

CHAPTER 4

THE DURSLEYS' GUEST

The next day seemed like it might be more usual, but Harry realized that somehow the Dursleys were more comfortable, or at least less uncomfortable, with him. The way they reacted to him downstairs in the morning reflected that he was still not being treated like a member of the family would be, but not badly either. It was a pleasant development; Harry hoped it would last.

Dudley was on the phone with one of his friends for forty-five minutes at about noon. Just after he hung up, the phone rang again. Harry was in the living room and heard Dudley answer.

“Hello? Yeah, he is. Who is this?” Dudley called to Harry, “It’s Hermione. One of your friends?” Harry walked toward the phone and nodded.

Dudley didn’t give him the phone immediately. Into the phone, he said, “Yeah, okay, he’s coming to the phone. This is his cousin, Dudley. Listen, we were talking last night, and I wanted to ask you something. How many times do you reckon Harry’s almost been killed?”

Harry rolled his eyes. Petunia, just walking into the kitchen, was less amused. “Dudley!” she said sharply.

Dudley’s eyebrows went up, and he covered the phone with his hand. “She’s counting,” he said.

“Well, it’s not a number we have at the top of our heads, or anything,” Harry pointed out.

“Mmm hmmm...” Dudley was saying into the phone. “...yeah, I was there for that one...Voldemort, Barty Crouch...” Dudley was repeating them to let Harry know what Hermione was saying. She was obviously going in reverse chronological

order. “A dragon?” Dudley said, his eyes wide. Harry said, “I didn’t count the dragon. I don’t think my life was really in danger.”

“He says he didn’t count the dragon,” Dudley said to Hermione. He listened for a minute. Covering the phone again, he said to Harry, “She says you were plenty worried about being mauled, and with good reason, so she counts it.”

Suddenly Dudley burst out with, “A hundred dementors??” He looked at Harry in disbelief.

Harry shrugged. “You do what you have to do to stay alive,” he said. Petunia looked on disapprovingly, but said nothing. Dudley’s jaw dropped. Harry thought, if I didn’t have his respect before, I do now. He doesn’t know what Voldemort’s like, but a hundred dementors, that he can understand.

Dudley continued listening and commenting. “Basilisk, spider, uh huh, he mentioned those... Voldemort again... that guy’s pretty persistent, isn’t he... uh huh... squirrel?... oh, Quirrell... yeah, that would be pretty strange...mmm hmmm... troll...”

Harry snapped his fingers. “I forgot about the troll.”

Dudley relayed this to Hermione. He listened for a minute, then chuckled. “He could only think of eight...well, give him a break, it must be hard for him to keep it all straight... okay, thanks, I’ll give him to you.”

Dudley covered the phone. “She counts ten, including the dragon and the troll. She’s upset with you for forgetting the troll. ‘How could he forget that, he and Ron saved my life!’” he said, quoting Hermione and smiling, greatly amused. He handed the phone to Harry, and walked away shaking his head. Petunia watched him go with concern in her eyes. Harry saw him sit down in the living room in a place from which he could hear Harry’s half of the phone call. He’s getting pretty interested in this, Harry thought.

Harry put the phone to his mouth. “Hi, Hermione.”

“Hi, Harry. How could you forget the troll?”

“Well, c’mon,” he said defensively, “like Dudley said, it’s a lot to keep straight.”

“I know, I’m just teasing you. Why is he suddenly asking about what you’ve done at Hogwarts? I thought they didn’t want you talking about that.”

“Well, it’s a long story. On my way home yesterday, Malfoy and his pals were waiting for me on Privet Drive.”

“No!” she said, shocked. “I knew he was upset at you, but I never thought he’d do that. I assume he wanted Crabbe and Goyle to rough you up?”

“That was the idea,” he confirmed. “Either get beaten up, or use magic and take my chances with the Ministry. I would’ve used magic, of course, but before it got to that, Dudley happened by. Malfoy started right in on him, you know how he is about Muggles. Well, big mistake. Malfoy wouldn’t back off, and Dudley made short work of Crabbe and Goyle. Less than two minutes, they’re both on the ground, not getting up. He made them look like a couple of weak ten-year-olds.”

“Pretty much what they were,” Dudley muttered from the other room.

“So, now Malfoy’s in the same boat he wanted me in,” Harry continued. “Dudley gave him a chance to apologize and run away, but you know Malfoy. I had to block a few spells, and when Malfoy realized there was no getting away from Dudley, he Disapparated.”

“Disapparated?” Hermione asked, shocked again. “But he can’t, he’s not old enough! He’s going to be in such trouble!”

“Tell me about it. Now we’re going to see just how much good his family connections are, with his father in custody. He should be expelled, but first offense, he’ll probably get probation and a warning.”

“He deserves worse,” Hermione said fervently. “What’s really bad is, he probably won’t get punished at all for coming to your street to assault you. It does seem like there’s no justice sometimes.”

“I’m not holding my breath,” Harry agreed. “Anyway, I’ll tell you all the details the next time I see you.”

“Which I hope will be soon, which is why I’m calling,” she said. “I want you guys to visit me, over here at my place. You and Ron and Ginny. We could have dinner, talk, watch a movie, stay up late. It would be fun. What do you think?”

“Yeah, that sounds great!” Harry said. “I’d love to see your place and do all that.” He paused. “But what about transportation? How would I get there? Or Ron and Ginny, for that matter?”

“Mr. Weasley has hooked up our fireplace to the Floo network,” she said. “The Weasleys could come straight from the Burrow, and you could come from Mrs. Figg’s house, if she’s around and agrees. That could work.”

“Yes, it could,” Harry agreed. “Have you asked the Weasleys about it yet?”

“No, I was waiting for you, to see if you wanted to first,” she said. “I’ll ask them as soon as I get off the phone with you. I was thinking of tomorrow night. How would that be?”

“That would be great. Listen, this just occurred to me, but... what would you think about inviting Neville, if it wouldn’t be too many people? I mean, we don’t have to, but I just thought it might be a nice thing to do,” Harry suggested.

“Yes, that would be good,” she agreed. “It’s nice of you to think of that. It’s not like he has tons of friends, at least that I know of. I’ll ask Ron and Ginny what they think, and if it’s okay with them, then I will.”

“Sounds good. I assume they don’t have phones, so you’ll communicate with them through their fireplaces? Owls would take too long, I guess.”

In the background, Harry heard Dudley mutter, “Communicate through the fireplace?”

Hermione said, “Yes, there’s not enough time for owls,” she agreed. “I’m thinking of around four or five in the afternoon.”

“My schedule is pretty free,” Harry joked. “So, get back to me after you’ve arranged it, and tell me the details. It sounds great.”

“I’m glad, Harry. I thought I’d rent Star Wars for the movie. You’ll have seen it, of course, but the others won’t have. A Muggle science fiction movie should be really interesting for them.”

“I’d think so, but I haven’t seen it, either,” Harry said.

“You haven’t seen Star Wars?” she asked, in great surprise. “How did you manage that?”

“Well, if you think about it for a minute...” he prompted her.

“You mean they wouldn’t let you watch it because it was too similar to magic? That’s amazing!”

“Amazing but true,” Harry said. “So, that’ll be good, too. I guess I should go, and let you make the arrangements.

“Okay, I’ll probably call you later. Bye.”

Harry said goodbye and hung up. It felt good to be able to talk to someone else on the phone and make arrangements to socialize, pleasures he had never enjoyed at the Dursleys’ before. He wasn’t going to go so far as to ask the Dursleys to open up the fireplace and allow it to be connected to the Floo network; he thought that would be pushing it.

“Hey, Harry,” Dudley said from the living room. “She wasn’t really upset at you, was she?”

“Nah,” Harry said casually. “She was just having a bit of fun with me, like you were. She called to invite me and some other friends over to her place for the evening, tomorrow night. I’m really looking forward to it.”

“Big old magic convention, eh? Will the toads in the neighborhood be safe?” Dudley joked.

“Pretty safe, since we’re not allowed to do magic during vacation,” said an amused Harry, wondering what Dudley imagined wizards did when they got together.

“Where does she live?” Petunia asked.

“You know, I’m not sure,” Harry answered. “I guess I’ll find out when she calls back to confirm everything.”

“Good to see you’re not getting bogged down in trivial details,” Petunia observed. Harry was surprised; he didn’t know quite how to take that. If she was being sarcastic, it was not something he’d seen her do much, if at all. He didn’t know how to answer, so he didn’t, and went upstairs.

It was about three in the afternoon when Hedwig flew in through Harry’s bedroom window. He took the letter off her leg and petted her; she nuzzled his hand for a second and flew up to her perch.

Harry looked at the letter. It was sealed, and simply said “To Petunia Dursley, via Harry Potter.” Harry would have loved to know what was in it, but knew better than to open it, or even ask Petunia. He took it downstairs, found Petunia in the kitchen, and gave it to her.

“Thank you, Harry,” she said politely, and opened the letter. Harry wandered into the living room. He didn’t want to press her, but he wanted to be nearby in case she wanted to ask or tell him anything.

She didn’t for a short time, but ten minutes later she came into the living room and sat down on the sofa next to Dudley, opposite Harry.

“He says he wants to come by fireplace. Is that the same thing as that man tried to do two years ago?”

Harry told them it was, and explained about the Floo network and that it was such a basic mode of transportation for wizards that Mr. Weasley simply hadn’t stopped to consider that a fireplace might be boarded up. “All you have to do is make sure that the fireplace is open,” Harry summed up.

“Seems like kind of a weird way to travel,” Dudley observed.

“Tell me what about their world isn’t weird,” Petunia muttered.

“Yeah, I thought so at first, too,” said Harry, responding to Dudley’s comment. “Walking into a fire isn’t something you’d think of doing. But you get used to it, and it’s really convenient. It doesn’t matter how far away someone is.”

“Is it worldwide? Think of all the money you could save on airfare,” Dudley pointed out.

Harry looked thoughtful. “That’s a good point. I don’t know; I’ve never asked. I’ve never had to go outside England.”

“Then why do you have to take that train every year?” Dudley asked. “Why don’t you just go like this?”

Harry almost started his answer with the word ‘Hogwarts,’ but that word had been forbidden by the Dursleys for so long that it was a habit to avoid it. “Another good point. My school is isolated, I think for security reasons. The train, roads, and flying are the only ways to get there. The school has fireplaces, but only for communication, not for transportation.”

“For a minute, I thought you were going to say, ‘only for fires,’ but I should have known better,” Petunia said dryly.

“Yes, that would be too obvious,” Harry agreed, going along with the joke. At least she’s not recoiling in horror from all this, he thought. “They are used for fires, too, though. There’s one in the common room of our House at school. People like to sit around it and study in the winter.”

“He’s coming at 7:30,” said Petunia. “Dinner will be at 6:30, so we’ll be ready when he gets here.”

“Who’s coming, anyway?” Dudley asked.

“Professor Dumbledore, the headmaster of my school,” said Harry.

“Why’s he coming?”

Harry looked at Petunia, silently saying, it’s not for me to tell him, this is your business. Petunia nodded in acknowledgment, then said to Dudley, “He’s coming to discuss security arrangements.”

“Security? For Harry?”

“No, Dudley,” said his mother. “For you.”

“For me??” Dudley sounded outraged. “I don’t need that! I can take care of myself!”

“No, you can’t, Dudley!” his mother exclaimed, frustrated. “You tell him, Harry.”

Harry looked at Dudley with a serious expression. “I can understand that this is annoying, Dudley, because you’re more than capable of defending yourself against other non-magical people.” Harry thought that sugar-coating this with a little flattery would help the message go down, and besides, it was true. “You’re not used to the idea of needing protection. It sounds insulting. Believe me, I know. But it’s a totally different situation with wizards. You’d simply have no way to defend yourself. It has nothing to do with how strong or brave or capable you are. It wouldn’t even matter if you had a gun in your hand. A wizard could whisk it away, just like that. I know that stinks, but it’s just a fact.”

Dudley gave Harry an angry look, but Harry knew Dudley was angry at the situation, not him personally. In a sulky way, Dudley said, “I wish I could do magic, then I could defend myself.”

“Dudley!!” Petunia nearly screamed. “Don’t you ever say that! Don’t even think it! Didn’t you hear what goes on in that world? You don’t think it’s a bad thing that Harry’s almost been killed however many times? A lot of wizards get killed when this Voldemort is around, and they can defend themselves, but not against him! You don’t know what death is, Dudley! You’ve never seen it! But I bet Harry has!”

Dudley looked at Harry questioningly.

Somberly, Harry nodded. “A little over a year ago, in a school competition, another student and I got caught in a trap, which one of Voldemort’s helpers set for me so Voldemort could return to full strength. The other student getting caught was an accident, just by chance. They needed me, but not him. A Voldemort helper raised his wand, and bam, the other student was dead, just like that. Right in front

of my eyes. And he was good with a wand, too. At least as good as me, maybe better. Didn't do him any good."

Dudley was silent for a minute. Then he asked, "This was Cedric?"

Harry nodded, remembering that Dudley had overheard him saying Cedric's name in nightmares a year ago. "Now, I choose to be part of the magical world. I feel like I belong there, I feel at home, even though I know I'm at high risk all the time. But I can really understand why your mother doesn't like it, why she wants you nowhere near it. Most of the time, it's fairly peaceful. When Voldemort is around, as he is now, it's very dangerous, especially for anyone with a connection to me. But she got stuck with me. She just doesn't want you to have to suffer for it. Cedric died for no other reason than that he happened to be around me at the wrong time."

Dudley thought for a minute; Harry could see Petunia watching Dudley and hoping he would understand the danger. "But you're in all this danger, but you don't need anyone protecting you, right?" Dudley asked.

Harry shook his head. "No, I do, actually. I'm safe at school and I'm safe in this house. Anyplace else, someone is following me all the time. Professor Dumbledore started making sure I was protected twenty-four hours a day after Voldemort came back last year. I'm not thrilled with it, but I understand the need for it. But you see, Dudley, I can take care of myself against someone my own age, like Malfoy, or an adult wizard who isn't that good. But Voldemort's henchmen are highly trained, skilled, and will use very deadly spells with no hesitation. I probably couldn't defeat one of them, never mind two or three. That's why I need protection."

Dudley pondered this. "Yeah, but you're like Public Enemy No. 1 to these people, but they're barely aware of me. I'm not going to need someone following me."

"No, you're not," Harry agreed. He doubted that the Order could spare the manpower to have Dudley followed anyway. "I think that Aunt Petunia just wants to

hear how much risk Professor Dumbledore thinks there is in this situation, and to know about what precautions might be a good idea.” He looked at Petunia.

“Yes, that’s about right,” she said. She turned to Dudley. “Dudley, please, help me with this. Whatever we end up doing, it probably won’t work without your cooperation. Please keep an open mind about whatever we decide. Will you do that for me?”

“Okay,” Dudley said, “but I don’t want to just hear about it after you’re done talking to him. I want to be there, I want to be able to ask him questions. It’s my life we’re talking about. If I can do that, I’ll keep an open mind.”

Seeing Petunia’s indecisive expression, Harry assumed that she hadn’t planned on including Dudley in this meeting. “I think Professor Dumbledore would want Dudley in the meeting anyway,” Harry said. “Probably it’s best if we’re all there.”

“Very well,” Petunia said. She got up and left the room.

They ate at 6:30 as Petunia planned; she was nothing if not punctual. As she finished the dinner dishes, 7:30 was approaching. Harry could tell that their attitude was different from when they had waited for the arrival of Mr. Weasley two years ago; for one thing, the Dursleys were wearing their normal weekend clothes, not their Sunday best they’d worn hoping to intimidate Mr. Weasley. Not that Dumbledore would be intimidated no matter what they wore, Harry thought. He couldn’t imagine what could intimidate Dumbledore. There had to be nothing that could, since he had seen with his own eyes that even Voldemort could not; in fact, it was the other way around.

The three Dursleys and Harry stood in the living room at 7:28. Harry looked at the open fireplace and wondered why Dumbledore had made this particular request when he could have easily Apparated.

Vernon looked at Harry suspiciously. “Is he going to be on time?” Harry knew that Vernon placed a high value on punctuality.

“Let’s put it this way,” Harry said. “If your watch says 7:30 and he’s not here, it probably means your watch is wrong.” Harry silently hoped he was right.

Vernon grunted. “It’s got exactly the right time, I called the number to check before dinner.” Why am I not surprised, Harry thought. He wants to be able to call Dumbledore on being late, even if it’s by only a minute or two.

“In fact, it’s coming up on 7:30 now,” Vernon announced. He counted down the seconds remaining. “Three... two... one...”

There was a sudden, small explosion, or burst of flame, in the fireplace, and out of the fire walked Albus Dumbledore, wearing his usual wizard robes and hat. He surveyed those gathered to meet him.

Vernon stepped forward with a twinge of anxiety. “A pleasure to meet you, Professor Dumbledore. I’m Vernon Dursley. My wife, Petunia,” he said, gesturing to Petunia, who also seemed to fighting down anxiety while putting on a polite face. “My son, Dudley,” he continued. Dudley was gaping at Dumbledore; Dumbledore’s whole appearance, especially the robes and beard, was very odd indeed to Dudley’s eyes. “And of course you know Harry,” Vernon concluded.

