, right? Even if not in real situations, like you just used the Cruciatus Curse there, and I think you have to be in a negative frame of mind, even if only unconsciously, to use it. I wondered, what if you can’t use the energy of love for your spells if you sometimes use spells that require that kind of frame of mind?”

“But you used the Cruciatus Curse once, or at least, tried to,” said Kingsley, somewhat apologetically, as if not wanting to remind Harry of the circumstances.

“Yes, and later swore to myself never to do it again,” Harry answered. “It’s just a thought, I could be totally wrong. I just wonder if we have to choose one or the other. I asked Albus about it last night, and he said he thought it was very likely. It was funny, because when I talk to him, it seems to me as though I’m speaking, but really I’m just thinking, so he hears me whether I speak or think. I was thinking that he should be able to know, and he said, ‘Just because I am dead, it does not mean I have become omniscient.’” The others laughed. “I said, ‘It would be nice, though.’”

“Nice to see that dying hasn’t taken away his sense of humor,” said Kingsley wryly. “It’s an interesting thought, Harry. You could be right, it’s just so hard to know at this stage. It’s amazing, it’s like you’re founding a whole new branch of magic.”

Harry grinned in embarrassment. “It’s pretty convenient that I’m the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, then. You almost have to wonder if Albus knew something when he asked me to take the job.”

“I’d say that anyone who can talk from where he is could do anything, but then again, he did have a bit of a checkered history with that job,” joked Kingsley.

“He couldn’t help that no one good was available for the position most of the time,” said Ginny. “He was just waiting until Harry got old enough.”

“Yes, that must be it,” said Harry, deadpan.

“Before you all head back to Hogwarts, there’s something I need to give you and talk to you about,” said Kingsley. He walked over to a chest in a corner and took out a box. “This came up because of how Malfoy threatened you,” he said as he looked at Pansy. “Most of your protection is already taken care of, since you’ll be staying at the Burrow, along with... well, if he’s not the most powerful wizard in the world right now, I don’t know who is.” Harry tried not to look as embarrassed as he felt as Pansy grinned mischievously, knowing how he would feel. “Anyway, this was done with Pansy in mind, but we arranged it so that it works for all six of you, knowing how close you all are, and it wasn’t that much extra effort.”

He opened the box to reveal six pendants. Each was circular and was one solid color; they looked like stones, but the colors didn’t seem to be the type that would come naturally to stones. They weren’t very thick, and were about two centimeters in diameter.

“Sorry that we didn’t know enough about all of you to make the colors specific to each person,” said Kingsley, “but I bet you all can guess which one is Harry’s.”

“The green one, of course,” said Pansy. Harry realized that the color of the green pendant was almost exactly that of his eyes.

Kingsley nodded. “It seemed appropriate. Gold is Ron, red is Ginny, pink is Pansy, blue is Neville, and orange is Hermione. Dumbledore told you that Pansy would be given something that would be an alarm if Malfoy got close enough to it. If he gets within a hundred yards of her, all your pendants will make a whistling noise; the closer he is, the louder it’ll be. Another nice feature they have is a kind of a distress signal that you don’t have to activate. This monitors your heart rate and adrenaline levels, and if they suddenly shoot up, or reach a certain level, the color of that person will blink rapidly on the other pendants. So, if Pansy were under threat,

everyone else's pendants would blink with a pink color, and make a noise. Unfortunately, only Harry could come to her aid instantly even if he didn't know where she was, because Fawkes would take him. But I've had these linked in with the Security department of the Magic Detection Center, so if any of them goes off, we'll know immediately, and we'll know where the person is. We could Apparate there within seconds, by which time I suspect we'd find that Harry had already taken care of the situation." This got a laugh from everyone except Harry, who managed a smile.

"What if one of us gets a jolt of adrenaline for some other reason?" asked Hermione. "Wouldn't it cause some false alarms?"

