

Anima Summa Book 1

The Mystery of Rhedae

By

Anima Summa

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Prologue The Prophecy

It was two in the morning in the far-off forbidden forest near ancient Rhedae. It was a time when all the creatures of the forest should have been asleep.

Suddenly, the dark forest stirred with the excited calls of a multitude of Magical Creatures. Their tormented roars, hisses, growls and yelps filled what should have been a peaceful time of the night. Hippogriffs suddenly took flight and Trolls wandered about in a stupor looking for something - anything - to bash. Acromantulas scurried about the forest floor thinking that a late meal was approaching but were confused when it didn't. The Romanian Longhorn dragons' eyes rolled in their heads as they tried to pinpoint the source of the magical emanations that had disturbed them. They crashed through the undergrowth in a vain search for the offending mind, wanting to end the feeling of uneasiness that was instilled in them.

At the edge of the forest four ramblers slept in a small tent, weary after the previous day's hike through the foothills of the Pyrenees Mountains that straddled the Franco-Spanish border. Before they had pitched camp they had come upon the forest but were, inexplicably, unable to enter - it was as if some unseen thing was warning them away. Their tiredness prevented a retreat, however, and they had agreed to stay outside the forest just until the morning. They now wished that they had left immediately the previous evening.

A horrific roar woke all four sleepers. They nervously looked outside their tent for the cause, and were left speechless and terrified at the sight that confronted them. Dragons were not supposed to exist! So if that were the case, what the hell were the enormous creatures that were running about just inside the forest perimeter?

"Bloody Nora!" yelled one of the hikers, his northern-British accent sounding incongruous in this part of Europe. "Look at the size of those sodding gnashers - I'm off!"

All four took flight directly away from the dragons, knowing that the nearest village was many miles away, but not caring to stay around to become a tasty snack for the unholy denizens of this weird place. They weren't to know that the dragons were prevented from leaving the forest by magical wards set up by the French Ministry of Magic.

Deep beneath the ground, some twenty miles or so away from this fevered activity, the spirit that was the cause of the disturbance continued to send out its mind power into the world. It had been awakened from its age-old slumber by the triggering of a magical alarm set nearly one thousand years ago. It had received its warning of the imbalance in the world - an imbalance that would inevitably lead to an age of evil. The spirit was there to warn of this abomination, and was now calling to the one force of light that could do something about it.

It didn't know, however, who the current force of light was, or if he or she was yet strong enough, magically, to receive its summons, or was prepared for the coming conflict.

It could only send out its magical summons and hope that it was acted upon. It would continue to broadcast until the light arrived. It could now only wait....

Rubeus Hagrid sat outside his shack, near the Forbidden Forest, at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. His eyes were closed, soaking up the warm summer sunshine. The school and its surroundings were always peaceful at this time of year. It was summer recess, and the students and most of the teachers had left for their holidays well over a week ago. Hagrid was reflecting on his failed attempt to persuade the giants of Eastern Europe to help in the coming fight against Voldemort and his Dark Minions. He was satisfied for now that he had persuaded them, with the help of his giantess mother, Fridwulfa, to remain neutral. But he didn't know how long that situation would last. A newly resurrected Voldemort would also, no doubt, be trying to win over the support of the giants.

A rustling of leaves at the edge of the forest shook Hagrid from his reverie and he looked to find what the cause was. His eyes widened at the sight of Ronan and Firenze, his centaur friends, gesturing to him from just inside the confines of the woods. It was unlike them to come so near to Hogwarts during daylight hours, normally preferring to stay away from the people at the school.

"'Ello, I wonder what's up with `em," thought Hagrid as he moved toward the centaurs, "Something must be wrong for `em to come this close to the school."

"Ronan, Firenze - what's up? What brings you `ere at this time o' the day? I thought you were night-birds."

"Greetings, friend Hagrid," said Ronan, "We have an urgent message for Professor Dumbledore, and we'd like you to deliver it for us. Last night the stars were full of portents and we saw a dire prophetic warning. It is essential that you tell Professor Dumbledore immediately. Please write it down so that there can be no mistake."

"'Ang on, I'll get some parchment and a quill - back in a mo'," and he quickly went to his hut.

"Right, then, let's `ave it," said Hagrid when he returned.