“Very well indeed,” Dumbledore said, with a wink for Harry. “I’m very pleased to finally meet you all,” he said, shaking hands with each Dursley in turn, to Vernon’s surprise. “It is most unfortunate that it must be under such circumstances as this.”

It would never have happened under any other circumstances, Harry thought; only desperation drove Petunia to seek his help. He wondered if Dumbledore understood this and that his comment had been deliberately ironic.

“Yes, it is,” agreed Vernon. “Please, sit down.” Dumbledore sat in the recliner Vernon gestured him towards, the one that was usually Vernon’s exclusively. The Dursleys sat on the sofa; Harry, in another chair.

“If I may,” Dumbledore began, “I would like to first apologize for the fact that you are in this situation. It is the sincere wish of the magical community that Muggles be undisturbed and unmolested by magic. Some of our most serious laws

enforce this desire. It is only at times like this, when the dark forces of magic have a strong unifying force, that it becomes difficult to enforce our laws as we would like. I deeply regret that you should have to be present at such a time.”

“And that you are responsible for our harboring the boy who these dark forces, who don’t care much about collateral damage, would like nothing better than to kill?” asked Petunia. It seemed to Harry that she had never quite forgiven Dumbledore for leaving him on her doorstep. “Surely you foresaw that we could be dragged into these events.”

Dumbledore nodded. “Yes, I deeply regret that, too. Let me be absolutely honest with you. Harry would have been in danger, and those around him in danger, no matter where or with whom he was placed, even in the wizarding world. He and those around him would, in fact, have been in even greater danger in the wizarding world; he would have been more exposed to access by dark wizards. Since someone was going to be in danger in any case, I sought to minimize the danger to Harry and others. As I explained to you in the letter I left with Harry, placing him with you was the way to do that. I also assumed that, as his closest living relatives, you would share an interest in his welfare.”

Harry wondered how they would respond to that. All indications to him over the years had been that they had little or no interest in his welfare, but he was sure they would never admit that to Dumbledore, and probably not to themselves.

“I, we, would not have taken him if we did not have an interest in his welfare,” said Petunia, assuming a dignified expression, as though that dignity had been called into question. “Our interest in his welfare extended to the opinion that he should not attend Hogwarts. He would have been perfectly safe growing up as a... Muggle, as you say. But you would not leave that to our judgment; you sent that violent giant to practically drag him from us.”

Dumbledore gave a small smile. “Hagrid is the gentlest of people, actually. You must have caught him on a bad day. But to respond to your comment, in fact,

Harry would not have been safe had he never attended Hogwarts. He would have been highly vulnerable.”

Harry couldn't help chiming in. “Why is that, Professor? It does seem like I would have been safer. Would being the Boy Who Lived still have led me to trouble even living with Muggles?”

Seeing their confused faces, Dumbledore quickly explained the sobriquet to the Dursleys, then answered Harry's question. “Yes, Voldemort would have sought you to complete his rebirth anyway, and he would have had a much easier time getting ahold of you if you lived in the Muggle world. Also, consider what happened to you when he started becoming stronger. Your scar hurt, you had visions. You would not have known what to make of that. You or others would have feared for your mental health.” He turned to Petunia. “Alas, for reasons you could not then know and would not have wanted to hear, Harry's best interests were far better served by going to Hogwarts.”

“Even if he's almost been killed ten times?” asked Dudley.

Dumbledore looked at Dudley in mild surprise. “Is it that many? I didn't realize.”

Harry said, “Hermione told him that when he asked her. She counts the dragon, but I don't.”

Dumbledore considered. “Dragons can kill, but many precautions were taken, so you each have a point. But we digress. To answer Dudley's question, yes, even given what has happened, Hogwarts is still safer. Harry's escapades are partly due to the efforts of dark wizards to undo him, but partly because he is an unusually brave and adventurous person. If you put in front of Harry a box that says ‘Do not open, extreme danger,’ Harry will think, ‘I wonder what is so important inside that box,’ and find a way inside.” He smiled at Harry, who found it hard to argue. “So, Harry's character has something to do with it.”

He turned back to the Dursleys. “In any case, I did what I thought best for all concerned. It would not be unreasonable for you to blame me for any danger

that your family has faced or will face. Though I did what I thought best, I still must accept responsibility for my actions. That is one of the reasons I am here now.”

In the kitchen, the phone rang. Harry immediately stood up. “I’ll get it,” he said, figuring himself the least important person in the conversation.

“Whoever it is, take a message,” Vernon said as Harry walked to the kitchen.

It was Hermione. “Hi, Harry, I’ve made the arrangements, and I’m calling to tell you about them.”

“Um, Hermione, I need to call you back. Professor Dumbledore is here and he’s talking to the Dursleys.”

“You’re kidding!” said Hermione in astonishment. “How did that come about?”

“Another story for the next time we meet. I’ll call you back, okay?”

“Okay, Harry, talk to you later.”

Harry said goodbye and hung up. He walked back into the room. The conversation had gotten back around to Dudley and what danger he faced.

“Yes, I believe Harry’s assessment of the situation is correct,” Dumbledore was saying. “The chances of anyone putting Dudley in danger are very small. But as Mrs. Dursley says, they are there, and so the situation must be taken seriously.”

“Well, what do you suggest?” asked Petunia.

“The best solution, I feel, is what could be referred to as a magic detector. It would be embedded in a piece of jewelry so as to be inconspicuous. It would glow and send a harmless vibration when in the presence of magic or any magical person. It would also, at the same time, activate alarms at the Ministry of Magic. Protective teams would be on the spot in seconds. This sort of device has been used very successfully in the past with Muggles who have needed protection. In fact, all British Prime Ministers and monarchs have worn such devices for decades.”

Vernon and Petunia stared in astonishment. “You must be joking,” Vernon gaped. “You mean... they know about your lot?”

“It would be difficult to conceal our existence from Muggles without their help,” Dumbledore explained. “This is a service we provide in return. In the case of the Prime Minister and the monarch, the device senses not only magic, but just anyone with the intent to kill. It is one of the reasons a Prime Minister or monarch has not been assassinated since this practice was begun.”

“I thought it was because we don’t allow handguns,” Vernon said.

“That has something to do with it as well,” Dumbledore allowed, “but any sufficiently determined person can acquire any weapon they wish. They are made in such quantities in America and Russia, among other places, as to make keeping them totally out impossible.”

Vernon grunted. “You’re quite well informed about our world.”

Dumbledore tilted his head in acknowledgment of the compliment. “I read the Times, the Guardian, and the Sun,” he said, the last drawing raised eyebrows from Vernon and Petunia, who were obviously surprised that Dumbledore would read a popular tabloid. “I feel it important to know about Muggle news and culture. Outrageous though it may be at times, the Sun is an excellent reflector of popular culture.”

“More’s the pity,” Vernon said in reluctant agreement.

Dudley broke in. “I’m not wearing any jewelry,” he announced. “I never have, and I’m not going to start now. You have to think of something else.”

Vernon turned to Dudley. “I understand how you feel, Dud, but men do wear jewelry sometimes. My wedding band, for example,” he said, holding up his hand.

“I did bring something I felt might be appropriate,” said Dumbledore, reaching into his robes. “If the design is not to your liking, another can be arranged. It is to be worn around the neck.” He handed it over to Dudley.

Dudley looked at it. It was a representation of a fist, a particularly masculine and threatening-looking one, gripping a lightning bolt. It was not large; just a half-

inch wide, and an inch from tip to tip of the lightning bolt. The slim chain went through a small hole at the upper tip of the lightning bolt.

Harry saw Vernon and Petunia recoil as soon as they saw it, which did not surprise him. Not their kind of thing, to put it mildly, he thought.

Dudley, however, was entranced. “Cool!” he said, eyes wide as he looked at it from all angles. It was glowing.

Vernon looked uncomfortably at Dumbledore. “I was, erm, hoping it would be something more neutral, like my wedding band,” he said. “I really don’t care for that.”

Dumbledore nodded. “Indeed, which makes it all the better. It is far less important that you admire it than that Dudley and his peers do. If they do not, he may be tempted to put it aside. If he and his friends think it is ‘cool,’ he will be more inclined to wear it, which is what is desired, is it not?”

Vernon and Petunia looked for a moment as though this was a higher price than they’d intended to pay, but both finally nodded their acquiescence.

“Why is it glowing?” Dudley asked. “You said it would only glow if there were... oh, is it because of you and him?” Dudley gestured towards Harry.

“It is because of Harry, yes,” Dumbledore said. “It can be adjusted so as to not be activated in the presence of specific wizards or their magic. I have already adjusted it to not recognize me. I shall do the same for Harry.” He extended his hand to Dudley, who handed over the necklace.

Dumbledore handed it to Harry. “Please hold it so that the lightning bolt is entirely surrounded by your hand, Harry,” he asked. Harry did so. Dumbledore produced his wand and swished it gently over Harry’s hand. A silvery glow surrounded Harry’s hand and then faded, seeming to absorb itself into his hand. At Dumbledore’s prompting, he gave it back to Dumbledore, who again handed it to Dudley. It was no longer glowing.

“It is now adjusted, and will not glow in Harry’s presence, nor mine,” Dumbledore said. “Now I must ask you a question, Dudley. For this to work as it is

designed to, it must be worn twenty-four hours a day. Is there any reason you cannot do so?"

Dudley thought for a moment. "Yes, I will," he said.

Dumbledore looked at Dudley seriously. "I'm sorry, Dudley, to be so rude as to say this, but this is very important, too important to lie about, as you have just done."

Dudley's eyes went wide. Vernon said, "Now, see here," just as Petunia said, "How dare you!"

Harry interrupted. "Professor Dumbledore, you should know," he explained to the Dursleys, "has the ability to tell when a person is lying. It's a very rare magical skill, but he has it."

Vernon harrumphed. "And I suppose you found that out the hard way?"

"Actually, Harry has never lied to me," Dumbledore said. "He has, perhaps, failed to tell me things he should have; of course, it could be said that I have done the same. But he has never lied."

Vernon clearly still didn't believe it. "All right, then, you won't mind if I test you out on this?" he challenged Dumbledore, who placidly shook his head.

"Very well," said Vernon. "I am forty-four years old. My favorite food is beef Wellington. Petunia and I were married on a Saturday. My company had over 5 million pounds in sales last year. Last night I watched the telly until midnight. Right now, my head itches." He glared at Dumbledore. "Now which, if any, of those statements were untrue?"

Without hesitation, Dumbledore answered, "The first, second, fourth, and sixth. The ones regarding your wedding and the television were true."

Vernon visibly deflated. Petunia questioned Vernon with her eyes; he nodded. "He's exactly right," he said, so that Dudley would know as well. Turning to Dudley, he asked, "Were you lying, Dudley?"

Dudley looked down. "Only a bit," he said defensively. "I planned to take it off when I boxed."

“I cannot see why you would, Dudley,” said Dumbledore. “As I understand the rules of boxing, punching the neck is not permitted, so it would not be dangerous. In addition, it might prove intimidating or distracting to your opponents. Wearing it could only be to your advantage.”

Dudley appeared not to have thought of it that way. Looking at the necklace again, he nodded. “OK, I’ll wear it all the time. I’m not lying this time.”

Dumbledore smiled. “Yes, I can see that,” he assured Dudley.

“So, how will this work?” asked Petunia. “What is its range?”

“It will detect any magical person or activity within a range of one hundred meters,” said Dumbledore. “If it detects magic, the best thing for you to do is hide,” he told Dudley. “Anyone who comes looking for you will not expect you to be protected, and so will think you to be totally unprepared. Hiding will also make life easier for your protectors, who should materialize within seconds, with advanced magic detectors which can pinpoint the source of the magic and take action. These people are called Aurors; their job is to track down and capture dark wizards. Their function is somewhat analogous to Britain’s MI5, or America’s F.B.I. It is the profession, in case you did not know, to which Harry aspires after he graduates from Hogwarts.”

Vernon rolled his eyes. “Right, because there hasn’t been enough danger in your life up ‘till now,” he said sarcastically.

“No, it’s because these people have been hounding me for five years,” Harry said firmly. “I don’t want to just sit back and be protected. I want to do something about it.” He gave the Dursleys a challenging look. Petunia looked away, but Harry thought he saw some respect and understanding in Dudley and Vernon’s eyes, especially Dudley’s. He knew Dudley could identify with that right now.

“And you will,” Dumbledore assured Harry. “I believe I have never mentioned this to you, but I am confident you will make an excellent Auror. You have the raw talent and strong character necessary, and with time and training, your skills will reach the necessary level.”

Harry didn't know what to say. "Thank you," was all he could think of. He could think of no greater compliment.

Dumbledore nodded. "As I was saying, two Aurors will stay with Dudley and make sure he is protected, while another two will attempt to track the source of the magic. The two remaining with him will move him to a secure location until the immediate danger has passed."

"How will they move him?" asked Vernon.

"They will Apparate. Disapparation and Apparation are terms we use to describe a wizard's ability to disappear and reappear at a different place. This is how they will move him."

"Professor," Harry broke in, "I didn't know that you could move other people by Disapparating and Apparating. I thought people could only do it by themselves."

"Normally, that is true," Dumbledore explained. "But it is possible to escort others by doing so. It requires substantial magical power, and only Aurors or other specifically licensed individuals are permitted to do so."

"Getting back to the matter at hand, wearing this magic detector will make Dudley completely safe from attack from dark wizards?" Petunia asked.

Dumbledore nodded. "I hesitate to endorse the word 'completely'; the vagaries of life are such that we can never completely know the future. I will say that he will be extremely safe, as safe as we can make him without giving him an around-the-clock security presence, such as Harry has."

Vernon had not heard the conversation earlier in which Harry had told Dudley and Petunia about this, and looked astonished. "He has a security detail? Like the bloody Prime Minister?"

"Harry, unfortunately, has more threats on his life than the Prime Minister does," Dumbledore said.

"Then why didn't this detail break up the fight yesterday? All this mess could have been avoided," Vernon pointed out.

“Yeah, I was wondering about that myself,” agreed Dudley. “I never even saw anybody else.”

“Harry’s security is very discreet. I am told that they occasionally catch him looking around to see if he can spot them,” Dumbledore said, glancing at Harry with bemusement, “but he never can. Wizards have various ways of making themselves invisible, but they will still be detected by the device Dudley will wear, even though invisible. As for why they did not intercede, it was largely because of the presence of Mr. Malfoy and his father’s connections to the Death Eaters.” At the Dursleys’ horrified looks, Dumbledore in an aside explained the nickname and what it meant. “It was feared that if Harry’s guards interceded, Mr. Malfoy would relate the incident to his father or his father’s associates, and Voldemort would know that Harry was being guarded. It is to our tactical advantage to keep this information secret for as long as possible, so we have a greater chance of capturing anyone who makes an attempt on Harry. In yesterday’s situation, there was no true threat to Harry or Dudley, or at least no threat that they themselves could not handle,” he said, smiling at Dudley, who looked pleased at the compliment. “If there had been a true danger, Harry’s guards would have intervened.”

The answer seemed to satisfy Vernon. “I see,” he said. “Well, it seems there is not much more to be done, then.” Wanting to end the conversation on a more positive note, he added, “But you say, don’t you, that the chances of anyone even trying are...”

“Remote, yes, quite so,” Dumbledore agreed. “If you find yourselves worrying, do keep that in mind.”

“I’ll try, but I’m sure I’ll worry anyway,” said Petunia.

“Before I take my leave, there is something else I would like to mention, another preventative measure.” Vernon gestured for him to continue.

“As Harry may have told you, wizards travel from place to place by fireplace, by means of what we call the Floo network. Although Aurors can transport others by Apparation, in an emergency situation, it would be very helpful

to be able to use your fireplace should the need arise. So, I would suggest that you keep your fireplace open and connected to the Floo network.”

Harry raised his eyebrows; this was asking a lot of Vernon and Petunia, and a look at their faces showed that they thought so, too. Vernon raised a practical objection.

“Wouldn’t that mean that any wizard who pleased could waltz right into our fireplace? Wouldn’t that be quite dangerous?”

“No, not at all,” Dumbledore said. “There are, naturally, security measures built into the Floo network. Merchants and other public establishments have what we call open fireplaces, but residences’ fireplaces can only be used by people who have been given authorization. In your case, authorization could be limited to emergency Auror assistance, Harry, and whichever other individuals you see fit to authorize. No one else could come through.”

Vernon and Petunia still looked dubious, but were at least thinking it over. Harry suspected that their desire for security and possible emergency assistance was being balanced against the desire not to have any such connection to the magical world.

“There are other reasons why connecting to the Floo network would be desirable,” Dumbledore continued. “As you have said, interested as you are in Harry’s welfare, you will be glad to know that access to the Floo network through this fireplace would increase his safety. As things stand now, to go anywhere else in the magical world, he must leave this house and use standard transportation to wherever he wants to go, during which time he is potentially exposed to threat, in spite of our efforts to protect him. Such efforts are not infallible, as we saw last summer, when due to human error he was left temporarily unprotected just when the dementors attacked. By using this fireplace, he would be exposed to less risk.”