"No," answered Kingsley, "we've been using these long enough to have worked that out; having your life under threat causes a much stronger reaction than someone you didn't realize was behind you suddenly yelling. There's one more feature, and it's only partly security-related: these can also function as communication devices. If Harry wants to contact Pansy, he holds his pendant and says 'pink,' and her pendant will slowly blink with his color, letting her know he wants to talk to her. She says his color, and then they can hear each other. Any number can do it at once; one of you could speak to all the others at the same time if you wanted. We Aurors talk to each other using things like this. And if one of you sets off the adrenaline alarm, that one's pendant immediately becomes an open channel; all other pendants can hear what's going on at that one."

"Wow... this is terrific," said Pansy, as the others' faces showed that they shared the sentiment.

"Thanks, Kingsley, this is great," said Harry sincerely.

Kingsley shook his head. "Most of the work was done by others; like I've said, Aurors tend to get things they ask for. And we have a tradition of doing things Dumbledore asks us to do. We'll still do that, of course, but now Harry will have to relay his messages."

"You can be sure I will, if he has something to say," said Harry.

“I really like the ability to communicate,” said Neville, still very impressed. “I’ll be able to talk to Hermione without using the fireplace... and from bed, even if there’s no picture.”

Harry and the others put on their pendants. He felt very connected to the others, but not because of the pendants; he realized the pendants were a symbol of the connection they already felt.

The next day, Harry began both giving and taking examinations. His days this week would be longer, because giving each student ten minutes took over three hours instead of the normal two for each class; he was busy until six o’clock, which left him just the evenings to study for his own exams. He was busy each day until Friday, which was essentially a day off for him; Dumbledore’s death meant that exams in his class for sixth years were cancelled, and Harry didn’t have to give any exams for his fifth years, as they were taking their O.W.L.s. The Astronomy O.W.L. re-test scheduled for last Friday had of course been rescheduled after Dumbledore’s death earlier that day, moving to Wednesday of the final week. Harry didn’t particularly care about taking it at all, but went through with it as a gesture to Hermione, although she didn’t seem nearly as bothered by the whole situation as she had been at the beginning of the year. (“What happened this year sort of put that in perspective for me,” she said.)

In deference to Harry’s schedule, Snape had waited until Friday to request his first meeting with Harry since finalizing their arrangement. The memories Snape accessed were mainly from Harry’s childhood, before he had known he was a wizard. Some of them were similar to the ones he had seen during the previous year’s Occlumency sessions; Snape told Harry that no attempt to do anything similar was intended, which Harry understood. “It’s not your fault I have so few happy memories before I was eleven,” he assured Snape. He knew Snape was simply starting at the beginning, so to speak, to understand Harry’s life better. Snape

actually found a few memories that Harry had forgotten, but they were no more pleasant than the ones he remembered.

Friday night saw the end-of-the-year feast, at which the House Cup was awarded to the House with the most points. Slytherin had won, in a close contest with Gryffindor. Harry was pleased; now that Malfoy's influence was gone from Slytherin, it would be able to cooperate better with the other houses, and Harry wanted to encourage that. He knew that there were still plenty of Slytherins who were prejudiced against non-pure-blood wizards—after all, Slytherin was where the Sorting Hat tended to put such people—but Dumbledore had pointed out to him earlier in the year that working with other Houses and being around different kinds of people would help change such attitudes. Harry asked the Gryffindors before the feast to give the Slytherins a healthy round of applause, and he asked the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff prefects to make the same request of their house's students. All did so, and when the award was announced by McGonagall, Harry could see that most Slytherins were very pleased at the loud support they got from the other houses.

After the feast, there was a social event for the staff, to allow them to say their goodbyes for the year. Harry talked to everyone at least once, even Professor Trelawney, whose attitude towards him seemed to have warmed a bit, though he had hardly seen her all year. At the end of the event, McGonagall led them in a moment of silence in Dumbledore's honor, and thanked them for all of their efforts for the year.

Harry took the opportunity to thank the teachers for their support throughout the year. "I was afraid that some teachers might not like the idea of a sixteen-year-old teacher, but you never made me feel as though I didn't belong here. You cared about me, you teased me... you made me look forward to coming to this room every day. Thank you for that."