Firenze took on a look much like Professor Trelawney when she went into one of her trances, and began to recite the prophecy

"... He who was once defeated has again risen and will enslave mankind. The world will then enter a long period of darkness from which there can be no escape. This can be prevented only if the former conqueror uncovers the ancient secret and then joins with his Anima Summa and together build their strength."

"Ok, I've got that and thanks. What does it mean?" asked Hagrid scratching his head.

"It is not for us to interpret the prophesies of the stars. We just read them and pass them to those who are needful," answered Ronan.

"Right, ok. I'll go and see Professor Dumbledore straight away," and Hagrid rushed off towards the school, waving to the two centaurs as they disappeared back into the forest.

Meanwhile in the headmaster's office, Fawkes was exercising - jiggling from foot to foot, swinging around his perch, and letting out his distinctive Phoenix song in a slightly annoyed

way. He'd been awakened a little earlier by the arrival of Professor McGonagall, the deputy headmistress.

Dumbledore looked up at McGonagall. "Minerva, I've given a lot of thought about the ways in which we can help Harry. I think he'd have an advantage over the Dark Side if he were to become an Animagus. Only we would know this of course, but he'd have to register when the threat from Voldemort is over. Can you give Harry private and secret instructions on the Transformation Spells?"

"Of course, headmaster," replied McGonagall. "Harry should be able to complete the transformation training without too much bother, since his father was also an Animagus at about the same age. I'll begin his training when school starts."

"Thank you, Minerva."

A knock at the door signalled the arrival of two other teachers, and they sat down at Dumbledore's gesture.

The group sat around the headmaster's desk - Severus Snape, the Potions Master at the left, Minerva McGonagall next to him, then and Remus Lupin on the right. Lupin had been re-appointed Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher for the coming year, which didn't go down well with Snape, who had always wanted the job. Everyone knew, however, that Snape was the best Potions Master in Europe, so Dumbledore was reluctant to move him from that post.

Much to the surprise and horror of Snape and McGonagall, a tall, thin dark-haired man entered the room. Sirius Black was a known criminal and the only wizard ever to escape from Azkaban Prison. He took a seat close to Dumbledore, who welcomed him with a smile and tried to ease the fears of the rest of the group.

"Please, please don't upset yourselves. Sirius is here at my request. Let me explain..."

The headmaster folded his hands on his desk and continued, "I've been in constant touch with Cornelius Fudge, the Minister of Magic, over the last week or so, and he has finally accepted Harry Potter's account of what happened at the Triwizard Tournament, and that Voldemort has been resurrected and is undoubtedly building his own strength and his Dark Army."

He looked toward Snape, who pulled his gaze of loathing from Sirius Black and gave a slight nod of confirmation. Snape had at one time been one of Voldemort's Death Eaters, and had the Dark Mark on his forearm as proof, but had for some time been assisting the headmaster as a spy. Voldemort, although not fully trusting Snape, still believed him to be one of his Death Eaters and Snape had to tread a fine and dangerous line in his task.

Dumbledore continued, "You will no doubt realise, from Harry's account, that Peter Pettigrew - Wormtail - is still alive and at the side of Voldemort," some of the teachers again winced at the sound of that name, "and this obviously means that Sirius is entirely innocent of killing him, and also of killing those poor muggles - it was Wormtail who did that. Harry and his friends, Remus Lupin," he looked towards Lupin, "and I have been aware of this for over a year, but with no proof up until now, we couldn't do anything about it. Fudge has also now accepted Sirius' innocence and has secretly pardoned him. But he won't relent on releasing this information to the Magical Community at large. He doesn't want to cause a panic by

confirming that Voldemort is back. I don't agree with his position, but at least progress has been made."

Lupin and McGonagall stood and shook Sirius' hand and muttered their support. Snape was the exception, which was not surprising given the history between the two when they were students together at Hogwarts.

"I can accept that Black is innocent of the charges, Headmaster, but why is he here at our meeting?" Snape asked Dumbledore.

"Well, Fudge has agreed to me setting up a team to infiltrate and combat Voldemort and his Death Eaters. I already have several spies out in the field as you know, and I've been getting reports from the U.S. that there is increasing Death Eater activity there. It seems that Voldemort is trying to increase his sphere of influence. The U.S. Magical Congress has asked to send a special services Auror over here to monitor Voldemort's activities, and I've appointed Sirius to work with their agent as a special team reporting directly to me. They'll keep close tabs on any Death Eater activity and try to get advance warning of anything Voldemort is planning. The agent should be arriving in about a month's time. Severus, I'd like you to continue to spy from inside Voldemort's group, and Remus, I'd like you to keep an eye on Harry and his friends when they return to school after the summer. Now I know that is easier said than done, given their passion for exploration and adventure using Harry's Invisibility Cloak, but I have one of your own inventions which might help."