Harry would have been very surprised if this argument had swayed the Dursleys, who he assumed were of the opinion that whatever risk he faced was his own fault, and responsible for their current situation. Their faces suggested that

they were waiting for more persuasive arguments. Harry was amused, though, at the phrasing of Dumbledore's first sentence; it sounded like he was saying that if they cared about Harry the least little bit, they would do this. Perhaps he could shame them into it, if nothing else.

"Secondly," Dumbledore went on, "and the likelihood of this is remote, but it could be a useful means of escape for Dudley and yourselves should this house fall under attack by dark wizards. Aurors could Apparate here and take on the wizards, covering your escape. Again," he said as he saw that Vernon and Petunia appeared startled at the very possibility, "this will almost certainly not happen; it is merely a safety precaution. There are only positives to doing this, no negatives."

Vernon and Petunia looked at each other, communicating without words. Petunia said, "There are a few more questions we'd like to ask you about this, but it has nothing to do with Harry or Dudley, and we'd like to ask you privately. So, you two, please go upstairs." Harry and Dudley got up.

"If you don't mind, I would like to have a brief word with the two young men after we are finished here. Perhaps I can join them upstairs a bit later," Dumbledore said. Vernon nodded, and Harry and Dudley headed upstairs.

Harry and Dudley walked up the stairs. "Wonder what that's all about," said Dudley.

"Don't know," Harry answered. "Can't think of what else they would need to ask him."

As they neared their rooms, Dudley said, "Hey, why don't you show me some of your birthday presents."

Another first, Harry thought. He wondered if hearing about Harry's dangerous experiences made the magical world look more exciting to Dudley than it used to. At least it seemed to have removed whatever revulsion he had to it.

"Sure, come on in," Harry said, entering the room. They entered the room. Hedwig hooted; Harry wondered whether it was because of Dudley.

“My presents, let’s see...” Harry knew there were at least two presents he couldn’t show Dudley. One was the Extendable Ears; it wouldn’t do for Dudley to know that he could listen in on anyone in the house. The other was the pumpkin cake; should Dudley turn antagonistic, he could report Harry to Petunia for having food in his room. He started thinking of things in his trunk that he could say were birthday presents. He decided to start with Hermione’s because Dudley knew Hermione a little, having talked to her briefly.

They sat down on Harry’s bed. “Well, this one is from Hermione,” he said, showing Dudley the large black book. “She’s one of the types who always get the best scores in the class, so she always gets me practical stuff. But this is really good, it’s got lots of really advanced information.”

Dudley flipped through the book, looking at the illustrations, not the text. He closed it again and took note of the title. “...strategies for teaching? Are you planning to be a teacher? I thought he said you wanted to be an Auror!”

Harry quickly explained about the D.A. and why he had been asked to lead the class, and how it led to being named a teacher this year. At Dudley’s amazed expression, Harry added, “But it’s partly because all the people who are good are busy fighting Voldemort, and partly because there’s supposed to be this jinx on the position, so nobody wants to take it. Bad things have happened to the last five teachers.”

Dudley looked at Harry as though evaluating his mental health. “So, you’re taking a jinxed job. I guess it’s like Dad said, you can’t get enough of that danger.”

“Not really,” Harry said. “It’s more like, Professor Dumbledore is the kind of person it’s hard to say no to.”

Dudley looked thoughtful and nodded. “So, what else did you get?”

“Well, I got this from Ron, you know, the tall, red-haired one. He and Hermione are my two closest friends, the three of us are always doing stuff together. He got me this, it’s the blue thing on the outside.” He now had to explain how the Omniculars worked, then the Omni-view, and finally, Quidditch.

Dudley was able to watch the Quidditch, but even with Harry's basic explanation, it looked to him like a bunch of people flying around on brooms hitting and throwing balls, which he told Harry. Not that that wasn't interesting anyway, he said, never having seen people on brooms before.

"It's almost like a whole different world you guys have, isn't it?" Dudley observed.

"In a way, yes," Harry said. "The details are really different. But when you get right down to it, the people are really the same. Just like the Muggle world, we have good and bad people, greedy and generous, rich and poor, arrogant and humble. People are people, with magical ability or not."

"Well put, Harry, I could not have said it better myself," said Professor Dumbledore, who entered the room as Harry finished his sentence. Harry and Dudley stood up.

"I have finished discussing it with your aunt and uncle," Dumbledore said, addressing Harry, "and they have agreed to open the fireplace to you and for use in emergencies. I know you may be tempted to press them for permission to have Ron and Hermione authorized as well, but I advise you to be patient. Even allowing this much was a difficult decision for them." Harry could well believe that. "I have brought with me a quantity of Floo powder to get you started. I believe you will find more easily enough in Diagon Alley." He handed Harry a small pouch.

"Dudley, just a reminder, make sure the device is always next to your skin. If it is, say, outside a t-shirt or more layers, you might not feel it should it start vibrating. I assume you are clear on what you should do in the unlikely event it should do so?"

Dudley nodded. "Get to a safe place, wait for the Aurors."

"Good," Dumbledore said. "I also strongly recommend that you follow any instructions they might give you, for your own safety." Dudley nodded again.

"Now, there is one other thing. Yesterday during your confrontation with Mr. Malfoy, it so happened that the responsibility of watching you was mine." Harry

raised his eyebrows in surprise; he wasn't aware that Dumbledore ever did that. "I witnessed the whole incident, and followed you home to make sure you encountered no more difficulty. I further overheard your discussion regarding the Weasley twins and their shop." He looked at Harry significantly.

Harry tried not to look guilty. "The Snackbox..."

Dumbledore nodded. "Yes, the Snackbox. The Weasley twins have clearly hit upon a winner with that, though they will have to start changing the symptoms as teachers get wise to them. Now, Dudley, you may not be aware, but we generally try hard to prevent items imbued with magic from reaching the Muggle world. Experience has shown us that there are too many unintended consequences."

Turning to Harry, he continued, "Harry, I am fairly sure you are aware of that, but I can understand your desire to be helpful to your cousin in this situation. Also, I am only aware of this because I was guarding you, and any information I gain by doing so I should not use, lest you feel like slipping away to ensure privacy. You see, the only reason I am mentioning this is that the Snackboxes would activate Dudley's magic-detection device, causing a great deal of trouble and embarrassment. So, before I came here tonight, I stopped by the Weasleys' new shop, which seems to be doing quite well. I asked them to set aside a Snackbox, and I adjusted it so that it will no longer activate Dudley's device. I told them that someone would be in to pick it up, and to hold it until then."

Dudley's jaw had dropped open as soon as it dawned on him that Dumbledore was not going to lower the boom on them, and it remained open.

Dumbledore turned back to Dudley. "I have two other things to say about this. First, and Harry would have told you this anyway, but when you take them, be very careful to use the antidote as soon as possible. Unchecked nosebleed or vomiting can lead to serious physical harm, and since the symptoms are caused by magic, a Muggle physician would not know what to do.

“Secondly, I would request that you not ask Harry for any magic-imbued items in the future. I know that Harry would wish to give you what you ask for, but as I mentioned before...”

“Unintended consequences, yeah,” said Dudley. “It’s too bad, but okay, I understand.”

Dumbledore smiled. “At the Ministry of Magic, there are very thick files full of examples of what problems happen when magical items fall into unwary Muggle hands. Harry could also get in trouble. Granted, he has spent much of the past five years in some kind of trouble, but I think you know what I mean.” He winked at Harry.

Harry was embarrassed and grateful. “I’ll bet you’ve never had to give this kind of talk to a professor before.”

“You might be surprised, Harry. You might be very surprised indeed. If the worst problem I ever had to deal with from a new professor were a boyish prank, my career would have been a lot simpler.

“Alas, I must be off. I will take my leave of your aunt and uncle and exit via the fireplace. Dudley, it was a pleasure meeting you.” He shook Dudley’s hand again. Harry, I will be seeing you on Monday. The location for the Occlumency lesson has been changed; it will now be held at the Burrow. I will explain the reason for the change then.”

He paused, and spoke again to Harry. “One other thing, Harry. Perhaps you were just being modest, but I do not wish you to have an incorrect impression. I did not ask you to be the Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor ‘because all the people who are good are busy fighting Voldemort,’ as you put it. I did it because I believe that you are an excellent choice, and you will do an excellent job.” He nodded to Harry and Dudley. “A very good evening to you both,” he said, and left the room.

Harry and Dudley just stared at each other for a minute, unable to say anything. Finally Harry said, "I've known him for five years, and I don't think he'll ever stop surprising me."

Dudley looked wistful. "I wish my school's headmaster was like that."

Harry soon went downstairs and called Hermione back. He found out that the get-together had evolved into a sleepover, which made him happy, though he wondered if they wouldn't just end up staying up all night instead. Neville had been invited and was happy to come, but his grandmother would not allow him to sleep over; he would have to go home by midnight.

For his part, Harry decided that it was a much better idea to tell Vernon and Petunia that he would be sleeping over at Hermione's than asking them. He figured they wouldn't care much in any case, and he soon discovered that he was right. He was very pleased that he would be able to travel by Floo. He didn't especially care for the experience, except that it was better than the alternatives.

The next afternoon, Harry went downstairs a few minutes before 4:00. Vernon and Petunia were outside, which Harry assumed was by design. They may have been willing to let him use the fireplace for travel on safety grounds, but they still didn't want to watch anything magical being done.

Dudley came downstairs. Harry assumed he did want to watch, and had not been with his parents outside because they would not have let him come into the house at just before 4:00.

"So," Harry said, "did you get a lecture about how you should never, ever, ever use this for any reason whatsoever except for the most dire possible emergency, and then only if told?"

"Yeah, but it was a lot longer, and more emphatic than that," Dudley answered casually. "Something to do with having my privileges revoked for the rest of my life, and them sending me off to your school to be practiced on."

“That would be bad,” Harry laughed. “I can see it now,” and he launched into an imitation of Snape’s voice, “...and now we will see whether Mr. Potter has made his Knockout Potion too strong again. Drink it down, Mr. Dursley.” They both laughed heartily.

Harry looked at his watch. “Well, gotta go.”

Dudley said, “Okay... watch out for, you know... vampires, and giant porcupines, and trees that eat people, and land sharks, and quicksand that looks like lawns...”

Harry nodded, deadpan. “Ah, the usual, you mean...” Smiling, he asked, “So, how long were you, thinking that up?”

“Couple minutes. Not too long.”

Harry made a ‘not too bad’ facial expression. He waved. “Bye.”

He took a pinch of Floo powder, threw it into the fire, and walked in, shouting “The Granger home!”

CHAPTER 5

THE SLEEPOVER

When Harry recovered from the usual disorientation of traveling by Floo powder, he looked around and quickly saw Hermione, Ron, and Ginny standing in the living room, talking. They walked over to greet him.

“Hi, Harry! Great to see you again, finally,” Ron said cheerfully.

“You doing okay, Harry?” asked Ginny.

“Yeah, pretty good... even better, being here, with you guys, and in a house where ‘wizard’ and ‘magic’ aren’t dirty words. Where are your parents?” he asked Hermione.

“They were supposed to be back by now, but they’re running late with some stuff they had to do,” she said. “They called and said they’d be another half hour.”

“Okay, Hermione, are you going to tell us now?” asked Ron.

“Tell you what?” asked Hermione, confused.

To Harry, Ron said, “She’s been acting like there’s something she wants to tell us, but didn’t want to do it until you got here. You know, it’s this ‘I know something you don’t know’ sort of expression.”

Hermione looked at Ron sourly. “That’s the problem with spending so much time around people, they start to work out things like that. I guess I have to work on my poker face.”

“Your what?” asked Ginny, looking blank.

“Guess that’s not really a phrase in the wizarding world,” Harry noted. He glanced at Hermione, whose expression said, go ahead, tell them. He tried to make his voice sound casual as he said, “Hermione and I found out who next year’s Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher is.”

“Oh, boy, I feel like there should be somber music playing, a dirge maybe,” said Ron, grinning. “In fact, I was thinking, in the room where they teach that class, there should be a plaque that reads ‘Hall of Misfortune’—you know, like ‘Hall of Fame’—with the subheading, ‘Hogwarts’ Distinguished Defense Against the Dark Arts Teachers, and Their Tragic Fates,’ and then a gallery with each teacher’s portrait, and below, a description of how they met their unhappy ends.” Ginny chuckled a little, but Hermione was frowning, which Ron did not notice.

“Anyway,” continued Ron, “So who’s the poor sap they’ve got to do it this year?”

Harry almost smiled; he couldn’t wait to see the look on Ron’s face. “That would be me.”

Ron looked blank for a second, then laughed. “No, c’mon, seriously, who is it?”

Harry glanced at Ginny; he could tell by the astonishment on her face that she believed him.

“I’m afraid I’m serious, Ron,” Harry said. “Dumbledore said it was because of what I did with the D.A. He wants me to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts.”

Ron looked at Hermione, in shock. She nodded. “It’s true, Ron. That’s why I really wanted to tell you, but I wanted to wait for Harry,”

Ginny’s look of astonishment had transformed to one of joy. “You’re going to be teaching us? Oh, that’s so great!” She was so excited that the last word was more like a squeak. She rushed forward and threw her arms around Harry.

“Congratulations!”

Harry chuckled and hugged her back. He glanced at Hermione, who looked very pleased. “Seems there’s a lot of hugging involved in this teaching business,” he joked. To Ginny, who had just released him, he said, “Thanks. At least I know there’ll be one friendly face in my classes.”

She playfully shoved him in the chest. “Are you kidding? People will be thrilled!”

Harry looked as if he didn't believe her, but didn't want to contradict her and rain on her parade. "That would be nice," he said.

The news was registering with Ron only very slowly. "You're really serious?"

Harry decided to have mercy on Ron, and explain it so that it didn't sound so off-the-wall. "Okay, here's the main reason. You got an Outstanding on your O.W.L. for Defense Against the Dark Arts, right?"

"Yeah, I did. How'd you know?"

"Because Dumbledore told me that every fifth year in the D.A. did, too. He figures I'm largely responsible, and hopes I can do it for the whole school."

"Every fifth year in the D.A.? Wow, that is impressive..." Ron was starting to come out of his shock. "Funny, when I think of it like that, just doing in classes what you did in the D.A., it doesn't seem so strange. It's just that we think of teachers as these authority figures who are all strict and give out detentions and stuff... I can't see you doing that, but I can see you helping people learn. I guess that's what Dumbledore wants." He looked at Harry more seriously. "How do you feel about this? I mean, I'd be terrified, if it was me."

"I think my reactions were pretty much the same as yours... shock, disbelief, terror..." Harry smiled. "But I've had a whole, what, forty-eight hours now to get used to it, so I'm not doing so badly now. Hermione has been serving as my cheerleader and self-confidence builder, and now it looks like she's got company," he said, looking at Ginny, who smiled back and nodded.

"You'll be great, Harry," she enthused. "You'll be wonderful."

He shook his head in surprise at her attitude. "Like I said to Hermione, you just keep telling me that."

"Okay, we will," said Ginny.

"Anyway, I've gotten used to the idea a bit, but I'm kind of worried about how the Slytherins are going to act. There's bound to be a test of my authority, probably early."

"You can give out detentions, can't you?" Ron asked.

“Yes, and Dumbledore pretty much told me that I was going to have to do so at some point.” Harry said.

“And it’s going to be mostly Slytherins,” Ginny speculated, “partly because they don’t like you anyway, and partly because Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff won’t be trying to get on your back. Their prefects were in the D.A., so they’ll be telling their houses to give you a break. So the point is, don’t give Slytherins a break because it seems like you’re only giving them detentions. That’s bound to happen.”

“Snape’ll be on me, asking why I’m only giving his house detentions.”

“Just tell him to go get stuffed,” Ron suggested.

“Yeah, right,” Harry said. “That’ll work.”

“Actually, Ron’s right, though you have to be a little more polite than that,” Hermione said. “But you do have to be firm. You tell him that the students in his house are testing your authority, and as he well knows, a teacher has to put his foot down. Then tell him that if he tells his house to behave properly in your classes, the detentions will stop.”

“Hang on, let me write this down,” Harry joked.

“I think you’ll know what to say when the time comes,” Hermione assured him.

“Wait a minute, how am I going to give detentions?” Harry asked, suddenly in a mild panic. “The teacher has to be there as well, and I’ll be studying or with Quidditch practice. The Slytherins’ll start getting detentions on purpose so my time’ll be all messed up.”

“Didn’t McGonagall tell you?” asked Hermione in surprise. “After you left Hogwarts the day before yesterday, I was asking her about some of this stuff, how it would work with you teaching, and I asked about detentions. She said that any detentions you give would be served with her.”

“Excellent,” said Ron. “That should be a pretty good deterrent.”

Harry was relieved. “That was good of her. I hate to think of what might happen if I had to do them myself. Funny, I’d never looked at detentions from the

teacher's side of it until now. It never occurred to me that they might rather be doing something else as well."

They heard a noise coming from the fireplace and turned around; Neville was recovering his balance, then walking towards them. "Hi, everyone!" he said cheerfully.

"Hi, Neville," they all said, almost in chorus. "Thanks for coming," said Hermione.