Flitwick replied, "We're just happy to see a Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher survive the year," to general laughter. As the party broke up, Harry got handshakes from his fellow teachers as they wished him a good summer.

Before he could leave, McGonagall found him and told him that she wanted to talk to him privately, and asked him to call Ginny to have her join them. He did, and soon Ginny was knocking at the door of the staff room. The three of them walked to Dumbledore's quarters, and sat down. "Are these going to become your quarters now?" asked Harry.

"No, and that is part of what I wanted to talk to you about," McGonagall replied. "The fact is, the quarters I now occupy are the ones designed to be the headmaster's; he was entitled to them when he became headmaster, but he felt these were more than adequate, and had me take the slightly larger ones instead. Harry, you were never assigned teachers' quarters, because it was understood that you would stay in Gryffindor Tower, and I assume you will next year as well. Nonetheless, I would like you to think of these as your quarters; they will remain yours should you decide to stay on past next year. This solves the immediate question of what to do with Albus's belongings; they will remain here, for you to deal with as you see fit. I think he knew as well that you would consider it a particular honor."

I sure do, Harry thought. He very much liked the idea that he would get to stay in these quarters, around Dumbledore's belongings, and be able to talk to Dumbledore about them if he wanted to. "Yes, thank you, Professor. I'm very happy to be able to have these quarters, even if I don't stay in them much for the next year."

McGonagall pursed her lips, seemingly unhappy at what she was going to say next. "He also made a particular request of me... one which I know amused him to do, because he knew how I would feel about it, and that I would grant it anyway, despite my feelings. He and I were aware that you occasionally used your office as a place for the two of you to have some privacy. I am not saying it was for the purpose you think I am referring to," she added quickly, forestalling his objection. "I know that couples need to be able to talk privately from time to time. In any case, he wanted the two of you to be able to come here to be alone if you wished."

Harry and Ginny looked at each other, eyes wide. He knew they were both thinking the same thing: that there was a bed in the next room. There would be nothing to stop them from doing anything they wanted—except, of course, for the situation with Snape—and unlike the Burrow, no need to fear being called or interrupted at any time.

Now McGonagall looked amused. “The looks on your faces could hardly be more transparent, you know.” Dropping her austere manner, McGonagall looked at them fondly. “Harry, Ginny... it is difficult for me especially as the headmistress to approve of this, so let me just talk to you as a person for right now. Albus was always very relaxed about this kind of thing, much more so than I could be. About this particular situation, Harry, he felt that you may be only sixteen—though I know you will be seventeen soon—but that you deserved to be treated with the consideration and privileges of an adult, especially now that you bear such serious responsibilities.”

Harry cut in before she could continue, because he thought he knew what she was referring to. “Just so you know, Professor... Minerva,” he amended, noticing her look reminding him that she was just a person right then, “Professor Snape has given me permission to discuss his situation with Ginny as well as Hermione.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Yes, that was one of the responsibilities I was referring to. In addition, despite your ages, you have chosen to be in a committed relationship, which is another adult responsibility. He considered the situation much as though you were a married couple. It is difficult for me to see it that way, but I do see his point. You know that I am pleased for both of you, and wish you nothing but happiness.” Harry was touched, and could see that Ginny was too.

“I ask only that you be discreet,” she continued. “Not that you would not do this anyway, but I expect only your circle of friends to know about this, and Ginny not to be seen coming to or leaving this room. Fortunately, as you have Fawkes, you need not go skulking around the castle.” She stood up. “You both should be getting back to Gryffindor Tower very soon.”

They stood as well, and followed her out of the room. Harry wanted to stay just to look at everything, but he knew he would be able to soon enough.

“Wow, this is amazing,” said Ginny, as soon as they were out of McGonagall’s hearing range. “It was so good of him to do this for us. And since we have Fawkes, we can go there any time we want during the summer, and not have to worry about getting privacy at the Burrow. That is, as much privacy as we can ever get, now.”