Dumbledore reached into his desk drawer and produced a blank piece of parchment. It was a copy of the Marauder's Map, which had been produced by Mooney, Wormtail, Padfoot and Prongs during their time at Hogwarts. He gave it to Lupin (Mooney) with a twinkle in his eyes, "Remus, I'm sure that you won't be up to no good when you use this. It covers the whole of the Hogwarts buildings and grounds."

Lupin grinned at Sirius (Padfoot) at the headmaster's oblique reference to the command that activated the map.

"Next, I'd like to ...". Dumbledore was suddenly interrupted when the door to his office was flung open and a breathless Hagrid rushed in.

"Sorry to in'erupt, Professor, but I've got an urgent message from Ronan and Firenze who asked me to see you straight away. They've seen a prophecy in the stars and they say it's urgent that you see it."

"That's all right, Hagrid, tell me what this prophecy is," said the headmaster.

Hagrid pulled the parchment out of his pocket, and ...

"Sirius Black! Professor Dumbledore, do you know who's sitting over there?" Hagrid bellowed.

"Yes, Hagrid. I've just been explaining to the others that Sirius is innocent, and he has now been secretly pardoned. He's joined our little group here, and he'll be doing special tasks for me."

"Right, right," Hagrid quickly recovered his composure and nodded to Sirius.

He then unrolled his parchment and read out the prophecy to a captivated audience, who scratched their heads in puzzlement.

"What do you think it means, Headmaster?" asked McGonagall.

"Well," said a thoughtful Dumbledore, taking the parchment from Hagrid, "let's look at it a piece at a time... 'He who was once defeated has again risen and will enslave mankind.'"

"Well that's obvious," muttered Lupin, "it must mean 'You-Know-Who'."

"I agree. But what about the next bit, 'This can be prevented only if the former conqueror uncovers the ancient secret'."

"The former conqueror must be Harry, since it must refer to 'You-Know-Who's defeat when Harry was a one-year old. But what is this ancient secret?" asked McGonagall.

"There are many ancient secrets - far too many. This piece of the puzzle will have to remain a mystery for now," said Dumbledore with a frown on his weather-beaten face. "'And then joins with his Anima Summa and build their strength.'"

There was silence around the room, so Dumbledore continued

"This is a crucial bit of the prophecy. Harry must join with his 'Anima Summa' - now I seem to remember reading something about this term when I was at Wizing University. I can't remember any specific details apart from it being a very, very rare happening. I'll have to do some research and get back to you on this." He paused and looked at each of the people around the desk.

"I think that this is a very important prophecy that the centaurs have revealed - and you all know how accurate they are. This is crucial in the fight against the Dark Side and may be our only hope of salvation. It is imperative that Voldemort does not get to know about this - I'm sure you're aware of the consequences for Harry if he does. So please, keep this to yourselves and be very careful of eavesdroppers if you discuss it among yourselves. This will put a great strain on Harry if he finds out, so I think it best that he isn't told about it for the moment."

Everyone nodded in agreement and looked grimly determined.

Dumbledore then dismissed the group, "Well, thank you all for attending - I'll let you know when I have some more information and we can then reconvene this meeting."

Before he left, Sirius spoke quietly to Dumbledore, "Yesterday, I received an owl from Hermione Granger and she sounded very upset ..."

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Two days previously, Hermione was sitting on her bed reading *'A History of Hogwarts'* when she heard a tapping at the window. She looked up to see a snowy owl, its large amber eyes staring at her. It was Harry's owl, Hedwig. She opened the window and the owl flew into the room.

"Hello, Hedwig, its nice to see you," she said as she released the parchment from the owl's leg. "You'd better hang on in case I need to reply to this."

She gave Hedwig a biscuit to chew on while she read the message.

'Dear Hermione

I know that it's only been just over a week since I saw you, but I need to tell you something. I think I'm going crazy. Uncle Vernon locks me in my room nearly all day and all I seem to do is think of what happened at the end of the Triwizard Tournament. I'm feeling terrible about it all.

I didn't tell you and Ron everything that happened - it's so painful to think about it - but I'm getting more and more scared about what's going to happen now.