"Thanks for inviting me," Neville said. He looked around. "This is neat, I've never been in a Muggle house before. Is this what most are like?" he asked, looking at Harry and Hermione.

"Bit bigger, I think," said Harry.

"Yes, it is, a little bit," agreed Hermione. "My parents are dentists, so their income's a little above average, but we're not rich or anything. You'll get the tour of the house when my parents get back. It should be any time now."

"My dad would be going nuts," said Ron. "Asking about every little thing, how does this work, how does that work..."

"Oh, Hermione, I just remembered, I need to ask you what you've told your parents about the stuff we've done, you know, the dangerous stuff," Harry said.

"How much of it do they know?"

"If in doubt, don't say it," she said. "The first year, with the Sorcerer's Stone, I told them everything, and my mother almost had a heart attack. Not that she was angry, just really worried. And in the second year, I couldn't very well avoid telling her that I was Petrified for a month or so. She was pretty worried about that, too. So in the third year, when you saved us from the dementors, well, she didn't hear anything about that, or us setting Sirius free, or the Department of Mysteries. No reason for her to worry needlessly."

"So, Neville, have you heard the news about Harry?" asked Ron, looking eager to get to see someone else's reaction.

“You mean about him teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts?” Neville asked guilelessly, as though there might be other news about Harry he hadn’t heard.

“Yeah, that,” said Ron, looking rather less eager.

“How did you find out, Neville? Not many people have been told, I thought,” asked Hermione.

“My gran wrote Professor Dumbledore a letter recently, and he mentioned it when writing her back,” said Neville. “She just got it today.” Looking at Harry, he said, “Congratulations, you really deserve it. I mean, I got an Outstanding on my Defense Against the Dark Arts O.W.L.! Last year at this time, I didn’t think I’d be able to manage an Acceptable. Being in the D.A. made all the difference.”

“Well, you worked hard,” said Harry. “I’m not sure that I deserve credit for your effort. I hope people know that they won’t get better unless they try as hard as people did in the D.A. last year.”

“Maybe you should mention it in your introductory lectures,” suggested Hermione.

“Don’t think I’m going to be doing much lecturing... but is that something I should really go out of my way to say? ‘Hey, people, you won’t get better unless you try?’ Seems kind of obvious.” Harry found that he didn’t want to think about giving lectures; he just wanted to do what he’d done in the D.A.

Hermione’s parents returned, and things went the way such things normally do: introductions, a tour of the house, a chat in the living room, and then dinner. Hermione’s mother had offered to cook dinner, but Hermione knew that having dinner in a Muggle home was quite a novelty for Ron, Ginny, and Neville, so she wanted to avoid anything they might normally have at home or at Hogwarts. She asked her parents to get a couple of takeaway pizzas and some Cokes. Hermione and her mother had baked some chocolate chip cookies earlier in the day to have for dessert.

The pizza was a big hit with Neville and the Weasleys, and Harry as well, who hadn’t had as much pizza in his life as he would have liked. They had three

large pieces each, and were so full that they decided to wait until later to have the cookies. Then the Grangers went upstairs, so the kids could chat without discomfort or the oppressive feeling of close parental supervision.

Hermione started off by asking Harry to tell the whole story of what had happened with Malfoy's visit to Privet Drive, and how it had led to Dumbledore's visit and the Dursleys' increased tolerance of discussion of magic. Harry had to first explain to Neville how the Dursleys were about magic and how he was generally treated in the past, which earned him amazed looks from Neville.

All were spellbound at Harry's recounting of the tale about Dudley and Malfoy, and offered only brief interjections ("the swine!", "good for him!", "nice to see Dudley being useful for a change") throughout. They debated just how much trouble Malfoy was in, whether he might get off with a warning, whether Malfoy's family connections would do him any good now that his father was a known Death Eater, and whether he could or would argue that it was self-defense. They shared the hope that his actions could get him expelled from Hogwarts, but agreed that it was unfortunately unlikely.

Harry asked Ron about Weasley family news. "Not much that I haven't already told you by owls," Ron said. "I did just find out that Fred and George are planning on moving out soon. They've been looking for a place for a month or two, since they left Hogwarts, and they said yesterday that they've found someplace they like, it's just a matter of finalizing it."

"That'll leave only you and Ginny at home," Hermione noted. "How do your parents feel about that?"

"Well, they don't know yet. Fred and George haven't exactly been on the best terms with Mum lately. She was really upset when they left Hogwarts before they graduated."

"They should get a Special Award for Services to the School, if you ask me," said Harry, "for what they did to Umbridge." The others laughed; Harry

continued, “Seriously, they probably kept her off balance and occupied, so she couldn’t make whatever changes she might have been planning sooner.”

“We agree with you, Harry, and we tried to tell Mum how helpful they’d been, but she places less value on that than she does on a diploma,” said Ginny. “She wasn’t there, she doesn’t know how it was with Umbridge there. I mean, if even Hermione was encouraging rebellion, you know things were bad.”

“It’s not only that,” Ron continued, “but she’s unhappy about the shop, too. Don’t worry, Harry, she’s not unhappy with you specifically for giving them the money to start it. She reckons you’d been through a serious trauma and weren’t thinking straight.” Harry started to protest, but Ron cut him off with a gesture. “I know, it was nothing like that, but I think Mum doesn’t want to be angry at you, so she came up with a reason why it wasn’t your fault. They told her that you practically forced it on them—”

“Which was true,” Harry cut in.

“—but Mum had decided that it was their fault, and nothing was going to change her mind. Anyway, things were kind of tense between her and them when they got home. They’re not happy with her, either, because they reckon—and Ginny and I agree, of course—that they’ve done nothing wrong. There was a bit of a blow-up a few days after Ginny and I got back. I guess Mum had made one comment too many, and Fred said, ‘I suppose you’d still have us take a leaf from Percy’s book?’ And George said, ‘There’s things more important than how far you get in the Ministry. At least Dad understands that.’”

Harry winced, and Ginny nodded. “Yeah, it was pretty bad. They were right, though. You’d think Mum would take a lesson from what happened with Percy. I think she just had to take some time to get used to their dropping out and the shop, but they were getting tired of her picking at them. I don’t blame them. I think they’ve made up since that happened, and Mum’s trying not to comment on it so much. But she’s still not happy, and they know it, so they want to get out. I’m glad they can afford to do it.”

“How does your father feel about the shop?” asked Hermione.

“He’s not bothered at all,” said Ginny. “Whatever they do is fine with him, which only upsets Mum all the more. But Mum puts more stock in accomplishments and honors and things like that. She was so pleased at Ron’s Outstanding Defense Against the Dark Arts O.W.L. that she’s forgotten she ever told us not to be a part of the D.A. Just wait until she hears you’re a teacher, Harry, she’ll have kittens.”

“Yes, more hugging,” quipped Harry. “Part of the dangerous life I lead.”

“Well, let’s watch the movie, shall we?” Hermione said, reaching for the tape and putting it in the videotape recorder. She started the movie after explaining to Ron, Ginny, and Neville how the machines and the tapes worked. When Ron caught on, he said to Harry, “Ah, kind of like the Omni-view, isn’t it?” Harry agreed, and thanked Ron for the present.

They watched the movie in silence, except for a pause for Hermione to explain as best she could how special effects worked. Hermione’s mother came downstairs halfway through the movie and made them buttered popcorn. It turned out that while popcorn tended not to be served at Hogwarts, it was common enough in the magical world, and the one who had eaten it least was Harry.

After the movie, as they were eating the cookies with milk, Hermione asked Harry why Dudley had asked her about Harry’s close shaves on the phone. “Why is he so interested all of a sudden?”

“I’m not sure,” Harry said. “It was almost like turning a switch. Whatever it is, all of a sudden my being magical doesn’t bother him at all. It’s very strange, I can tell you that. That’s probably why I said yes when he asked about the Snackbox; I was startled because he’d never asked me for anything before.”

“Maybe,” Ron suggested, “it all sounds glamorous to him. Exotic, strange creatures, brushes with death... he doesn’t see the other side of it. You know, worry, nightmares, that kind of thing.” He picked up another cookie.

“You’ve had nightmares about the stuff we’ve gotten ourselves into?” Harry asked, surprised. He hadn’t known that.

“I’d be surprised if any of us hadn’t,” said Hermione. “The mind has to deal with this stuff somehow, and if we don’t talk or think about it, it’ll come out in dreams.”

“Well, maybe the three of us, but maybe not Neville or Ginny, they haven’t done as much stuff as we have,” said Ron.

“Oh, right, having Voldemort take you over and use your body against your will, no, that’s nothing to get bothered enough about to have nightmares,” Ginny said with annoyance.

“Well, then, how about you, Neville?” tried Ron.

Neville gulped. “Well, this isn’t like wake-up-screaming scary, but... I’ve had the same dream a few times since then. I’m at the Department of Mysteries, in that room where Dumbledore found us, and I’m holding the prophecy, but in the dream, the prophecy has my name on it, not Harry’s...”

Harry’s heart almost stopped. Neville could have no way of knowing that the initial prophecy was ambiguous enough that the subject could have been him instead of Harry. Was Neville’s unconscious mind giving him accurate information? Or was it just a strange coincidence?

“...and at some point it pops out of my hands and flies across the room, and into the... what do you call that thing, like a gateway... that thing that Sirius fell through when he died... I’m sorry, Harry...”

Harry shook his head and made a ‘don’t worry, go ahead’ gesture.

“Well, you know what I’m talking about... anyway, it went through that, and disappeared, and I started walking over, following it. I was walking up the steps to the gateway, and I heard these voices telling me to cross through it, it was my destiny, the prophecy said I would. I pass through it and suddenly I’m falling, and that’s when I wake up.”

No one said anything for a moment as Neville looked at their faces for reactions. Finally Ginny said, "I don't know about you, but I'd say that qualifies as a nightmare. I mean, basically, you're dreaming about your own death."

"Yes, and it makes sense, since you saw someone die there," Hermione said, quickly casting an apologetic glance at Harry, "and you could have died yourself. Have you thought consciously about the fact that you could easily have died?"

"Oh, yeah, once or twice..." Neville said, making a poor attempt to feign a casual attitude. Then, giving up the pretense, he added, "... a day..." He grinned nervously.

"Well, it's hardly surprising, since you had the hardest time of anyone there, except Harry," said Hermione. "I mean, you were tortured... how can that not affect your dreams?"

"That's the strange thing; being tortured hasn't come into my dreams at all," said Neville. "I agree, you'd think it would. I mean, I think about it when I'm awake at times... daydreams about what I'd like to do to Bellatrix Lestrange before she dies a horrible and painful death." The others all looked at Neville sympathetically; they knew this very uncharacteristic attitude was because she had caused Neville untold pain, both last month and when he was a baby. "But I imagine you must too, Harry, she did something awful to you, too..."

"Actually, Neville, I haven't thought about her that much. I agree, you'd think I would... I don't know, maybe it's because I..." He trailed off. He hadn't intended to tell anyone about this, but the tone of the conversation was confessional, and they all had been with him there, they would understand... he felt a need to unburden himself.

They were looking at him expectantly. "You have to promise to tell no one this, absolutely no one," he said. They nodded as if to say of course, you don't need to tell us that. He swallowed and went on. "After seeing her kill Sirius, I think I was in denial for a few minutes. I thought he was coming back. When it finally started hitting me that he wasn't, I think I just went into a blind fury." The others looked at

him anxiously. “After she escaped from the room, I screamed, said I’d kill her, something like that, and went after her. I don’t know what I expected to do; I’m no match for her, but I wasn’t thinking. I entered the lobby as she was at the end of it. She threw a spell, I think it was a Killing Curse, at me, which I dodged, hid behind something. She taunted me, doing that baby voice she did earlier. ‘Did you loooove him?’” He shook his head, in anger again from the memory of it. “The next thing I knew, I leaped out from where I was hiding, pointed the wand at her, and yelled...” he paused for a few seconds, “... Crucio.”

The others gaped; their mouths hung open and their eyes were wider than Harry thought they could get. In an absurd, random thought at a time such as this, Harry thought, I really wish I had a camera right now.

Hermione was the first to speak. “Oh, my God... oh, Harry...” She broke into sobs and leaned into him, crying on his shoulder and holding onto him. Harry was bewildered; this wasn’t a reaction he expected. He put his arm around her shoulder in a comforting gesture, feeling that it was very strange that he should need to.

After a few seconds, she started sniffing and trying to stop crying. Ginny leaped up to get a box of tissues, and put them in front of Hermione. Haltingly, Hermione said to Harry, “I’m sorry, I know this is strange, but I just... I was empathizing with you through the whole story, and... the fact that you did that, I know you, you would never do that, you must have been in so much pain...” She blew her nose, then continued. “I guess I went on empathy overload. I felt too much of your pain. But it makes me understand how what you did could happen. You weren’t yourself.”

She extricated herself from Harry and sat back up, blowing her nose one last time. Ron finally spoke. “No one else was there, were they? I mean, you could do life in Azkaban for that...” He still looked in shock.

“Yeah, I know, that was why I mentioned the bit about, you know, not saying anything...” Harry forced a small smile. “But no, no one else was there, I’m sure.”

“He’d never be convicted anyway,” argued Ginny, “considering the circumstances.”

“Whether that’s true or not, obviously it was the farthest thing from my mind at the time. I do know that the Muggle courts say that to be convicted of a crime, you have to have been mentally competent when you committed it. I’m pretty sure I wasn’t.”

“What happened then?” asked Neville. “Did it work?”

“For less than a second,” Harry said. “She screamed and went down, but got right back up again. She told me it was obvious I’d never done that before, and that to do it so it lasts you have to be focusing on wanting to inflict pain, you have to enjoy it.” He paused, thinking. “I hope to hell I never get that bad off, that I could do that.”

“You won’t, Harry,” Hermione said fervently. “I promise you, you won’t.”

He nodded. “I was sort of afraid to tell you about it, afraid of what you’d think of me,” he admitted. “It’s a horrible thing to do, whatever the reason.”

“C’mon, Harry,” said Ginny. “We know who you are, and it’s different from a few seconds of madness in a horrible situation. We know you.”

“Yeah, Ginny’s right,” echoed Ron. “We know that’s not who you are.”

Harry looked troubled; he had been focused on having lost Sirius recently and hadn’t thought about this incident so much. “But it’s obviously at least some small part of who I am, if even in that state of mind, I could do it. It’s there, somewhere.”

“It’s there in all of us, Harry,” Hermione said. “We’re all capable of something like that, or worse. It’s part of being human, of having free will. You can’t judge yourself by a lapse of control at an unbelievably stressful moment; the human mind can only take so much, and the death of a loved one is the most

stressful moment in a person's life. To have that person's killer taunt you about what she'd done, about the loss you suffered... is a provocation almost beyond imagining. Next to that, what you did... seems understandable."

"To me, especially," Neville said grimly.

"She taunted you, too," Harry said quietly. "About your parents. Before she tortured you."

The others looked shocked again; they hadn't known what Bellatrix had said to Neville.

"And if I'd had a wand, and had enough magical ability to think that the Cruciatus Curse would do any good, I'm almost certain I would have done it, maybe sustainably. I don't know," said Neville. "But it wouldn't surprise me at all."

"That woman is evil, just plain evil," said Ron, disgustedly. "And at least half mad, too, she kept losing control, Malfoy's dad had to keep holding her back."

"What happened after that, Harry? Was that when You-Know..." Neville sighed. "I guess I'd better get used to saying it...was that when... Voldemort arrived?"

"No, that was a few minutes later. She kept trying to get the prophecy, she didn't know that it had broken. I told her that it was broken; she didn't believe me, she kept trying to Summon it. I taunted her, saying her boss would be angry. She cried out to Voldemort, pleading with him not to punish her. I said, he's not here, he can't hear you. Then suddenly, he was there, saying. 'Can't I, Potter?' Then I just froze; I couldn't move or do anything. I don't know if it was me, or a spell of his. Then he sent the Killing Curse at me, which as you know, Dumbledore arrived just in time to block."

"What was he like, Harry?" asked Ron. "When he was facing... oh, all right... when he was facing Vol- Voldemort?"

"He was so calm, it was amazing," Harry related. "It was like he was having a casual chat with someone. No fear, no anger, just an intensity, but a subdued one, if that makes any sense. Very focused. He's talking to Voldemort—calling him 'Tom,'

by the way, I guess since he knew him at Hogwarts when he was Tom Riddle—while at the same time casting and blocking spells, making sure that I’m protected. It was like he could do two or three things at once, effortlessly. It was amazing. I’m sure I could have appreciated it more if I hadn’t been in such a state.

“I don’t remember all of their conversation, but I do remember one thing,” he continued. “Dumbledore said there are other ways to destroy a man than to kill him. Voldemort said there was nothing worse than death. Dumbledore said that one of Voldemort’s greatest weaknesses was not understanding that there are things worse than death.”

“I wonder what he meant,” Ron mused. “What could be worse than death?”

“I don’t know, but I have an idea,” said Harry. He related his conversation with Dumbledore two days ago at Hogwarts about the extent to which Voldemort could be said to still be human. “So,” he concluded, “maybe Dumbledore meant the way Voldemort is living now, a kind of living death, at least for Tom Riddle, who really isn’t around anymore. All Voldemort is, is a body occupied by evil. But maybe Dumbledore meant something else, I don’t know.”