He nodded. “How are you doing with that? We haven’t talked about it for a few days, we’ve both been so busy.”

She shrugged. “I think I’m getting used to the idea, but I don’t know if I’ll know for sure until the time actually comes.” Harry could understand that, as he felt more or less the same way himself.

* * * * *

As the Hogwarts Express started its journey to London the next day, Harry had the thought that it was a good thing that the compartments could fit six people. He and his friends had unconsciously taken the same positions they did at the table in the Great Hall; Hermione, Harry, and Ron on one side, with Neville, Ginny, and Pansy facing them. Hermione was holding Crookshanks, Fawkes was on Harry’s shoulder, and Harry and Ron had Hedwig and Pigwidgeon in their cages. Harry realized that he had hardly used Hedwig at all this year; he wondered if Hedwig would feel displaced by Fawkes, though Harry thought of Fawkes as more of a person than a pet.

“So, Ginny, how do you think you did on your O.W.L.s?” asked Pansy.

She shrugged. “Okay, I guess. They’re pretty tough, as you all know. The only one I felt really confident about was Defense Against the Dark Arts. I probably could have gotten an Outstanding even last year if I’d taken it then. How about you guys and your finals?”

“Pretty difficult, but they want them to be that way, to get us used to the idea of what the N.E.W.T.s will be like,” answered Ron. “It’s not like they’re going to throw us out of the school if we don’t do well enough. I remember when they wanted us to think they would. McGonagall seemed to like to give that impression.”

Harry chuckled. “Some of them told me they do that on purpose, especially to first years, to try to scare them into better study habits. McGonagall said it actually has happened, but the other teachers asked her about it, and she admitted it was only twice in her time there, and it was basically students who refused to study at all.”

“I assume you didn’t, Harry,” said Neville. “How did your students do, especially the first years?”

“Pretty well,” said Harry. “It was hard for me to remember exactly what I knew when I finished my first year, but I’m pretty sure they’re better than I was then. Some of the first years are better than some of the second years, because the second years were essentially first years in this subject, thanks to Umbridge. But no, I didn’t threaten anyone, obviously. I really didn’t care what they knew from books, just what they could do with their wands. If it was up to me, the O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s in this subject wouldn’t have written parts at all.”

“Well, by all means, start sending owls to the testing boards,” joked Ron, “tell them that. They’ll listen to Harry Potter.”

“I have a feeling, Harry,” said Hermione with a playful frown, “that when you’re headmaster and I’m deputy headmistress, we’ll have a few arguments on this subject.”

Momentarily ignoring the surprised looks from Ron, Pansy, and Neville, Harry replied, “Yeah, but I’ll be the headmaster, so I’ll get my way.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure of that,” said Hermione, looking like she knew something he didn’t. Of course, that’s usually the case, Harry thought.

To the others, he explained what McGonagall had told he and Hermione the evening Dumbledore died. They were surprised, but not astounded. “It seems

reasonable, now that I think about it,” said Pansy. “I know that being deputy headmaster at eighteen seems a bit much, but considering who you are, I think it’ll make sense to a lot of people, since it’ll be clear that it’s so you can be headmaster after McGonagall retires.”

“And you’ll have Hermione there, to threaten the first years that they’ll fail and be expelled if they don’t study hard enough,” said Ron with a smile.

Hermione gave him a mildly reproving look and said, “Yes, if it happens, I probably will. After all, it worked with me.”

“Are you sure it isn’t only going to work for people like you?” asked Ron, smirking.

Hermione ignored his provocation and replied, “I seem to remember you being a bit worried, back when you were a naive first year,” with a superior expression.

Ron ignored her comment altogether, leading Harry to think it was probably true. Then he said, “I just realized something, Harry... You’ll be teaching us next year, won’t you? I mean, with all the Auror stuff you did, you’ll be totally qualified.”