Wormtail cut my arm and used my blood in the spell to give Voldemort a new body. Does this mean that he'll have some sort of control over me now?

I can't stop thinking of Wormtail using the Avada Kedavra curse on Cedric - just because he got in the way. He wouldn't have died if I hadn't told him to take the trophy with me.

I'm scared, Hermione, scared not only for myself, but for you and Ron as well. Now that he's back, I'm sure that Voldemort will try to hurt you two to get at me. I won't be able to live with myself if that happens. So I think it would be best if I stopped being friends with you and Ron. If you both stick together and I keep my distance, then maybe Voldemort won't try to get you.

I'm sorry, Hermione, but the way I feel and the way this is affecting me, I wouldn't be a very good friend anyway.

Harry'

After reading this, Hermione put her hand over her mouth to stifle an anguished gasp of horror.

'Harry must be in a dreadful state to want to stop being friends,' she thought. 'I've got to do something about this. But what?.....'

"Sirius!" she suddenly exclaimed, "He must be able to help."

Hermione picked up a piece of parchment and began to write ...

'Dear Sirius

I've just had the most awful letter from Harry. He's in trouble.

He's told me about what happened with Wormtail and he's afraid that 'You-Know-Who' might now have some sort of hold over him. He's agonising about Cedric's death and blames himself for it.

Worst of all, he wants to end his friendship with Ron and me because he thinks we are in danger - Sirius, I can't let him do this. Without the support of his friends what would happen to him? And what would he have left?

As his godfather, I know that you'll want to do something about this. Please let me know.

Your friend

Hermione Granger'

Hermione then attached the parchment to Hedwig's leg. "Hedwig, take this to Sirius Black as quickly as you can."

Hedwig spread her beautiful wings and flew out of the window on her long journey to deliver Hermione's message to Sirius Black.

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Sirius roused himself from his thoughts and glanced at the headmaster, "... I have to go and see Harry straight away. It looks like he's in a terrible state after his run-in with 'You-Know-Who', and I wouldn't be a good godfather if I didn't give him some support and try to talk some sense into him. And if those Dursleys are mistreating him as well!" He trailed off with a dark look on his handsome features.

"Yes, I agree Sirius. I think that would be a good thing to do, but remember - not a word to Harry about this prophecy. He's got enough on his plate at the moment."

With that, Sirius left the office and went directly to Hogsmeade so that he could Apparate to number four, Privet Drive.

A small group of wizards dressed in black cloaks stood in a circle around a sinister-looking man with gleaming red eyes. Lord Voldemort had summoned his closest lieutenants to a meeting in the north of Scotland, and was telling them of his plans.

Among those listening attentively to the Dark Lord were Lucius Malfoy - his right-hand man and Peter Pettigrew - Wormtail the betrayer.

"I will not be stopped now! It is time the world again trembled at the name of Lord Voldemort. Soon, my Death Eaters, I will be master of this miserable country, and then - the world. We will be able to fulfil our destiny - ridding the planet of Mudbloods and Muggles,

except those we keep as slaves - it is our pureblood right to rule and mould the earth to our noble ideals."

There was a murmur of approval from the group.

"You, my most trusted helpers, will play a big part in my glorious plan. You will go out into the country and recruit for me an army of Death Eaters. You will train them and gather them together to be initiated into my cause. My close allies will be doing the same in the United States. Do not fail me - you know what will happen if you do." He looked menacingly at the group around him.

"Now go! I want to start the initiation ceremonies within the next week."

After the ritual there was a murmuring of, "Yes, my Lord, we will obey you," before the Death Eaters Apparated away to start on their task.

Chapter 1 Summer

Harry was sitting on the floor of his bedroom at No. 4 Privet Drive, Little Whinging, covered in a bath of sweat. He had just finished his hour-long stint of circuit training, and was now trying to relax, breathing deeply, trying to bring peace to his aching mind and body.

After a while, he got up and sat on the edge of his bed and smiled to himself. He thought back to his godfather's visit a week ago.

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Harry was curled up in a ball on his bed when Sirius entered his room. His Uncle Vernon stood behind him looking frightened, but then quickly went back downstairs.

Sirius had taken one look at Harry, and his worse fears were confirmed - Hermione had been right - his godson was in one hell of a state.

Sirius touched Harry on his shoulder, and then lifted him up into a sitting position. Harry's eyes were dull - gone was the mischievous spark that normally lived there.