“Do you think maybe the prophecy had something to do with it? I really wish I hadn’t broken it,” said Neville mournfully.

“It’s better that you did, Neville, trust me,” said Harry confidently. “If you hadn’t, he would probably have gotten it. That could have been bad.”

“Well, we can’t know how bad it would have been, since we don’t know what it said, can we?” pointed out Ron.

Harry said nothing. Hermione looked at him and suddenly understood.

“You know... you know what it says, don’t you?”

Harry thought for another minute, and nodded. He knew he had to be careful.

“How did you find out? Did you know all along?” asked Ron, with a slight undertone of being annoyed if Harry had known and not told them.

Harry shook his head. “Dumbledore had it. He told me, in his office right after all that happened, exactly what it said. As far as I know, he and I are the only two people in the world who know what it says.”

There was silence for a few seconds. Then Ron burst out with, “Well, c’mon, are you going to tell us, or not?” They looked at him expectantly.

Looking at them earnestly, Harry said, “I can’t. Not because Dumbledore told me not to, but because your lives would be in danger if you knew, and knowing won’t help you in any practical way.”

“I don’t think there’s any of us who aren’t willing to take that risk,” said Ron fervently. The others nodded.

“I’m not willing to take that risk,” Harry almost shouted, taking the others aback. “I’ve had enough people die for me. I’m not going to have any more if I can help it. Knowing it won’t help you, and it won’t help you help me.”

“How would knowing put us in danger?” asked Ginny.

“If he found out that you knew—and he has powers we don’t understand, we can’t know he wouldn’t find out—you’d be targets. He’d have his Death Eaters grab you, and bring you to him. He’d force it out of you, then kill you.”

“But we wouldn’t...” Ron trailed off, realizing that he was wrong.

“Tell him? You would,” said Neville emphatically. “Any of us would. You hear about the Cruciatus Curse, you know it’s horrible, but you can’t really know until you’ve experienced it. We can’t begin to imagine that much pain. How long did they do it to me, Harry?”

“About five seconds.”

Neville shuddered. “Believe me, it felt like longer than five seconds. A lot longer. There aren’t enough words to describe it. Anyone would break. Or...” he trailed off, unable to finish his sentence.

“Or suffer your parents’ fate,” Harry finished. Neville nodded. “I can easily believe it,” Harry said. “Last year, when Voldemort did it to me, I don’t know how long it was, but all I could think was that I wanted to die, just so the pain would

stop.” He made eye contact with each of the others in turn. “I won’t risk that happening to you. Not over this.”

“Couldn’t we just lie to him? How would he know?” asked Ron.

“Dumbledore said that both he and Voldemort are expert Legilimens, which means they know if they’re being lied to,” Harry responded. “Only a powerful Occlumens could lie without being detected.”

“Isn’t it a problem that we know that you know?” Ron pressed. “I mean, he grabs one of us, makes us tell him that you know? Isn’t that worse for you?”

Harry shook his head. “If Voldemort could have gotten me, he would have by now. It’s not for lack of trying. And once he gets me, the prophecy doesn’t matter anymore.”

“How does he even know about the prophecy, then, if he’s never heard it?”

“He knows a part of it. Dumbledore told me that one of his people was present and heard the first few sentences before being made to leave.” Harry thought for a minute. “I guess I could tell you that part safely; he knows it, so there’s no danger if you do.”

They nodded in anticipation.

“Let’s see, how did the first part go...” Harry struggled to remember the words as accurately as he could; he had played them back in his head several times. “‘The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches... born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies.’ That’s as much as Voldemort knows of the prophecy.”

Everyone sat quietly for a minute, trying to digest this and figure out what it meant. Then Hermione said, “Your birthday is at the end of July. When exactly was the prophecy made?”

“About sixteen years and one month ago.”

“One month before you were born,” said Hermione.

“What does it mean, ‘thrice defied him?’” Ron asked. “What does ‘defy’ mean in this case?”

“I think it means ‘escaped,’ like they got away from him though he intended to kill them but couldn’t.”

“But your name isn’t mentioned?” Ginny asked. “It couldn’t have been anyone else?”

“It is me,” Harry said, “but at the time the prophecy was made, Professor Dumbledore told me, they couldn’t know for sure who it was that the prophecy referred to. He said that at that time, there were two wizard children it could have referred to. I was one.”

“Did he say who the other one was?” asked Ron.

Harry wasn’t sure whether he should say it, but in a fundamental way he felt Neville had the right to know. “Yes, he did,” said Harry. He stared at Neville.

Neville was the last one to work out what Harry’s stare meant. Hermione gasped. “You mean... the other one it could have been... was Neville?”

Harry nodded, and kept his gaze on Neville. “Your birthday is only a few days away from mine. Your parents fought Voldemort.”

Neville appeared to be in complete shock. His facial expression was unmoving, staring straight ahead.

“But the prophecy had your name on it,” Ginny pointed out. “So how did they know that it was you and not Neville?”

“My name was put in later,” Harry said. “At first there was a question mark; they didn’t know. Later events, combined with knowing the rest of the prophecy, made it clear that it was me.”

“But Voldemort didn’t know that, right?” asked Hermione. “When he went after you, he didn’t know for sure it was you, it could have been Neville as far as he was concerned, couldn’t it?”

“Yes,” Harry answered. “He couldn’t know. Even Dumbledore doesn’t know for sure why he chose me. Maybe he was going to do both of us, and happened to try for me first. We can’t know.”

“Wow... this tells us enough to understand what happened to Neville a bit better,” Hermione said, now looking at Neville with great sympathy. “Neville’s parents were attacked shortly after you were,” referring to Harry, “Voldemort was gone... but maybe his followers still weren’t sure which one it was...”

“Yes, I’ve thought the same thing,” agreed Harry. “They probably guessed it was me by then, but they probably wanted to do in Neville too, just to be sure. Maybe Neville’s parents had hidden him, just in case... Lestrangle and the others caught his parents, tried to make them tell them where Neville was, so they could go kill him...”

“...and if there’s anyone who could refuse to crack under torture, it would be a parent trying to protect their child,” Hermione finished. “They knew what would happen if they wouldn’t tell, but they didn’t... to protect Neville...” Hermione looked on the verge of tears again, as did Ginny. Even Ron was having a hard time keeping his face free of emotion.

“We don’t know this for sure, of course,” Harry said heavily. “Dumbledore didn’t say that specifically, one way or the other. But it seems like it might have happened that way. It makes sense.”

Neville finally reacted. He bent down towards the floor, his face in his hands, and started sobbing. The other four glanced at each other, then looked down. They knew he had more than enough reason.

Ginny, who was sitting next to Neville, moved over closer to him. She put her arm around his shoulders, and held his arm with her other hand. She kept doing so for another minute or two, until Neville had cried himself out. He took some tissues and blew his nose. “Sorry,” he murmured.

“Are you kidding?” asked Ron. “I felt that way myself, and it wasn’t even my family. It would be strange if you didn’t react like that.”

“Believe me, no one thinks any less of you,” Harry assured him.

Neville nodded and slowly regained his composure. "I'm going to have to ask my gran some questions about this. Where was I, did it happen that way, maybe she doesn't know, or just hasn't told me." He looked at a clock; it was 11:45, fifteen minutes until he had to go back home. "I was going to pop back home to try to convince her to change her mind, to let me stay overnight. But now I'm just going back. I'd love to stay, but I have to find out some things."

"Boy, can I understand that," said Harry.

"Can I ask you something else about the prophecy, Harry?" Neville asked.

Harry wanted to help Neville as much as he could. "Of course. I'll answer if I think it won't be unsafe for anyone."

Neville nodded. "You said that it turned out that the prophecy was about you. Was that fixed in stone? Was it always going to be you, no matter what? Or, is it the case that, if some events had gone differently, it could have been me instead of you? Do you see what I mean?"

Harry did. "Yes, and I'm sorry, Neville, but I don't know, even knowing the whole prophecy. It could be that it was set in stone, but it could be otherwise. I'm not sure that even Dumbledore knows."

"I understand," said Neville. "Well, I think I'll go now. I'm probably not going to get much sleep tonight anyway. Got a few things to think about." He stood, then all the rest did too.

"Neville... now I'm wondering whether I should have told you this or not. Would it have been better if I hadn't?"

"Of course, Harry, you should've. I'm glad you did. I want to know as much about this as I can. It's my life, after all."

"I'm glad you feel that way," Harry said. "I felt like you deserved to know."

Neville walked over to the fireplace. "Thanks again for having me," he said to Hermione and the others.

"Thanks for coming," said Hermione. She walked up to him and patted his arm, after which Ginny did as well. He smiled, both heartened and embarrassed by

the gestures of sympathy. He said goodbye, shouted his home's name, and disappeared into the fire.

The four of them stayed up for a while, eating more cookies and talking about Neville, the prophecy, and the events at the Department of Mysteries. It was a relief for Harry to talk about it, even if it was not about Sirius specifically; talking about the events in general helped to desensitize him to dwelling on Sirius every time the Ministry of Magic or the Department of Mysteries was mentioned. They set up and got into their sleeping bags on the living room floor, talked some more, and eventually fell asleep.

The next morning at breakfast Harry told the others about his Occlumency lesson scheduled for later that day. They were happy for him that he didn't have to study with Snape, though Hermione was mildly annoyed that he hadn't mentioned it to them until then ("it's not as though there hasn't been lots of other stuff to talk about," he pointed out). Harry told them that the lesson was supposed to take place in the Burrow, which surprised Ron, as he hadn't known.

At noon, it was decided that they would all go back to the Burrow, including Hermione, who was hoping she could put in a good word for the twins with Mrs. Weasley. Harry and the Weasleys said goodbye to Hermione's parents, and they took the fireplace to the Burrow.

The Weasleys' living room was empty, which to Harry was unusual; his experience was that the house was a hub of activity. Ron's father was at his job, and Harry imagined the twins were tending their shop. They didn't see Mrs. Weasley. Harry walked over to the clock that gave the location of every Weasley; hers was on 'shopping.' "Looks like we're the only ones here, then," said Ron. They all sat down in the living room.

"So, tell us about what Dumbledore said when he told you about the Occlumency lessons," said Ron. Harry related it as best he could remember, up to

where the conversation turned to Harry's teaching position. Ron took mild umbrage at Harry's description of him as unusually vulnerable to Malfoy's taunts.

"But it's true!" insisted Hermione, as Ron scoffed. "As soon as he starts saying stuff, you lunge for him, you don't even use your wand. You need to do what Professor Dumbledore says, ignore him. They're only words."

"Didn't you haul off and slap him once?" Ron reminded her.

"I'm not saying I'm perfect," she admitted. "But I usually just try to be dignified and ignore it. He always does it to you because you react so well. Harry is better; except for that incident after the Quidditch match last year, he usually ignores it or insults him back. If you can't ignore him, at least come up with some good insults to use against him for this year. You can make it a summer project."

"This is an interesting suggestion from you... a summer project that doesn't involve schoolwork," smirked Ron.

"Like there's much chance of getting you to do schoolwork in summer," she retorted.

Harry chuckled. "I've got to say, after a month of being ignored at the Dursleys', it's even good to listen to you two quibbling." Ron and Hermione laughed.

"It really must be bad there," said Ron, though of course he knew.

As 1:00 approached, Harry said, "By the way, when Dumbledore arrives, don't clear out right away. I want to ask him something with you all there."

Right on time at 1:00, Dumbledore appeared in the Weasleys' fireplace. "Ah, Harry, Hermione, Ron, Ginny, how nice to see you all. I trust you had a pleasant time last night?"

"Well, pretty much," Harry answered, "but some of it was pretty serious; we talked about the stuff that happened last month. So you couldn't say that was 'pleasant,' exactly, but it was probably a good thing." He paused. "Professor, can I ask you a few things before we start the lesson?"

"Certainly, Harry," Dumbledore said. "Go ahead."

“When we were talking about the Department of Mysteries, there was a point when Hermione figured out that I knew what the prophecy was.”
Dumbledore looked concerned. “I wouldn’t tell them what it said; I didn’t want to put them in unnecessary danger.”

“Although we tried to get him to,” admitted Ron.

“But I did decide that it was okay to tell them the part of the prophecy that Voldemort already knew, since they couldn’t get in trouble from that. I thought it couldn’t add to their danger. Do you think that was all right, or should I not have even done that much?”

Dumbledore thought for a moment. “It is not an easy question to answer. On the one hand, the less information disseminated about the prophecy, the better, and one cannot be faulted for being too cautious. But for friendships to be close, confidences must be shared, and this prophecy weighs heavily on Harry. I am sure Harry would have liked to tell you all and share his burden, and I know you would have wanted to help him. But he is right, it is too dangerous for you to know. I would say that what he did seems like an appropriate balance.”

“It was pretty hard for Neville to hear,” said Ginny. “It was easy to understand why. We all felt awful for him. Is what we think true? Did his parents lose their minds protecting him?”

“We will probably never know,” said Dumbledore. “The only people in a position to know are the perpetrators. But it stands to reason.”

Harry looked puzzled. “But when I saw that scene in the Pensieve, Crouch—the father—said that they were trying to get information on where Voldemort was.”

“Yes, that was what was assumed at the time,” Dumbledore confirmed. “But the younger Crouch denied involvement, and the other three were disinclined to give any information as to their motivations. I was the only one who knew the prophecy, and I did not wish to make it public, feeling it was likely that Voldemort would rise again. And to have told you that they might have had another motivation

for their attack on Neville's parents would have meant telling you of the prophecy, which I was not ready to do, to my regret. I should have recognized at the time that fate was providing me a perfect opportunity to do what I knew, even then, I should have done." He paused. "And what was your second question, Harry?"

"I was wondering if it would be okay if they joined the Occlumency lessons with me," said Harry. "Not that they especially need it, of course, but if they're willing, it would help me a lot. I didn't do very well with it last year, and I thought part of the reason might be that I didn't have anyone I could share the experience with, who could know exactly what I'd been through."

Dumbledore looked at the others, asking them a silent question. They all nodded. "Normally I would hesitate, Harry, as lessons for four may necessitate a different approach than lessons for one, and your situation is unique. But you make a good point about the advantages of companions. I warn you, however, that some aspects of this may involve things that are quite personal being shared or known. Does this disturb any of you?"

Three heads shook as one, and Ron shook his a second later, looking embarrassed that he was the only one who hesitated. "I did not think it would," continued Dumbledore, "but it was necessary to ask. Well, shall we get down to it, or did you have another question?"

"Yes, Professor," said Harry. "When we were talking in your office a few days ago, you said, 'One of the great but not well understood truths of life is that what we do to another, we do to ourselves.' What does that mean, exactly? That's not literally true, is it?"

"In a physical sense, no, but it is real enough nonetheless. One could say that it is psychically true, or spiritually true. If you do a kindness for another, one done with no thought of compensation or expectation, you feel better about yourself. So, in essence, you have done a kindness to yourself. If you harm another, it is because you yourself have been harmed. A perfectly content and happy person would never deliberately harm another; the thought would never occur. The harm

that you do another comes from the harm that has been done to you, and reinforces it. Doing harm becomes acceptable, and a cycle of harm is perpetuated. This is very damaging, so in harming another, you harm yourself. If you kill another, you do not literally kill yourself, but you kill a part of yourself—the part that can look in the mirror and not be disturbed. You have done something to another that can never be rectified, and the damage to yourself can never be fully repaired. I could give more examples, but I think you understand my point. Does that answer your question?”

“Yes, I guess so,” Harry said. “I had never thought of it that way before, but it makes sense. I asked because last night I was telling them about what happened in the Department of Mysteries, after Sirius died, when I chased after Bellatrix Lestrange. I didn’t tell you this, but at one point after I caught up with her, she taunted me about Sirius, and I lost all control. I—”

“I was aware of it, Harry. Even though I was not in the room, I am sensitive to... certain types of spells within a certain radius, and that one was impossible not to notice. I assume that you are now thinking of your action in terms of what I said, that your action may have caused grievous harm to yourself?” Harry nodded again. “I would say that you are right to be concerned, and that the very fact that you are concerned is reason to think that you should not be overly concerned. The primary factor to consider here is the overwhelming stress you were under. It is literally difficult to imagine more stressful circumstances. I would be deeply concerned if you had done what you did with forethought and deliberate intent, or if you had been able to sustain the spell. I assume the spell’s effects were brief?”

“Yes, very brief. She told me that you have to enjoy inflicting pain to make it work for any length of time. She almost seemed pleased that I’d done it, now that I think about it.”

“I would hardly be surprised. What you did could be described as a small step in the direction of the Dark forces. No doubt she would have been pleased to see you make more steps in that direction. That is how people end up as Dark wizards, in

many cases: a succession of small steps, moral compromises, ignoring of the conscience, and a slowly growing lust for power and dominance. That is how it sometimes happens. But it can also happen another way: if a person suffers a terrible loss or defeat and succumbs to the darkness instead of fighting his way through it, the transformation to darkness can be very rapid. Bellatrix Lestrange may have been hoping that would happen with you, her taunting designed to push you along such a path. She informed you of how to make the pain caused by the spell last longer to give you incentive to try again. If I may ask, what were the exact words of her taunt?"