“I suppose so,” Harry agreed, sad that Dumbledore would not be teaching him again next year. “Although I don’t know how I’m going to have a study schedule, teaching all seven years of students. Then again, I don’t have to take Defense Against the Dark Arts, because who would teach it to me? Wonder if they’ll give me credit for it anyway. But, yeah, I’ll be teaching it. Neville, you can be my assistant.”

The rest chuckled, including Neville, who saluted, making Harry laugh. They then had to explain the reference to Pansy, who hadn’t been around the first time it had happened. She said, “I kind of wished they could have transferred me to Gryffindor after Malfoy left, I really wanted to be able to hang out with the rest of you, be around for everyday stuff like that. But at least I got to be a kind of heroine to the Slytherin first years after saving Harry’s life, so that was nice. Harry’s always so embarrassed when people praise him like that, but with my ego the way it was, I

was really happy about it. I was like, yeah, tell me more!” The others laughed at her self-deprecating humor.

“Well, you’ll get to do plenty of hanging out over the summer,” said Ron. “With Ginny and Harry and I, and I have a feeling Hermione and Neville will be over every now and then.”

“I’ll be over more often than that, Ron,” said Hermione. “I was going to surprise you, just to have some fun with you when we got back to the station... but I’m staying at the Burrow too.” Enjoying Ron’s startled expression, she continued, “Think about it. Voldemort had the Death Eaters grab me because I was involved in some plan to undermine him, that’s all he was told. He probably doesn’t even know now what that was. Even if he knows that stuff was rubbed into him, he still wouldn’t know what it was for, unless he had another spy somewhere. The point is, we have to assume that he may still want to know whatever it is he thinks I know. My home is totally exposed, they could just go in there and grab me. The next time he saw Voldemort after last Friday, Snape told him that he had discovered that I would be staying at the Burrow. I talked to Snape about this earlier this week, and he said that he thought it was ‘unlikely in the extreme’ that my parents would be targeted if I wasn’t there. He said that with the ban on Apparation, Voldemort’s decided that operations have to have a strategic objective; in other words, they can’t just be for the heck of it. Snape is sure that Voldemort thinks there would be zero strategic advantage in doing anything to my parents.”

Ron looked puzzled. “But they could just take your parents, and say, tell us what we want to know, or...”

“I said that to Snape, and he said that Harry’s refusal to give up his wand gave Voldemort a bit of a shock; he’s not going to want to count on that sort of thing. Also, my parents have been outfitted with the same kind of thing that Harry’s cousin Dudley got.”

“Then they know what you’re involved in? Aren’t they worried?” asked Ron.

“They don’t know. Apparently Aurors visited my home after they got back from the hospital. They put a calming spell on my parents, took their wedding rings, and imbued them so they’d go off in the presence of anyone magical except Neville or I. If Death Eaters show up, the Aurors will be there before they can get away. They could have done that and I still could have lived there, but I’m afraid my being there might tempt them into trying. Anyway, the Aurors put a Memory Charm on my parents after they were done. I was glad they could do it that way.”

“Yeah, I remember the Aurors talking about that,” said Neville. “They said it’s much easier to protect Muggles than wizards, because you can’t give a wizard something like that, it would always be going off.”

Hermione agreed. “Voldemort knows about this kind of thing, of course, he’ll assume it, and that’s another reason not to go after my parents. No, all the stuff they want is going to be right there, at the Burrow. Your parents are really brave,” she said to Ron and Ginny.

“You should include me in that, Hermione, now they’re my parents too,” joked Harry. “But, yeah, they really are. It’s great of them to do this.”

“Mum’ll just say that it’s a good excuse to have a lot of kids in the house,” said Ginny. “But there’s no way they’ll attack that, it’s too heavily defended, not to mention that their prime target is now someone they’re terrified of.”

“I doubt that they’re ‘terrified’ of me,” said Harry, “but I see what you mean. They’re bound to be concerned. Also, Snape confirmed what Albus told me after he died... it still sounds strange to say that... but he said that Voldemort doesn’t know what caused him to go unconscious, but thinks I did it. He’s not going to come anywhere near me for a while.”