"Harry .. " Sirius muttered quietly.

Harry then seemed to focus his eyes and when he recognised his godfather, let out a soul-tearing gasp of anguish and clung to Sirius as if his life depended on it. The tears that he had held back after Cedric's death then flowed freely as he sought to purge himself of all his worries.

Sirius had a tear of his own in his eye as he held Harry, and then whispered, "Tell me all about it, Harry. Perhaps I can help."

Harry sat back against the headboard of his bed and poured out all his experiences with Voldemort after the Triwizard Tournament, and his fears for the safety of himself and his friends.

"Yes, I knew most of this after Hermione wrote to me yesterday. You really upset her when you sent her that owl, and you're upsetting me now. Listen, Harry, none of what happened is your fault. You didn't kill Cedric - Wormtail did. And to even think of ditching your best friends is just plain silly.

"Look, when I was with your father, mother and Remus at Hogwarts, it was the best time of my life. I felt privileged to have their friendship. It was the rock that kept me going through the bad times."

"But Sirius," Harry tearfully shouted, "Voldemort killed my mother and father. How did that make *you* feel? I don't want the same thing to happen to Hermione and Ron"

"Listen, Harry, I felt absolutely gutted when your parents were killed and think how I felt when you were left alone and I was stitched up in Azkaban. But even with hindsight I wouldn't have changed my relationship with them. In the long run I would have been the poorer for not knowing them as I did.

"You must never underestimate the power of friendship, Harry. You can't shut out Ron and Hermione. Think how they'll feel if you suddenly dumped them - I know how Hermione feels about it - she's beside herself with worry. In those two, you have the most loyal friends I know and Hermione - well, she's one in a million. You must let them help you. Ok, they know the risks, but they can accept them, so why can't you? Let them be a source of strength to you - this is one of your greatest weapons in the fight against the Dark Side. The power of the friendship you have is pretty rare, so don't deny it to yourself."

At those words, Harry felt an uplifting of his spirits. Put that way, he could see the sense in what Sirius was saying to him and he silently resolved to move on and think more positively about things.

"Thanks, Sirius. I needed that, I really did. You do wonders for a guy's morale. Can't I stay with you this summer? It would be so much better than having to put up with the Dursleys."

"I'm sorry, Harry," said Sirius, "but I haven't got anywhere permanent yet and I'm doing a few things for Dumbledore that'll keep me moving about for the next few months. But I've had a few words with your uncle and I don't think he'll be so nasty to you from now on. If he is, just send me a note with Hedwig and I'll come and put him straight."

"Thanks Sirius, you don't know how much you've helped me. I can't thank you enough. I only wish I could help you by clearing your name with the ministry."

"You've already done that, Harry. You have to keep this quiet, but Cornelius Fudge has accepted your account of things and has privately given me a full pardon. He's afraid to broadcast it, though, because he doesn't want it known that 'You Know Who' is back."

Harry jumped up at this news "That's great Sirius, that's marvellous news. Can I tell Ron and Hermione?"

"Yes, but only Ron and Hermione. Look, I have to go now, but always remember that I'm there for you any time you need me and I'll help you as much as I can. Just send a note with Hedwig."

And with that, Sirius went back down the stairs, fixed Vernon with one of his deadly stares and went out of the house.

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'That was a week ago,' thought Harry. 'What a change in 7 days.'

After Sirius had left, Harry had sent Hedwig to Hermione with a note of apology, saying Sirius had visited and made him realise he was being a prat to want to end their friendship. He asked her to forgive him and that he would see her in Diagon Alley just before school started back.

Harry had resolved to do a number of positive things after Sirius' talk to him. He had decided that if Voldemort *were* going to come after him and his friends, then he would be as prepared as possible to meet him. That meant that he had to get his mental attitude right and he also needed to be prepared physically - hence the circuit training. And he'd also thought of another way to get fit and strong.

After showering, Harry went down stairs for dinner, which he, of course, had to prepare. It seemed that getting the food ready for them all took forever, especially with the huge amounts that Dudley tucked away these days. The bigger and fatter he got, the greater his appetite became.

When they were eating their meal, Harry tentatively asked his uncle, "Eh, Uncle Vernon, I was thinking. You and Aunt Petunia are always on about me being a lazy git. What would you say if I came to your factory and did some manual work - you know, shifting boxes and things? I wouldn't want any pay for it, I'd just be happy knowing that I was helping."