Harry told him; Dumbledore nodded somberly. "I am not surprised. Like their master, the Death Eaters see love as insipid, useless, a weakness. He trains them to banish it, to despise it. She wanted you to see it as a weakness, to feel ashamed of it. Banishing love is another step towards darkness. Now, bear in mind, the word 'love' is often misunderstood as referring only or primarily to romantic love. Love is equally appropriately used to describe bonds of friendship, closeness, and affection. There is a famous Muggle quote: 'No greater love hath a man for his fellow man than that he lay down his life for him.' The love you felt for Sirius was so great that the pain of losing him was equally great, and it was this pain that she hoped to capitalize on.

"To get back to the original thrust of your question, you did cause yourself harm by your actions, but it was a temporary harm. It was of a cautionary nature, the type in which a child touches a hot stove and so learns not to do so again. I think it is highly likely that if you ever found yourself in a similar situation, you would not do what you did this time. Not because you would consciously choose differently—you did not consciously choose in this incident—but you would unconsciously choose differently."

Harry fervently hoped that Dumbledore was right. He was willing to take it on faith for the time being, as he was with anything Dumbledore said. "Thank you, Professor." Dumbledore tilted his head in acknowledgment.

“Shall we begin the Occlumency lesson, then?” Dumbledore asked. Harry and the others exchanged glances and nodded. Dumbledore conjured four cushiony, comfortable chairs and gestured them to sit, which they did.

“Firstly, Harry, I would like you to describe in some detail the nature of the lessons you received from Professor Snape last year. It will help me in choosing where to start.” Harry spent the next five minutes giving Dumbledore the highlights of his lessons with Snape, and Snape’s methods. Harry thought he saw Dumbledore’s face cloud up a few times during the account, which was remarkable, because Dumbledore almost never showed any negative emotion. He soon discovered that he wasn’t the only one who had noticed.

“Thank you, Harry,” said Dumbledore. “I now have a good idea of where to begin. Yes, Hermione?” he asked, seeing her hand in the air.

“Professor, you don’t approve of what Professor Snape did with Harry, do you? I could see it in your face, and that’s very rare for you.”

He nodded. “You are quite perceptive, Hermione. But yes, I am human, and my feelings will show in my face from time to time. I would have preferred that these did not, because a fundamental rule of teaching at Hogwarts is that teachers do not criticize each other in front of students. But your question deserves an answer.

“No, I do not approve of how Professor Snape handled Harry’s lessons. The largest problem was that he simply told Harry to clear his mind, without giving any specific instruction on how to do so. There are methods, disciplines, practices, which Professor Snape knows. He seems to have utilized a ‘learn by doing’ approach. His approach is technically defensible; no doubt there are some instances in which it could work. But I do not think he chose this method because he thought it would be efficacious.”

“In other words, he did it so that he could have an excuse to beat up on Harry mentally,” said Ron angrily.

“I would not put it that way, Ron, but I can see why you would,” allowed Dumbledore. “Professor Snape may well have thought that his way was best. I cannot know his intentions for certain.”

“But you suspect them, or you wouldn’t be upset about it,” Hermione noted.

“I would be disturbed in any case, because the instruction Harry received was counterproductive,” Dumbledore explained, not exactly addressing Hermione’s comment. “It is a necessary part of learning Occlumency that the instructor attempt to break into the student’s mind; practice is as necessary as learning theory. But I will not do so here for at least three or four lessons. First, I will attempt to help build the skills that will enable you to clear your minds. This will help you gain greater confidence when we do actual practice.”

Dumbledore then proceeded with the lesson, explaining the fundamentals of relaxation, clearing one’s mind, and dealing with distractions. He had them try it for a minute or two three times. He asked them how well they felt they did and what their problems were. After a little over an hour, he called a halt.

“I think that will do for now,” he said. “We will resume on Wednesday, the same time and place. In the meantime, I urge you to practice clearing your minds at least three or four times a day, and especially before going to bed. It is not only useful for the sake of the class, but also for your general well-being.” Dumbledore then bade them farewell and departed.

Harry was the first to speak. “Well, that was way better than any class I had with Snape, to put it mildly. It actually left me feeling more like I might be able to clear my mind, not less.”

“He was really upset about what Snape did to you, I could tell,” said Hermione.

“For him, that was practically an emotional outburst. I’d love to be a fly on the wall when he talks to Snape about it.”

“Snape’ll just lie, and deny that he wanted to harm Harry,” pointed out Ron.

“Could he lie to Dumbledore?” asked Ginny.

“It’s hard to say,” said Harry. “I wouldn’t think so, because this is Dumbledore. But then again, we think Snape’s serving as a spy for the Order, which would mean that he could lie to Voldemort. And if he can do that, maybe he can lie to Dumbledore.”

“I don’t know... I’d never bet against Dumbledore being able to overcome any wizard’s magic,” said Ron.

“Good point,” agreed Harry.

“Well, what do you think, Harry?” asked Ron. “D’you want to hang out here for a while, maybe have dinner with us? Or do you think the Dursleys’ll miss you if you come home late?”

“I don’t know... I hadn’t really thought about it. They don’t care whether I’m there or not, for the most part, so long as I don’t bother them. On the other hand, I don’t know what their reaction will be if I come traipsing through the fireplace at, say, 10:30 when they’re watching the telly. I just hate to go back; it’s like volunteering to step into a prison when you could be free. I don’t know what I should do.”

“I hate to say it, Harry,” said Hermione, “but the prudent thing to do is to go home now, or at least in a few hours, maybe 4:00 or 4:30. Definitely before your uncle gets home, whenever that is.”

“That’s usually around quarter to six,” supplied Harry.

“Okay, no later than five, then. Sometime tonight, explain your situation with the Occlumency lessons, and say that some days you’d like to stay over at the Weasleys’ for dinner, and ask what they think would be a good time for you to come home. Because you don’t want to disturb them by using the fireplace when they’re watching TV, and so on.”

“Or, I could come home at two a.m., when they’re in bed for sure,” joked Harry.

“No, I suppose you’re right. I’ll try it your way.”

“That’s great, Harry. Did you hear that, Ron? Harry said, ‘No, I suppose you’re right. I’ll try it your way.’ You ought to give that a try once in a while, too,” teased Hermione.

Ron gave her a ‘very funny’ look. “I’ll be sure to do that, Hermione. Just as soon as I get through reading ‘Hogwarts: A History.’ Should be any day now.”

“Is anybody else hungry?” asked Ginny, derailing Ron and Hermione.

It turned out that they all were, so they trooped into the kitchen to see what was around. They ate, then talked for a while. Eventually, regretfully, Harry headed back to Privet Drive.

CHAPTER 6

THE END OF SUMMER

The next three weeks passed by far more quickly than summers usually did for Harry. The highlights were, of course, Dumbledore's Occlumency lessons. It was always good to see Dumbledore; he exuded a calm and strength that Harry found magnetic. He and the others felt they were making good progress with Occlumency. They were better able to reach a relaxed state before going to bed, and had increasing success at blocking Dumbledore's attempts to penetrate their defenses during practice sessions. Harry also felt that his increased focus on mental calm was helping his tolerance of living at four Privet Drive.

Harry soon took to going to the Burrow far earlier than was necessary, usually soon after nine in the morning, and so ended up spending most of the day at the Burrow even if he had no Occlumency lesson, as Petunia and Vernon didn't care whether or not he was around, as long as he didn't use the fireplace in front of them. Between those long visits and the Occlumency lessons, Harry ended up spending more time around Ginny than he ever had, and by the end of the summer, found himself thinking of her more and more as part of their group.

In the last week of the Occlumency lessons, Dumbledore started taking extra time at the end of the lessons to work with Harry on developing the right state of mind to repel any future attempts by Voldemort to access Harry's mind, or take him over as had happened at the Department of Mysteries. Harry could see how it was related to Occlumency, as Dumbledore had said earlier. He followed Dumbledore's advice, but said little about it during the lessons because of his embarrassment at the presence of the others, who were the natural ones to think of when trying to access the feelings Dumbledore advised him to. Part of him wanted

to request privacy for that portion of the lesson, but he couldn't bring himself to ask; he didn't want to seem to be shutting the others out, after they'd supported him by taking lessons they didn't have to, for his sake.

Things at Privet Drive had not changed much since Dumbledore's visit. Vernon and Petunia did not harass Harry, but were still cool and distant. An arrangement had been worked out in which Harry could use the fireplace during certain designated hours. Dudley, to Harry's relief, did not ask further questions about the magical world, but was fairly amiable, and continued to treat Harry as a respected equal.

At the end of the first Occlumency lesson after Draco Malfoy's disciplinary hearing, Harry asked Dumbledore what would happen with Malfoy. Hermione, Ron, and Ginny looked unusually attentive. Looking amused, Dumbledore said, "Normally, the deliberations of the Wizengamot would be a matter of the utmost secrecy, and I would refrain from commenting. However, as Lucius Malfoy still has friends on the court, the deliberations will probably be common knowledge soon enough. I must ask, however, that what I say not go beyond you four." They nodded their assent.

"Mr. Malfoy will not receive the full penalty possible," Dumbledore said as Harry's heart sank. "The court considered several factors, including the fact that it was Mr. Malfoy's first offense, and that there was sufficient ambiguity surrounding the circumstances—that is, why Mr. Malfoy's spells were ineffective if no one was blocking them—to cause many to feel that making an example of Mr. Malfoy was not appropriate. The court does not like to crack down unless the facts are certain."

"A lot of them were ready to crack down on me last year," Harry muttered.

"Some were, but not nearly a majority, as you doubtless recall," pointed out Dumbledore. "This was in spite of considerable pressure from the leadership of the Ministry to do so. As I was saying, on the charges of standard underage magic--the spells used against Mr. Dursley--the court issued Mr. Malfoy a stern warning, assuring him that any further offenses would lead to the breaking of his wand. On

the charges of using spells, especially violent spells, against a Muggle—a charge separate from underage magic, as no unauthorized wizard of any age is permitted to use spells against a Muggle—and underage use of Disapparation, the court took slightly harsher action. Mr. Malfoy will not be allowed to use magic outside of Hogwarts, or apply for an Apparation license, until his eighteenth birthday. In essence, there will be a one-year delay for his assuming the rights and privileges of an adult wizard.”

He was interrupted by brief cheers and exclamations of “Yes!” from Harry, Ron, and Ginny. Hermione looked satisfied but said nothing.

“If I may continue...” Dumbledore said tolerantly. “He was also warned that he would do well to avoid any future altercations with you,” gesturing at Harry, “or Mr. Dursley, and that if there were any that came to the court’s attention, the weight of suspicion would fall heavily on him.” He paused. “There was considerable division within the Wizengamot on this matter. Some wanted to let him off with a mild warning; others wanted to, as the Muggles say, throw the book at him. The final decision was essentially a compromise.”

“It feels that way,” Harry agreed. “It’s not as much as he deserves, but it’s more than I thought he would get. So, I guess I’m satisfied. By the way, I was wondering... if you hadn’t been there, I would have used the Protection Charm on Dudley. If that had happened, do you think I would have suffered consequences?”

Dumbledore considered this. “It is difficult to say. Your past might have counted against you, but they would have been defensive spells only. In addition, as you pointed out to Mr. Malfoy, ‘the Boy Who Lived is back in favor at the Ministry,’ so there probably would have been no consequences.” Harry looked embarrassed. “I assume you said that to Mr. Malfoy in order to shake his confidence, and to goad him into using magic first.”

Harry nodded. “I was trying to get him angry. I figured it would make him more likely to make a mistake. It looks like it succeeded, just not in the way that I expected.”

“Professor, I have a question,” said Hermione. Dumbledore gestured at her to go ahead. “It seems like a strange coincidence that you happened to be the one following Harry at that time, especially since he was just going from Arabella Figg’s home to the Dursleys’. It isn’t just a coincidence, is it?”

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows. “I am not surprised that you should be the one to make that connection, Hermione. At times, you remind me rather strongly of a young Minerva McGonagall. She also had a very sharp mind at an early age.”

Hermione blushed. “Thank you, Professor. That’s quite a compliment.”

“To answer your question, no. There was... intelligence to suggest that the event was about to occur. Given the likelihood that Harry could be forced to use magic to defend himself, I decided to observe the situation personally.”

Harry would have loved to know the nature of this intelligence, but knew better than to ask. He recalled, though, that the last person he saw in Dumbledore’s presence before he left Hogwarts was Professor Snape. He smiled inside as he pictured Malfoy’s face if he ever discovered that.

Harry woke up late on Sunday morning and went downstairs to find that Vernon and Petunia were already gone. Dudley was sitting at the kitchen table, eating his favorite sugared cereal. Harry asked where they had gone.

“Dad’s golfing, and Mum’s out shopping with her friends. They said they wouldn’t be back until seven or so, and they’ll get takeaway for dinner. So at least I can eat as much of this as I want without Mum sniping at me.” He grinned. “So, what’re you up to today?”

“I’m going over to the Weasleys’ at about two, and from there we’re going to Diagon Alley. That’s kind of like downtown London for wizards,” Harry explained. “All the shops are there. Have to buy books and supplies and stuff for the next term. Every year, we meet Hermione there and make a day of it.”

“What kind of shops do they have there?”

“Some of them are the usual kind, like there are bars, restaurants, an ice cream parlor, and a pet shop,” Harry explained. “And then there are some you wouldn’t find in London, like the wand shop, the magical antiques shop, the Quidditch supplies shop, and Fred and George’s new joke shop... which reminds me, I’m going to pick up the Skiving Snackbox for you, but there’s something I need to tell you about first.”

“What’s that?” asked Dudley between mouthfuls of cereal.

“Actually, if there’s enough of that left, I wouldn’t mind some, too,” said Harry. Dudley shook the box, determined that there was enough, and gestured for Harry to help himself. Harry got out a bowl and a spoon, and sat down at the table.

“Thanks,” he said as he poured the cereal. “About the Snackbox... Professor Dumbledore told me the other day that he put another spell on them when he made sure that your magic sensor wouldn’t go off. It’s kind of a precaution, since this is against wizarding law and everything.”

Dudley nodded in acknowledgment. “And...?”

“It’s going to sound a little odd, but he put a Forgetfulness Charm on the box. What that means is, the owner of the box may not forget he has them, but as soon as he thinks of giving them to anyone else, he’ll develop a temporary loss of memory. He won’t remember he has them, and it’ll be like... you know how you sometimes get up to do something, and then forget what you were going to do? It’s like that. You’ll forget what you were going to do.”

“What’s the point of that?” Dudley asked.

“In this case, it’s extra protection to make sure they don’t fall into the wrong hands,” Harry explained. “He was concerned that you might try to share them with friends, so you could skive off together. The friend might use them incorrectly, and the symptoms could become severe, and so on. He wants to make sure only you use them. So if you get inclined to share them, you’ll forget what you were thinking about, and you won’t do it.”

Dudley rolled his eyes. “That seems like a bit much trouble to go to... he could’ve just asked me.”

Harry finished chewing a mouthful of cereal. “Yeah, but he knows that people our age don’t always do what’s prudent. He just wanted to be safe.”

“So why did you have to tell me? I would just forget if I tried, so I didn’t really need to know, right?”

“Once you have them, yes, that’s true,” Harry agreed. “But the charm will cause a problem with me getting them to you. See, the charm won’t only work on you; it’ll work on me, and anyone else. When I get to the shop, Fred and George may not remember that they have the box set aside. I’ll tell them where it is, and they’ll give it to me. I’ll take it home, but if I think about giving it to you, I’ll forget to do so.”

Dudley looked confused. “So, how am I going to get the box?”

“You’ll have to ask me for it,” Harry said. “Then I’ll remember, though for how long, I can’t say. You may have to ask me more than once. I’m telling you this so you’ll know I’m not being deliberately stupid, when it happens.”

“I’ll try to keep that in mind,” said Dudley, grinning. “But won’t I forget to ask you for it?”

“No, it only applies to the current owner of the box. But once you get it, if you wanted to mention something about it to me, you might forget. I’m not certain if you’ll forget only if trying to give it away, or just if trying to mention it. I haven’t really used this charm much before.”

“Is anything in your world simple?” Dudley wondered. Harry chuckled.

“Seems not, sometimes. In my first year there, I was getting big surprises every other week. The biggest one, of course, was not knowing I was famous. It took a long time to get used to having everyone recognize me because of the scar, and having these big reactions, like they were meeting the Pope or something. Very weird.”

“But not everyone likes you, though. What’d Malfoy do to tick you off?”

“It was his natural charm, which you saw personally a few weeks ago.” They both chuckled. “Actually, he was being friendly at first, but it was clear that to be his friend, you had to agree with what he thought.” He explained how Malfoy felt about pure-blood wizards and Muggles, but again emphasized that it was a minority view in the magical world. “So he’s insulting Ron up one side and down the other because they’re a bit on the poor side, and they’re known for their fondness for Muggles. I’d spent time with Ron on the train, and I could tell he was a good guy. So I basically told Malfoy where to go. Been a dependable enemy ever since.”