“Why does he think you did it?” asked Pansy.

“The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord...” quoted Harry. “He knows that I can beat him, or at least have the potential to. Also, twice this year I’ve come up with spells that were totally new, and effective against Dark magic. Who’s to say I didn’t come up with something else new, on the spur of the moment? Not

to mention that it ties in perfectly with what Hermione said, when she was taunting him. I'm sure he remembered that.”

Ron shook his head in amazement. “It’s funny to think that... here all these years everyone’s so deathly afraid of Voldemort, and now, here he is, afraid of you.”

“Well, all I care about is that he’ll stay away from me if he’s afraid of me, so we can have a nice, quiet summer,” said Harry.

Pansy smiled knowingly. “I bet I know the first thing you’ll do when you get there, try to figure out when Mrs. Weasley will be gone, so you and Ginny can be in a room alone.”

“No, we’ve actually got that worked out,” Ginny said happily, and went on to tell them about Harry taking over Dumbledore’s quarters. The others were impressed.

“It must’ve killed McGonagall to tell you that,” said Hermione. “But that’s really great for you, you can just go anytime you want.”

“Wish we could do that,” mused Neville.

“Maybe Fawkes would take you if Harry asked him to,” suggested Ron.

Harry shook his head. “I wish I could, but it couldn’t happen anyway. Letting anyone else use it would be a sort of violation of her trust; I know full well that it’s intended only for my use.”

“I suppose so... but I’m still curious about what Fawkes would think,” said Ron, reaching over to pet him. “Imagine this, then... you find out about some place that’s totally isolated, like on some island somewhere, that’s really nice and there’s no people and nothing dangerous. Hermione and Neville could be alone, but since they can’t Apparate now, they can’t get there. Would Fawkes take them if you asked him?”

Hermione answered. “Well, from reading *Reborn From the Ashes*, I would think—“

Harry cut her off with a gesture. “Actually, I’d like to try something. I want to ask Fawkes that, and see if I can understand his answer, if he gives one.”

Neville looked puzzled. “How can you do that?”

“Everyone be quiet for a few minutes, let me see what I can get,” asked Harry. They were quiet, and after five minutes, Harry spoke again. “Okay, I think I have an answer. By the way, Neville, to answer your question... the more time a phoenix spends around his companion, the stronger their nonverbal communication becomes. Albus taught me that the way to communicate with Fawkes is that he’ll kind of send me impressions and feelings. The only thing I have to do is to know which impressions and feelings are mine, and which came from him. With more time, it’ll happen naturally; it was limited up until now because he was bonded to Albus also, and couldn’t completely communicate with two people at the same time.

“The answer to Ron’s question, I think, is that by choosing me, Fawkes has already said that he trusts my judgment. We all know how loyal phoenixes are, and Fawkes knows how close I am to all of you, so he would help you if he could, if you ever needed it, like he helped me in the Chamber of Secrets four years ago. If I asked him to do what Ron suggested, he would do it. What I have to think about before asking him is whether it’s important enough. If it was just a matter of Neville and Hermione preferring the island, but had other chances to be alone, I shouldn’t ask him. But if it was the only way, and if it was important to them, then I could ask him. Fawkes will just take it as a given that if I ask him for something, it’s important enough for him to do it. So, it’s not a matter of what Fawkes would do, it’s a matter of what I would do, what judgment I would make. Part of my obligation is to not use him for unimportant things. So, Hermione, how close was that to what you were going to say?”

“Very close,” she said. “I was just going to say that it all comes down to Fawkes trusting you.”

“You know, if it was necessary in some situation, you could summon Fawkes if you needed to, he would appear,” said Harry to the others. “You just swish your wand around like this, and say his name.”

“But we should only do it if it’s pretty important,” clarified Pansy.

“Well, it doesn’t have to be a life-threatening emergency,” said Harry. “Just something that’s necessary and can only be done with his help.”