After he said this, Harry had a job to get his tongue unstuck from the inside of his cheek.

Aunt Petunia and Dudley had their mouths wide open at this but Harry knew that the 'no pay' bit would get his uncle's attention.

"No pay, you say. Ok, if it'll teach you not to be a lazy good-for-nothing then you can start in the morning. I'll put you with Jake - if you can keep up with him then you might be of some use."

Uncle Vernon looked pleased with himself - as if it were his idea in the first place.

Harry just grinned.

On 28th July, Hermione was strolling down Diagon Alley. She was at a complete loss, for once in her young life, as to what to get Harry for his birthday. It was only 3 days away and she was going on holiday with her parents in two days time on a tour of Eastern Europe. She'd arranged to visit Viktor Krum when they got to Bulgaria, and looked forward to seeing him again.

She'd thought of all the usual things to get Harry - something for Quidditch and a book, but she wanted to get something special after the trauma he'd suffered earlier in the month.

A few shops up from 'Flourish and Blotts', she noticed a small, insignificant little shop which she was sure hadn't been there the last time she visited. She seemed to remember that this particular shop had always been empty and boarded up before.

There was now a sign over the front window, which said '*El Hamri - Unusual Gifts*'.

Intrigued, Hermione wandered over and browsed in the window. Something drew her attention to a small amulet tucked away in the corner - it was an unusual piece in the form of a Knight with an upraised sword, astride a large golden eagle. The Knight had a cross on the front of his tunic that reminded her of paintings she had seen about the Crusades back in King Richard the Lionheart's time.

She opened the door to the shop and heard a chime coming from the rear. An old and wizened man appeared and asked her, in perfect English but with an unfamiliar accent, "Hello, young lady. Is there anything that you fancy? A present for your boyfriend, perhaps?" Hermione blushed at this, but asked the man if she could see the amulet from the front window.

"Ah, yes," said the man as he stretched over and picked up the amulet "I think that you must be a very discerning young lady. This is a very rare piece that was recovered from Palestine after the last crusade. One of my ancestors fought there, you know, but on Saladin's side. The Prioxy sent it to me only yesterday. Would you like to hold it?"

"Yes please," said Hermione taking the object from the old man. She wondered to which priory he was referring.

As soon as she held it, Hermione experienced a warm and secure feeling emanating from the amulet. She had the distinct feeling that this was the perfect gift she had been looking for and she simply had to get it for Harry.

"That is a very rare piece, don't forget. But to you, it is only 6 galleons" said the old man with a gentle smile.

Hermione pulled a face. She hadn't intended to spend so much. But she just had to get it for Harry - after all he had been through, he deserved something special.

"Right, I'll take it," said Hermione and fumbled in her purse for the 6 galleons, which she handed over to the man. "Tell me, I haven't seen your shop here before. Have you just opened it?"

"Yes, it has only been open for a week," replied the old man.

"I was thinking - which priory sent you the amulet and where is it?"

"Ah," said the man with an enigmatic smile on his face, "it is a very old priory, as old as time itself. It is not for me to reveal its true name and as for its location, well - it is everywhere."

Hermione looked quizzically at the old man and pondered his answer for a moment. She was puzzled and made a mental note to do some research on *'the priory'* when she got back to Hogwarts - the library was sure to have a book on it.

"Well thank you very much - goodbye" and Hermione walked out of the shop. She was pleased with her purchase, and she went to find a suitable birthday card for Harry.

Meanwhile, at The Burrow, Ron, Fred, George and Ginny were sitting around the kitchen table talking about the 2-a-side Quidditch game they had just finished. There was a fair amount of taunting from Ron and Ginny after beating the other two 270 - 190.

Fred and George soon retired upstairs to work on their plans for '*Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes*', the shop they were hoping to open when they finished school next year. The shop had now become a distinct probability after Harry had given them the prize money from the Triwizard Tournament.

"Ron, I'm so glad that Harry seems to be ok now," said Ginny.

Ron had received a note from Hermione a week ago about Harry's problems. And he'd told Ginny, but leaving out any mention of Sirius Black.

"Yes, Gin, thank goodness. But why do you think Harry didn't contact me about his problems. He must have known that I'd support him?"

"I'm sure he knows that Ron, but let's face it, who would *you* turn to in a crisis like that? If it were me I know I'd want to talk to Hermi - she *is* the smartest witch at Hogwarts after all."