“Those two always with him?”

“Yeah, it’s pretty amazing, I almost never see him without them. One of the few times I did, I thought of saying, ‘Hey, where’s Moe and Curly?’” Dudley snickered. “Unfortunately, I realized I couldn’t, because he knows nothing about the Muggle world. In fact, for him it’s a point of pride that he knows nothing about the Muggle world. No point in insulting someone if they don’t know they’re being insulted.”

“Yeah, I see your point,” said Dudley, as he poured another bowl of cereal. “What’s his problem with Muggles, anyway? Did some beat him as a child or something?”

“No, but he was raised to think that way. Some wizards just take it for granted that they’re better than Muggles; that’s the crowd that tends to support Voldemort. I don’t even know why they think that. Of course, they think they’re better than other wizards, especially those who have Muggle blood. Like, Hermione is Muggle-born, both of her parents are dentists. He’s always saying the most foul things about her. And they think they’re better than pure-blood wizards who aren’t rich, like the Weasleys. So, they think they’re better than pretty much everybody. I guess some people like to think they’re better than everyone else.”

“Well, you do see that a lot,” agreed Dudley. “Thing is, it always seems like Mum and Dad think they’re better than wizards.” Harry noticed that Dudley was giving him a strange look, as if unusually curious to see how Harry reacted to this.

Harry thought about it. “It does seem that way, but I’m not sure they really believe it. I mean, I do think they don’t like it; they don’t much like anything that doesn’t fit their definition of normal. Look at how they reacted to your magic sensor.”

Dudley smiled. “Dumbledore was right, my friends really like it. Only problem is, they kept on asking me where I got it. Couldn’t very well tell them.”

“What did you end up telling them, then?” Harry asked curiously.

“Said I got it from a street vendor in London, so they can’t go looking for it.”

“Good idea,” Harry said. “Anyway, what I think is that they’re very scared of the wizarding world, going back to my mum being killed. I think I only realized it in the past month, after the thing with Malfoy, but it makes sense. You remember that when I was a kid, even before I went to Hogwarts, your parents, especially your mum, would go berserk at anything that happened that couldn’t easily be explained. They knew what it meant, even if I didn’t, and I think it really scared them. So I don’t think it’s really like what Malfoy and his type think.”

“Yeah, but it isn’t only wizards that Dad disapproves of,” Dudley pointed out. “He doesn’t like immigrants, people on the dole, men with long hair, women executives... I’m sure there’s a few others. He thinks he’s better than them.”

“Obviously, I don’t agree with a lot of what your father thinks, but it’s still different, I think. If the immigrants would go back to their home country, if people on the dole would get a job, if men with long hair got it cut, if women executives stayed home and became housewives, if wizards stopped using magic, he would approve of them. There is no one who your father would disapprove of if they did exactly what he thought they should do.”

“Then who would he complain about?” wondered Dudley jokingly.

“Dunno, maybe he’d be happier. Anyway, I think you see what I mean. But the people Malfoy disapproves of, most of them couldn’t change to get his approval if they wanted to. Muggles can’t become wizards, mixed-blood wizards can’t

become pure-blood, poor can't become rich. He dislikes them for things they can't help, so I think it's pretty different from your father."

"Didn't think I'd ever see you defending him," said Dudley.

"Let's just say I think I understand him a bit better, and most of all, I can sympathize with your parents being extra careful to see that you don't get killed."

"So, how did you start getting into trouble at your school, anyway? Tell me about all that stuff that's happened to you."

Harry looked at the clock. "Well, I can't tell you all of it, since I have to go in two and a half hours," he half-joked. "But I'll get started, anyway."

He launched into the story, starting at the beginning with the events of the first year. Dudley interrupted once in a while to ask questions. As 2:00 approached, Harry was finishing up his account of the third year.

"...so Hermione and I are in our beds, and as far as anybody knows, we've been there since we were brought in unconscious. They all come in, Snape is screaming that I must have helped Sirius escape. 'Out with it, Potter, what did you do?'" Harry smiled. "Funny thing is, he was right, he just couldn't explain why or how. So now Fudge thinks Snape's losing it, and they all leave. On the way home on the train, I got an owl from Sirius, telling me he was safe. So, he didn't end up being cleared like he should have been, but at least he was free."

"But the other guy, the one who was the rat, did he find his way back to Voldemort?" asked Dudley.

"I'm afraid that'll have to come under the heading of 'to be continued,'" Harry said. "I've got to get going in a few minutes."

"Okay, but you should have let Lupin and Sirius kill Pettigrew. He deserved it."

"I agree that he deserved it. But there's just something about cold-blooded murder that I can't bring myself to accept. I couldn't have it done in my name."

“But suppose,” asked Dudley, “that sometime in the future you’ve got Voldemort dead to rights. For whatever reason, you can’t capture him; your two choices are, kill him, or he gets away. Would you kill him then?”

The question chilled Harry, for reasons Dudley could not know; the prophecy’s words strongly suggested that Harry might well be faced with that very choice someday. He answered as honestly as he could.

“I should kill him. I know that, here,” he said, pointing to his head. “I just don’t know if I can get myself to do it. I suppose I’ll find out if the time ever comes.”

Harry got up and walked to the fireplace, Dudley following. Dudley said, “Have a good day. And thanks for telling me all that. I’d like to hear the rest sometime.”

“No problem.”

“Oh, and don’t forget the Snackbox.” Dudley was smiling at his own joke.

Harry laughed. “I’ll get it, but after that, you’ll have to not forget for me. Bye.”

Dudley said “Later,” as Harry shouted “The Burrow!” and stepped into the fire.

Harry walked out of the Burrow’s fireplace and was met by the whole group: Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, Ron, Ginny, and Hermione. They all greeted him with variations on ‘Hello, Harry,’ except for Mrs. Weasley, who said, “Hello, Professor,” and rubbed his head in greeting. Ron rolled his eyes.

“Do you have to call him that every time you see him, Mum? Can’t you see it embarrasses him?”

Mrs. Weasley’s tone suggested that that was the most absurd notion she’d ever heard. “Does that embarrass you, Harry, dear?”

Harry smiled. “Well, a bit, yeah,” he admitted. “But I know that’s not why you’re doing it,” he hastily added.

“You know we’re all proud of you, Harry,” said Mr. Weasley. Ginny and Hermione ostentatiously agreed.

“Yes, we know that, Mum’s mentioned it to him a dozen times or so,” said Ron.

“Well, I’ll stop doing it if Harry asks me to,” sniffed Mrs. Weasley.

Harry turned to her. “Mrs. Weasley, didn’t you say once that you considered me like part of the family?”

“Of course, Harry, dear! You know that!” She looked concerned at the thought that he even needed to ask that it be confirmed.

“Well,” said Harry, deadpan, “it seems to me that if I were a member of the family, you’d just say, ‘I’ll tell him as many times as I like, and I don’t care if it embarrasses him.’”

Hermione and the Weasleys burst out laughing, even Mrs. Weasley. Ginny said, “Well, it’s obvious that he’s spent enough time here to know how things work.”

Everyone was ready, and one by one they stepped into the fireplace, shouting “Diagon Alley!”

They made sure everyone was accounted for before setting out. After a stop at Gringotts to pick up some gold, Mrs. Weasley suggested that they go to Flourish & Blotts to get the year’s books before doing anything else. Harry had brought his booklist, but it was going to be very easy. Sixth and seventh years only needed one book for each class, and it was always the same one. The title was, “The Standard N.E.W.T. Guide to...” followed by the course name. He would only need five books, Ron eight, and Hermione, ten.

“How did you decide which books we were going to use, Harry?” Ginny asked.

“I didn’t, really,” he answered. “I asked Dumbledore and McGonagall to choose the books for me. They’re really only for reference, anyway. Dumbledore advised me not to teach from the book. For the fifth years, I may teach somewhat

with O.W.L.s in mind, but in general, I'm going to try to teach people what they need to know to survive a dangerous situation."

"Good idea, Harry," said Ron, smiling. "Stick with your expertise."

Harry smiled back, but Mrs. Weasley gave Ron a that's-not-funny look.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione purchased their books and waited for Ginny, whose books weren't so easy to find, having different titles. After she finished, Mrs. Weasley asked everyone to bind up their books and give them to her.

"Hey, let's go to Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes," suggested Harry. "I've really been looking forward to seeing their place."

"You go on ahead, dears," said Mrs. Weasley. "Arthur and I are going to try out that new restaurant at the end of the street. We'll find you when we're done." The Weasleys said goodbye and walked in the other direction.

Harry looked at the others in puzzlement. "Was that because they're hungry, or do they not want to see the shop?"

"They've seen the shop already," Ginny explained, "and according to Fred and George, Mum can't manage to say anything nice about it. I think Mum doesn't want to risk a row with all of us there."

"That's too bad," said Harry. "I'm still glad I gave them the money, though. So, where is it exactly?" Ron and Ginny had been there before, and led the way.

"Are they still doing well?" Hermione asked. "Those were pretty wild dragon hide jackets they were wearing at King's Cross in June."

"Yeah, still doing well, especially since then—as school's out, there are more young customers," said Ron. "And Mum wasn't especially impressed with the jackets, either."

Harry shook his head in wonder. Why couldn't Mrs. Weasley, normally a kind person, be happy that her sons were doing what they were happy doing, and making quite a good living at it as well?

As they entered the shop, Harry saw some items in the front window that he'd seen at Hogwarts, and a couple of posters which advertised products, except

that the people and things in these posters moved, of course. One poster repeatedly showed a student taking a Nosebleed Nougat, being excused from class, and relaxing outside in the sunshine under a tree. The other, larger poster displayed images of the Weasley's Wildfire Whiz-bangs, the fireworks that Fred and George had used to such great effect on Dolores Umbridge's first day of her short reign as Hogwarts' Headmistress.

Fred was behind the counter, and his face lit up when he saw the four of them. "Hey, George, get out here," he shouted. To them, he said, "Thought we'd be seeing you around this time. So, Harry, Hermione, what do you think?"

"It's brilliant," said Harry. He was looking around in wonder at all the products. He recognized a few of them from having seen them at Hogwarts, but there were many he had never seen. "How did you get so many products going so quickly? I had no idea you were doing this much."

"Well, what did you think we were doing at Hogwarts, studying?" asked George cheerfully as he walked in from the back room. "No indeed, we were hard at work, just not the sort of work the school expects or appreciates. No school-sponsored outlets for our creative energy existed."

"True genius is often not recognized," agreed Harry. He was joking, but he felt there was some truth to it as well.

"Exactly! See, he understands," enthused Fred. "But Harry recognized it, though. After all, it is only because of dear Harry's mental instability—"

"You mean, generosity," George corrected him.

"—yes, generosity, thank you—that we are able to have this shop at all. We salute you, Harry, as do the thousands of youngsters that we dearly hope our products will get into a lot of trouble."

"And you two were the first of those youngsters, from what I hear," observed Hermione. Fred and George's faces formed into almost identical what-can-you-do expressions.

“Mum’ll come around,” said George, “it’s just taking her a bit longer to get used to it than we thought it would. That’s one reason to move out—the less she sees of us, the more she’ll miss us, which would be a good thing right now.”

“Anyway, I have to agree with Harry, it’s very impressive,” said Hermione, picking up a quill. “I’ve never seen this before. It’s called an Invisi-Quill?” she asked, reading the label. “What does it do, write in invisible ink?”

“Ah, nothing so simple, dear girl,” assured Fred, as she frowned at him for ‘dear girl.’ “No, this is one of our most diabolical goodies. It bewitches the paper, not the ink. You start to write, and the ink disappears exactly one minute after it hits the paper. The unfortunate victim will think it’s a problem with the quill, and put it aside, but the same thing will continue to happen as long as the same paper or parchment is used. Really quite nasty.”

“We’re debating a disclaimer suggesting it not be used on people with heart conditions,” said George.

“Yes, well, the problem is that once you start with disclaimers, there’s no end to it,” pointed out Fred. “Should we put disclaimers on our fake wands, saying ‘Do not use this to cast or block spells?’ It’s a bad precedent. No, we must rely on the intelligence and maturity of our customers.”

“Many of whom will be children,” Hermione pointed out.

“Exactly,” agreed Fred. “So they won’t bother to read disclaimers anyway.”

Hermione opened her mouth, then paused, seemingly debating how to respond. Harry chuckled. “These are really nice wrappers on the products. Did you do all these as well?”

“No, our art is confined to humor and mayhem. Lee did all of the packaging; you recall he’s quite good with a pen,” said George. “We’ve been giving him steady work all summer; he’ll be starting his new job soon, and we still have new product lines to roll out.”

“Even more? My, you have been busy little beavers,” said Hermione, impressed.

“Well, really, we got in a lot of relaxing at Hogwarts,” said Fred. “Now we’re doing exactly what we want to do, so who needs to relax? I mean, Hermione, it would be like if somebody paid you to study every day. Wouldn’t you think that was the best job in the world?”

Ron laughed out loud; Harry and Ginny successfully muffled their giggles. “See, I try to compliment you, and this is what I get,” said Hermione, affecting a put-upon manner.

“Sorry, Hermione, but that’s not going to work. We’ve gotten that from Mum for so long, we’re immune to it,” said George.

Deciding he’d better do it now before he forgot, Harry said, “Professor Dumbledore was in here a few weeks ago, wasn’t he?”

“Yes, he was,” said George.

“It was an honor,” agreed Fred. “He was very complimentary. Said something about how we’d found our true calling. He bought a few things, as well, which was even more complimentary. He said they were Christmas presents.”

“I wonder who Dumbledore gives Christmas presents to,” said George. “Must be a very select group.”

“He had you set something aside,” Harry said. “It was for me. Could you get it for me?”

“Set something aside? Was that you, Fred?”

“No, I think I’d remember that,” said Fred. “Are you sure you’re not confused, Harry?”

Harry smiled. “No, I think you two are the ones who are confused. Tell you what, go look in whatever place you would put something if you were going to set it aside.”

The twins exchanged ‘is he crazy?’ looks, then George went to a specific desk drawer and opened it. He pulled out a Skiving Snackbox. “Fred, did you put this here?”

“No, must’ve been you,” replied Fred.

“No, I’m sure I didn’t,” said George. Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny all started laughing; all had been present when Dumbledore told Harry about the Forgetfulness Charm. “What’s so funny?”

“No way to tell which one of you it was, or maybe it was both,” Harry explained. “Dumbledore put a Forgetfulness Charm on the box and asked you to set it aside. It was for me.”

“Why the charm, then? Why didn’t you just ask us to send it to you?” asked Fred.

Harry spent about ten minutes explaining the situation with Dudley and Dumbledore. Fred and George listened raptly as Ginny, Hermione, and Ron browsed the shop and talked. Finally, both shook their heads.

“I don’t know whether to be more surprised at Dudley wanting the box, or Dumbledore letting him have it,” said George.

“He’s going to assist in the breaking of wizarding law so that a Muggle can skive off his classes. A truly great man, Albus Dumbledore,” said Fred, as George nodded solemnly.

“Let’s get you a bag for that, Harry,” offered George.

As George looked around for a bag, Harry asked Fred, “So, how much do I owe you?” Fred and George burst out laughing, in such a way as to make Harry think he must have said something totally absurd. “What?” he asked them.

“Harry, my lad,” said Fred, “if you think for a moment that we will allow you to pay for any merchandise from our shop, then you are even more crazy than you were when you gave us the gold in the first place.”

“Absolutely out of the question,” agreed George. “Not even open for discussion.”

“But we’ll forgive your little faux pas, because that’s the kind of people we are,” said Fred proudly.

Harry smiled. “I suppose I deserved that, for threatening to hex you back then.”

“Harry, I don’t think you quite understand what you’ve done here,” said George. “If not for you, there would not be this lovely shop in Diagon Alley. We’d be at the Burrow, with little prospect of leaving anytime soon, trying to do an owl-order business, with many fewer products than you see here, and with Mum making frequent comments about our inappropriate career choice. You’ve changed all of that.”

“Well, except for Mum,” allowed Fred. “Not much he can do about her. She’s a force of nature.”

“Maybe I should try a bit harder,” said Harry, as the other three wandered over to join them. “I am rather on her good side now, after all.”

“You’re always on her good side, Harry,” pointed out George. “Why now more than any other time?”

Harry looked questioningly at Ron and Ginny. “They don’t know?”

Ginny shook her head. “We knew you’d be coming here before school started, and we wanted you to be the one to tell them.”

Harry thanked her and Ron, and turned to the twins. “I feel like giving you hints and making you guess, but that wouldn’t be fair, since this is so unusual. Dumbledore asked me to be this year’s Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher.”

There was ten or fifteen seconds of silence and astonished looks. Finally Fred, wearing a concerned expression, said, “Harry, I wish you would reconsider this. I mean, we’ve really become fond of you, and we hate to see you do this to yourself. You’re so young, you still have so much to live for.”

George added, “Don’t do it, Harry. Don’t take this kind of risk on a reckless whim.” He shook his head somberly. “You always have been too ready to confront danger. Now look what’s happened.”

Ron was chuckling, but Hermione and Ginny did not look pleased at all. “All right, you two, that’s enough,” said Hermione.