“That reminds me, I was wondering about something,” said Hermione. “If you use Dumbledore’s quarters, I should say, your new quarters, over the summer, you’re going to have to tell Mrs. Weasley where you’re going, she’d worry if you were just gone. Do you think she’s going to approve of this? I mean, Ginny’s still only fifteen, and you’ll have the chance to do... well, anything you want,” she finished, looking embarrassed and apologetic.

“I hadn’t thought too much about that, this just happened last night. I can’t deny that I’d like to do... anything I want,” said Ginny, smiling at Harry. Catching her meaning, Harry smiled back, though a bit embarrassed at that kind of thing being referred to in front of the others. “But Harry and I haven’t even talked about that yet, so I’m sure we will before we talk to Mum. But yes, we do have to talk to her. That should be an interesting conversation.”

There was silence for a few seconds, then Ron cleared his throat and said, “So, that was a great Quidditch season, wasn’t it?” The others laughed at Ron’s acknowledgment of his discomfort with the turn the conversation had taken. The conversation moved on to other topics as the train continued on its way to London.

As the Hogwarts Express pulled into King’s Cross, Harry and the others stood and got their trunks from the luggage racks. Harry felt it was strange to think that he would only be doing this once more; even if he stayed at Hogwarts after he graduated, he would not be taking the Hogwarts Express again. He supposed he could if he really wanted to, remembering that Remus had done so when he had taught, but it would seem strange. It also wouldn’t be the same if he couldn’t do it with his friends.

He and Ron were the last of the group to approach the barrier leading to the main part of the station. Fawkes took flight and disappeared as he had let Harry know he would, as he couldn't be in an area where he could be seen by Muggles.

Harry and Ron walked through, pulling their carts, to see Molly standing next to Tonks and Cassandra. He said hello to the two Aurors and hugged Molly. Ron tapped him on the shoulder, gesturing to a spot down the platform. Harry did a double-take as he saw Dudley walking toward them

"Dammit," he heard Tonks say to Cassandra. "It's okay, I'll go tell them." She ran through the barrier. Harry realized that she was going to Apparate to wherever Dudley's magic-sensing device was monitored, to let them know that there was no emergency, and that she was annoyed that Dudley had deliberately gone where there would be wizards other than Harry, knowing it would set off his device.

"Hello, Harry," said Dudley, walking up and shaking his hand. "I would ask you if you had a good year, but I kind of know already." He turned his attention to Ginny. "You're Ginny, you're his girlfriend. I'm Dudley, nice to meet you," he said, shaking her hand. "And you must be Hermione, I talked to you on the phone. And Ron, and... Neville," he said, shaking hands with each. "You three saved him in... what's the name of that place..."

"Hogsmeade," automatically replied a surprised Neville. Harry's jaw dropped as he watched.

"Yes, that's it, those names are hard to remember," said Dudley. "And you're Pansy, the spy. Glad to hear you got Malfoy out of there." She shook his hand, giving Harry a look that said, 'what's going on?' Harry had no idea.

Dudley looked at him, smiling. "Well, I'd say it was worth coming here just to see that look. I was in London anyway. Mum and Dad got your letter, so don't worry, they knew not to come. I doubt they'd be happy if they knew I was here."

Harry was still astonished, and he asked the only question he could think of. "How did you know all that?"

Dudley's smile grew wider. "Yeah, figured you'd be surprised. I was a bit too, when I got back from school a week ago. Mum said we weren't going to get you, that you were staying with them. The next day, when she wasn't home, I went looking around the house, just to see what had changed. I found a folder in the kitchen with all these articles cut out of a newspaper, that one for you lot. Apparently some witch has been cutting them out if they have to do with you and sending them to Mum, just so she can know what you've been up to. There was also the letter from you in there, saying you couldn't stop them from doing that, so I guess she complained to you about it. Took me the better part of an afternoon to read them. Seems like you're even more famous in that world than you told us."

As he spoke, Tonks had walked back to join them. Without interrupting Dudley, she took the pendant off his neck, and used the same spell Dumbledore had used so that she wouldn't activate its magic. She had Cassandra do the same, then started handing it to Harry's friends in turn.