"I guess you're right Ginny. It's a pity that Dumbledore won't allow Harry to come and stay with us like last year," said Ron ruefully.

"Yes, but you know how he is about protecting Harry, especially now that 'You Know Who' is back on the scene. Oh well, I think I'll go and start packing Harry's birthday present" and with that, Ginny went upstairs to her room.

Ginny started packing Harry's present and birthday card feeling a little sad. She had, of course, had a crush on Harry since her first year at Hogwarts and she didn't think that she had completely got over it yet.

'Oh come on Ginny,' she thought, 'I'm fourteen now and getting a little too old to harbour such feelings for a boy who would never notice me *THAT* way. At least I've got Harry as a friend. Next school year, I'm going to forget that old crush and start getting a life - a boyfriend perhaps? ... Hmmm'

But she couldn't get it out of her head that any boyfriend she managed to get would only be second best.

Harry had many good qualities to his character. One of the strongest of those qualities was determination in the face of adversity. Harry certainly needed that quality now.

Uncle Vernon's factory had just received a large delivery of raw materials, and Jake had set a furious pace at unloading them from the lorry and stacking them onto shelves ready for dispatch to the various assembly lines. Uncle Vernon was too mean to invest in forklift trucks.

Harry had been working for two weeks now, and he and Jake had built up a friendly rivalry on who could shift the most stuff in the allotted time. After all, Jake had his weekly bonus to spur

him on, but Harry only had his determination and competitive edge, honed from four years of Quidditch.

"Come on `Arry" laughed Jake, "You'll never get fit and strong working in slow motion."

Harry gritted his teeth and lifted another heavy box from the lorry and ran with it over to the shelves. With a loud grunt, he lifted it onto the top-most shelf and sighed with relief before running back to get another box.

"Bugger off, Jake. If you were as fast as me you wouldn't be able to lift your pay packet at the end of the week."

When all the boxes were stacked, Harry and Jake collapsed onto the floor with exhausted grins on their faces and started chatting about the people working at the factory.

"Oooh that Melanie," sighed Jake, "she's a right little cracker. I wouldn't mind a night out wiv `er, I can tell yuh"

"Well why don't you ask her, Jake? You won't know if she likes you until you do."

Jake ignored that remark and, with a smirk on his face said, "What about that girl of yours `Arry? What's her name - `erm-ee-nee, `erm-ii-oo-n. Have you shagged her yet?"

Harry went bright red and shouted, "Sod off Jake! It's HERMIONE, and she's not my girlfriend - she's just one of my best friends. And no - I haven't, for God's sake, and anyway, she's not that sort of girl."

"Well, the way you always go on about her, you could have fooled me! Right, five more minutes rest and then we've got that load of coal to shovel down at the boiler room site."

Jake grinned, delighted that he'd struck a raw nerve with Harry, and laid his head back on the floor and started daydreaming about Melanie.

Harry woke early on the morning of July 31st, his birthday. The incessant tapping at his window by a flock of owls was the cause of his early return to the conscious world. He jumped out of bed and let them in, removing the parcels from their legs. He then gave them some biscuits to eat before they flew back out of the window.

Harry excitedly started opening his presents. He smiled when he opened Ron's present - a book entitled "*Quidditch Tactics and Innovative Moves for Seekers*."

Ginny's present was a wizarding photograph, which had the heading, in Ginny's handwriting, '*The Fab Four*'. It showed Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ginny at the lake at Hogwarts - the four were smiling and waving. Harry remembered Colin Creevey taking that picture just before the end of the Triwizard Tournament.

Harry laughed when he opened the birthday card from Ginny. There was a picture of a parrot on the front, and when the card was opened, he'd chant '*Who's a pretty boy then*' over and over.

'Just like Ginny.' Harry thought back to the time when Ginny had embarrassed him at school with her singing valentine.

The next present he opened was a parchment from Professor Dumbledore. It read

'Happy birthday Harry

I hope that you are feeling better after your chat with your godfather.

Professor McGonagall and I wanted to give you something for your birthday - but it will have to wait until you return for the new school year. I won't tell you what it is, but I will say that you will be following in your father's footsteps when you get it.

Be happy Harry and look after yourself.

Albus Dumbledore'

"What the devil is that?" Harry muttered to himself. But he knew one thing - if it allowed him to follow in his father's footsteps then it must be ok. He couldn't wait.