“Where have we heard that phrase before,” muttered Fred.

“Can you imagine what Mum would have done if one of her natural-born children had managed to become a Hogwarts teacher at the age of sixteen?” wondered George aloud. “Words fail me.”

“You should have seen her when Harry told her,” Ron said. “Her voice got so high it was a squeak, and she wouldn’t let go of Harry for, like, two minutes or so. If she had a heart condition, I’d have been worried. Even now, she still calls him ‘Professor’ all the time, and you can tell she’s still incredibly proud of him.”

“I reckon this is because of what you did with the D.A., Harry?” asked Fred.

Harry nodded, and told them about the D.A. members’ O.W.L. results. Fred whistled appreciatively. “Yeah, I can see how that would impress people. You can do it, of course. You just have to be confident.”

“And don’t take anything off the Slytherins,” George added. “Crack down on them if they give you a hard time.”

“I’ve already told him,” Ginny assured them. “He’ll be fine, and he’ll break that jinx. You’ll see.”

“We do hope our little sister is right,” Fred said. “Now, Ron and Hermione, you have to be respectful of the teacher. Don’t want him giving you any detentions.”

“Harry’s only teaching first through fifth years,” Ron explained. “Dumbledore’s going to teach the N.E.W.T. classes.”

Fred and George exchanged amazed looks. “You know,” said Fred, “I think I’m suddenly developing a whole new appreciation for the value of N.E.W.T. classes.”

“Quite so,” agreed George. “It does seem as though we left the place one year too early.”

“No, I think you two left at just the right time,” said Harry. “If you hadn’t been ready to leave anyway, you couldn’t have caused all that mayhem at the end of last year, and it was very important to school morale, even Hermione thinks so. I

told them that I think you ought to be given Special Awards for Services to the School.”

Fred and George looked uncharacteristically modest. “Thanks, Harry,” said George. “but what would we do with that? I mean, except for the fact that it would annoy Percy that we got one and he never did, what good would it do?”

“Well, there’s also the fact that your escape is now Hogwarts legend,” Harry pointed out. “That’s got to mean a fair bit of extra business for the shop.”

“That’s true,” agreed Fred. “We have gotten a lot of business over the summer from Hogwarts students, and they often mention our little rebellion. So that worked out well. Still, it would have been great to take classes from Dumbledore.”

“Yeah, we’re really looking forward to it,” said Ron.

“We should really be moving on,” suggested Ginny. They had been at the Weasley’ shop for over a half hour.

“I suppose so,” agreed Ron.

“I really am glad to see you two doing so well,” said Hermione to Fred and George. “It was good to see you again, and I’ll be sure to pop in whenever I’m in Diagon Alley.”

“See that you do,” urged Fred. “And Harry, congratulations. Not that I envy what you’ll be doing, but better than the prestige or the job itself is the fact that it means that Dumbledore has a lot of confidence in you. That’s the reason to be proud.”

“I can’t argue with you there,” Harry said. “And thanks for this,” holding up the bag with the Snackbox in it.

George scoffed. “It’s very little. Seriously, Harry, anytime, whether you want a fake wand or a Deflagration Deluxe, just tell us, and it’ll be yours on the next owl. Now you all have a good day.”

“And a good term,” added Fred. “Remember, Harry, no mercy for the Slytherins.”

“I’ll be reminding him of that, too” said Ginny. “Bye!”

They said their goodbyes and left the shop. Ron suggested they head over to Florean Fortescue’s ice cream parlor, and the others agreed. As they approached the parlor, at one of the outdoor tables, they saw Neville and his grandmother. Both stood up as they saw Harry and the others heading their way.

“Neville! It’s good to see you again,” said Ginny.

“Hi, everyone,” said Neville cheerfully. “C’mere, pull another table over next to this one and sit down.” They did so

Mrs. Longbottom looked like her usual no-nonsense self. “I’m pleased to see you all again,” she said, politely. “Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Professor Potter.” The others smiled at Harry’s expense, knowing he would be embarrassed. To Harry, she said, “Would you step over here for a moment, please? I would like to have a private word with you. Unless you would like to order first.”

Harry wanted to look at Neville to see whether he had any idea of what this was about, but he didn’t, as he didn’t want Mrs. Longbottom to see him doing so. He told Hermione what he wanted, and she took the others’ ice cream orders and went to the counter. Harry walked off with Mrs. Longbottom. When they were far enough away not to be overheard, she regarded him sternly, but with respect.

“First of all, Professor, I wish to congratulate you on your new position. I daresay you will improve on your predecessors’ performances.”

Harry fought back the urge to say ‘it would be hard not to,’ feeling that Mrs. Longbottom may not appreciate humor right then. He settled for saying, “Thank you, but I’m still not used to being called ‘Professor.’”

“Well, you had better get used to it. It will happen a lot more, very soon. Now, there are two things I wish to ask you about. Firstly, I would like to know to what you attribute the change in Neville over the past year. You see a great deal of him, so perhaps you have some idea.”

Harry considered the question. He had noticed that Neville’s focus and effort in D.A. sessions had increased dramatically right after the dementors joined

Voldemort, meaning that those who had tortured Neville's parents into insanity were free. He had assumed that Neville felt a greater need to be able to protect himself, or even a desire for revenge, but he didn't want to say any such thing to Neville's grandmother. He didn't know for sure, and it was very personal in any case; Neville hadn't discussed it with him, or anyone else that he knew of. He decided to give the answer he thought he would give if there had been no escape from Azkaban.

"You know, I've wondered about that myself. It's hard to say for sure. The first time I noticed any change was when Malfoy insulted me one day, acting like I was unbalanced and should be sent to St. Mungo's, and said something nasty about the kind of people in St. Mungo's. Neville just lost his temper and went straight for Malfoy. I had to hold him back so he wouldn't get clobbered by Malfoy's minions, then he was angry at me for holding him back. Anyway, I'd never seen him do anything like that before that day.

"Apart from that, being in the D.A. must have helped him; it gave him a focus for his energy. He started working really hard, harder than anyone else in the group. I was amazed at how fast he improved. As his skill increased, so did his confidence. But other than that, I can't say I know what did it."

Mrs. Longbottom nodded. "I understand. Here is my second question: Why did you give Neville the information you did about the prophecy?"

Harry had suspected this might come up. "I didn't tell him deliberately or specifically; I was talking to all my friends, and he was there. Also, I thought he deserved to know. I would have wanted to know if it was me. Do you think I shouldn't have told him?"

She glanced down, and for the first time he saw a small amount of uncertainty and vulnerability in her eyes. "No, that is not what I think. This has been very distressing for Neville, and I wished to understand your motivations. The fact is, when his parents were attacked, Neville was with me, but I did not know about the prophecy or that Neville or his parents might be in any unusual danger. I

cannot say whether Frank and Alice knew of the prophecy, or whether that is what they lost their sanity protecting. It is easy to see why you and the others suspect that this is so. Part of me wishes that Neville had never discovered this. But, as you say, he has a right to know.” She paused. “Very well, Professor. Thank you for your time.” She headed back to the others, leaving Harry to follow.

They went back to the table, where Ron was urging Neville to visit Weasley’s Wizarding Wheezes. “...and almost everything there was invented by them personally, so it’s not stuff you could get at Zonko’s, or anywhere else.” Neville said he would be sure to go there, as Mrs. Longbottom suggested to Neville that they move along. Looking a bit disappointed, Neville said goodbye and said he would see them on the Hogwarts Express.

“Why doesn’t he resist her more? I mean, he meekly goes along with anything she wants,” Ron said. To Ginny, he continued, “I mean, you and I, everyone except Percy, really, we give Mum a good run for her money. Why doesn’t he?”

“It’s hard to say, Ron,” said Hermione. “But you’ve seen what she’s like. She acts as though doing what she says is only common sense, and you’re a moron if you don’t. But I do agree that that wouldn’t stop many children from rebelling. We’re all different, I guess.”

“I have to wonder what it would be like for Neville if he had been able to grow up with his parents,” said Harry. “I sometimes wonder what that would be like for myself. Would I be a different person? If so, how? I guess you can never know, but it’s hard not to wonder.”

They looked at him sympathetically. “No, we can’t know. I guess we’re just stuck with what we’ve got,” said Ginny. “It’s not fair, though. For you or Neville.”

“As my aunt and uncle have said many times, and I assume almost all parents have said to their children...” The rest joined him in saying it: “Life isn’t fair.”

Harry entered the four Privet Drive fireplace at about 6:30. Dudley was on the sofa, watching TV. “Hey, Harry,” he said. “Have a good time?”

Harry found he was still not quite used to Dudley being so amiable with him. “Yeah, pretty good. Got my schoolbooks and supplies.”

“Did you get the Skiving Snackbox? I was hoping to get it from you before Mum and Dad get home.”

“Snackbox? Oh, yeah, that was pretty funny. Fred and George didn’t remember that they had it. Almost started arguing over who forgot about it. I had to tell them about Dumbledore’s spell; they didn’t know he had done it.” He paused, remembering. “Well, I’d better get this up to my room.”

Dudley rolled his eyes. “Okay, but could you give me the Snackbox first?”

Harry blinked. “Of course, sorry. Yeah, that was a strong spell Dumbledore put on it. I hope I can be half as strong as he is someday.” He looked down at Dudley, who was looking up at him expectantly. “I’m sorry, what were you saying?”

Dudley snickered. “Well, you did warn me that this would happen,” he allowed. “Tell you what, why don’t I come up to your room with you? I’d like to see what you got.”

“Okay, sure,” said Harry, wondering why Dudley was so interested. After all, it was only his N.E.W.T. books and a few other things. They went up to Harry’s room and sat down on his bed.

“So, what have you got?” Dudley asked.

“Mostly books for my N.E.W.T. classes,” Harry said, showing Dudley the books and explaining about O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s. “I’m taking the classes needed to train to be an Auror—Defense Against the Dark Arts, Potions, Charms, Transfigurations, and I’m also taking Care of Magical Creatures, which isn’t strictly necessary, but I like it.”

Dudley thumbed through the books. “Get anything else?”

“Just some quills and parchment, and...” He pulled out the Snackbox.

“So, is that ringing any bells?” Dudley smiled.

“I was going to... to give you this, right?” Dudley nodded as Harry handed the box over.

“Wow... that was even harder than you said it was going to be,” said Dudley. “Now that you don’t have the box anymore, are you starting to remember?”

“Yeah, I remember everything now. I don’t know if it’s just because it’s Dumbledore, but that’s a powerful spell. I guess that’s a pretty good demonstration why not to give them to anybody—if you try, you’ll just end up looking stupid.”

“Yeah, I’m pretty convinced,” said Dudley. “You knew that was going to happen, but it still worked just the same. He wasn’t kidding with that spell.”

“Fred and George were amazed that he was going to let you have it at all,” said Harry. “What did they say exactly... ‘He’s going to assist in the breaking of wizarding law so that a Muggle can skive off his classes. A truly great man, Albus Dumbledore.’”

Dudley laughed. “What else did you talk to them about?”

“Oh, they gave me a hard time about being a teacher,” Harry said. He related their teasing about the jinx on the position. “I told them what happened with you and Malfoy... just catching up on news.”

“That reminds me, whatever happened to him?” Dudley asked. “Did he get himself in big trouble?”

Harry explained what the result was. “So, that’s pretty good,” he concluded. “He’ll be very angry, that’s for sure. And, really, that’s the important thing.” They both grinned.

“Is it really that bad? It doesn’t sound like much.”

“Look at it this way. Would you think it was a big deal if you had to wait a whole year to drive?” Dudley nodded vigorously. “Well, that’s what it’s like. Apparating is like driving—the freedom to go anywhere you want. Every wizard looks forward to it, like every Muggle looks forward to driving. Trust me, it’s a big deal.”

“Excellent,” Dudley said, now smiling evilly. “Better not tell Mum, though.”

“I agree,” Harry said. “No need for her to think about Malfoy sitting around with nothing to do but plot revenge.”

Just then, the family car drove into the driveway. “Ah, good, they’re home,” said Dudley. “They’ll have takeaway. I’m hungry, just been eating junk all day.”

“Me too,” said Harry. He’d just had cake and ice cream at Florean Fortescue’s. “If you want to come up here after dinner, I’ll continue the story from this morning.”

Dudley nodded, and they went downstairs.

The following Friday was the day Harry had to leave for Hogwarts. Normally he would take the Hogwarts Express on Sunday, but as a teacher, he had to receive orientation and attend pre-term meetings. He had spent a lot of August thinking about how he was going to teach his lessons—heavy on practice so he wouldn’t have to give lectures, which he didn’t think he could do—and so wasn’t sure he could do much more. The book Hermione gave him had year-by-year charts of what spells and basic information the students should have. He used that as a rough guide, but he hoped to sit down with Dumbledore before the term started, show him the charts and what he planned to do, and ask for guidance.

Harry felt he had done what he could to prepare for going to Hogwarts as a teacher. Still, it was with some trepidation that he got ready to depart on Friday morning. He was double-checking his trunk to make sure it had everything when the phone rang, and he heard Dudley’s yell. “Harry! It’s Hermione!” Harry ran downstairs. As he walked into the kitchen, Dudley was saying, “Yeah, I hope so... no problem... okay, here he is.” He handed the phone to Harry.

“Hermione, how are you doing?”

“Good, I just wanted to say goodbye before you left. Ron did too, but of course he doesn’t have a phone, so he just told me in the fireplace to tell you to not worry, you’ll do fine. That’s what I say, too, of course.”

“I know, thanks. I’m sorry I’ll have to miss you on the Hogwarts Express. It’ll seem strange not doing that this year. Of course, you and Ron will be together in the prefects’ car.”

“With Malfoy, ugh, I can hardly wait...”

“Don’t talk to him, and if he says anything, just ignore him. Talk to Ernie and Hannah. Find out how they feel about the Astronomy thing.”

“I’d rather not do that in front of Malfoy, you know what he’ll do...”

“Yeah, start a campaign to undermine you. I forgot. Well, there’s other things. Talk about the D.A., Malfoy’ll love that. If you want, you can tell him about me being a teacher. I mean, I was looking forward to seeing his face at the feast, but if he’s really making you crazy, you can go ahead and do it.”

“Thanks, Harry. I appreciate it, but I’m not going to. You haven’t thought this through. It would be fun for a half hour or so, but it takes five hours to get to Hogwarts, as you know, and the prefects can leave their car after the first hour. What’s the first thing Malfoy’s going to do?”

Harry sighed. “Walk up and down the train, telling every Slytherin and orchestrating boos, hissing, and throwing things when I’m announced at the feast.”

“Exactly. No, it has to be a secret. In fact, I’ll talk to Ron, Ginny, and Neville today and make sure they know not to tell anyone. We’ll just have to be looking for him in the crowd when Dumbledore introduces you.”

“That should be a sight to see. Of course, I’ll probably be so nervous I’ll forget to look. I mean, when I come out the teachers will applaud, they always do, but what about the students? Everyone will be so stunned, I won’t even get polite applause.”

“Then just go with it, Harry. Make a joke about it. Tell them that was your first reaction too. My advice is, be yourself. Don’t try to make some prepared speech. Imagine you’re talking to D.A. members. If Slytherins jeer or shout comments, ignore them, or put them down if you can think of a comeback. Just keep cool. Before you come out, do some of the Occlumency exercises.”

“That’s a good idea, I hadn’t thought of that,” Harry said. “Thanks, you’re really a fountain of good advice sometimes.”

Hermione chuckled. “If anyone else said that, especially Ron, I’d be sure they were being sarcastic. But I know you mean it, and it’s nice of you to say so.” She paused. “Of course, you don’t think it’s so good when it’s advice about getting your homework done promptly.”

“No, I know that’s good advice, too,” Harry assured her. “It’s just good advice I’m not as likely to take.”

“One more bit of advice: don’t let Snape push you around. Now, you’re a teacher, he’s a teacher. If he’s rude to you, you can be rude to him—except in Potions, of course. But outside that, if he doesn’t treat you with the respect he gives other teachers, call him on it. Dumbledore and McGonagall will support you.”

“I hope you’re right,” Harry said. He talked to her for a few more minutes, then hung up and walked upstairs to his room to make sure that everything was in his trunk. He picked up Hedwig’s cage, grabbed the trunk’s handle, and headed downstairs.

Dudley was on the sofa watching TV. “Are you going to drag that thing into the fire?” he asked, gesturing at the trunk.

“No, they’ve given me a minor exception to the underage magic rule; I’m allowed to use magic to make the trunk light, so I can carry it easily.” He tapped the trunk with his wand, then lifted it. It weighed less than a schoolbook. “What did Hermione say to you on the phone?”

“She thanked me for helping put Malfoy in his place, and said that maybe this year he won’t be strutting around like he owns the place. I said I hope so.”

“I hope so too, but I’m not optimistic. I’m not sure he knows any other way to act.” Harry put out his hand. “Have a good term,” he said.

Dudley shook it. “You, too. Let’s see if you can keep the number at ten.”

Harry laughed. “I’ll do my best.” He tossed Floo powder into the fire, shouted “Hogsmeade Owl Office,” stepped into it, and disappeared.