"He's gotten a lot more famous just this year," Hermione said.

"Yeah, but what I have to wonder is..." Harry trailed off.

"...why she kept them, yeah, I wondered too," agreed Dudley. "I wondered if I shouldn't ask her, but I was too curious, so I did. She looked annoyed that I saw them, and said that she didn't want to throw them away in the normal trash, that because they were magic, they might blow something up, or something. Said she was waiting for you to give them to so you could get rid of them."

"You should have brought them, I could have started a scrapbook," said Ginny.

"You're going to start being in them more too, you know, you shouldn't say that," said Harry, teasing her back.

Dudley asked about the Joining of Hands, then about Fawkes, who he seemed surprised not to see with Harry. After Harry answered both questions, Dudley said, "Well, I could ask questions for an hour, but I don't want to keep you."

“You could send an owl,” Harry suggested with a small smile, imagining how Petunia would feel about it.

“I could, if I had one,” Dudley pointed out.

“If you write a letter and decide you want to send it, I think Hedwig will show up,” said Harry. “The owls we use have a way of doing that.”

Dudley looked impressed. “Maybe I will. Oh, and I’m sorry about Professor Dumbledore. He was really amazing.”

Harry nodded. “Thanks. Believe me, you don’t know the half of it.”

“I believe it,” Dudley agreed. “See you.” He waved to everyone and walked off.

Harry was still a bit stunned. “That was... very strange,” he said to no one in particular.

“You mean that Dudley is being friendly, or that your aunt kept those articles?” asked Ron, who also looked surprised.

“More the second one. She doesn’t really think anything could happen by throwing them away, I have to imagine.”

“Well, Harry,” said Hermione, “if you’ve inspired the magical public to say Voldemort’s name and respect and admire you, maybe it’s not so hard to imagine you’ve inspired her to think maybe you’re not so bad.”

Harry looked doubtful. “Considering how my childhood was, I think that would be more amazing than inspiring the wizarding public.”

Molly put an arm around Harry. “Anything’s possible, Harry. Maybe you should visit over the summer, see how they react to you.”

Harry was trying to be polite, but he wasn’t sure he would care even if Petunia’s attitude had in fact changed. “I think I’ve had enough of their reactions to me for now. I know what you mean, maybe it would be different. All I can say is, it wouldn’t be up high on my list of things I’d like to do.”

“People can change, Harry,” said Molly. “Look at you, look at how much you’ve changed since last year.”

“Also me, obviously,” put in Pansy. “If someone had told me a year ago that I’d be where I am now, with the friends I have, I would have said they were crazy. I mean, I don’t know if your aunt’s going to be good to you or not, just that stranger things have happened.”

Harry chuckled. “You’re saying the words, but it’s almost like I can hear Albus’s voice. This is exactly the kind of thing he said to me more than once. Well, I promise I’ll think of it as something that’s not impossible. I think that’s the most I can do right now.”

“I’m sure he wouldn’t ask more of you than that,” said Molly fondly. “Hermione, you know we’re very happy to have you with us as well. Neville, dear, do you want to come with us, then take a fireplace back to your home?”

“Yes, thanks,” said Neville. “I’m not letting him out of my sight anyway, until he’s someplace secure.”

Harry looked around at his friends and the Aurors. “It feels pretty secure here,” he said.

Neville raised an eyebrow. “We’ll be the judge of that, Harry. We know you have a lot of responsibilities and things to worry about, and we know one thing you’ve chosen not to worry about is your own safety. We do that for you; all you have to do is just do what we tell you, and not argue.”

Harry glanced at the others, who gave him looks emphasizing what Neville had said. He felt a surge of emotion, thankful that he had friends like this. “Thank you, Neville,” he said. “Let’s go home.” For the first time in his life, home would be a place where he wanted to go, and where he was wanted and loved. Hand in hand with Ginny, surrounded by his friends, Harry headed home.