Sirius' present was next - it was a small round glass object about the size of a squash-ball and shimmered like crystal. The note that accompanied the present said

'Happy birthday Harry

I hope you are keeping well. This little present is called a 'find-me-stone'. If you hold it in your hand and whisper the incantation 'expiscor ego' then the holder of the matching stone will be able to find you immediately. Of course, I have the matching stone, and don't worry - only I can operate it. It has to be magically set for the holder, and only I know the password.

You should set up the stone straight away. Hold it in both hands and say

Erigo Harry James Potter

The stone should then glow with a light shade of red. Then say your password like so

Signum <say your password>

And if the stone accepts it, the glow will change to a light blue colour. Once you set your password, only you will be able to use it.

I thought that this little device might come in handy one day.

With love from your godfather

Sirius'

Harry smiled "Just like Sirius - always practical and looking out for me. Right, lets try to set it up."

Harry held the stone in both hands and said, "ERIGO Harry James Potter"

Surely enough, the stone's colour changed to a light red.

Harry thought for a moment and then said, "*SIGNUM* Seeker" and the stone changed to a light blue colour.

'Great,' thought Harry, and put the stone into his pocket.

The last present was from Hermione. Harry grinned when he read her note saying that she just had to get this present and she hoped he liked it.

'A book of some sort I bet,' thought Harry

He was suitably surprised when he opened the parcel to reveal the Knight amulet. When he picked it up he had the same feeling of warmth and security that Hermione had when she held it. He made a mental note to ask her where she had found it when he saw her next, and whether it had any more magical properties.

A picture of Hermi's smiling face came to Harry and he knew that Sirius was spot-on when he said that Hermione was one-in-a-million. He was lucky to be able to call her his best friend.

He put the amulet around his neck, where he intended to always keep it.

Harry jumped when he heard the sound of something being pushed under his bedroom door. He picked up an envelope and opened it.

'Our birthday present to you

An extra shift at the factory next Saturday

Don't be late!

Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia'

Harry laughed. He didn't mind the extra work at all - especially since he wouldn't have to put up with Dudley all day Saturday. Harry thought that was probably the best birthday present they had ever given him.

Harry continued to work at the factory throughout the summer, and had got into the routine of jogging around the factory site whenever there was a slack period. Jake, however, thought he was crazy and didn't waste any time in telling him. By this time, Harry had a well-defined muscle structure to his upper body, his stomach was flat and muscled, he felt very fit and he had become quite tanned. It seemed that all the work he was doing was paying off.

He also enjoyed his running, even when he knew he had to pass by the office block and had to endure the whistles and calls (some of them quite rude and embarrassing) of the office girls. He thought it strange that they always seemed to know exactly when he would pass by their window. Some of the girls were very pretty and a lot older than Harry, and he wondered what the devil they saw in him. After all, they wouldn't know that he was Harry Potter, '*The boy who lived*'.

Jake had told him that he should take advantage of some of the offers shouted at him by a few of the girls and that he didn't realise how lucky he was. Harry had blushed but didn't take the bait.

All in all, Harry was becoming very contented with life and for once didn't get the feeling that time was passing too slowly when he was on his summer break.

This all changed the following day.

Harry was jogging around the back of the factory, close to some waste ground, when he heard a soft chuckle, which seemed to come from behind a nearby tree. He was later to thank his lucky stars for his keen hearing.

Harry turned towards the tree and saw a figure dressed in black robes and wearing a black hood. The figure lifted his hand, which, Harry saw, held a wand and shouted

"*STUPEFY*"

Before the figure - obviously a Death Eater - had finished saying the spell, Harry had dodged to one side, and saw the red light pass by his left shoulder. Harry didn't hang about after that. He turned and started running and stepping from side to side over towards a group of empty metal drums, thankful for his newly acquired fitness and his years of practice on the Quidditch field. The Death Eater continued to throw spells, but they all missed their mark, with Harry making himself as difficult a target as possible.

Harry reached the waste drums and flung himself onto the ground behind them. By this time the Death Eater was roaring in frustration, and started to walk over towards the drums.

'If only I had my wand,' Harry thought. His wand was in his trunk back at the Dursleys. Since he wasn't allowed to do magic away from school, the wand stayed in the trunk all through the summer.

Harry reached into his pocket, removed the 'find-me-stone', and whispered, '*EXPISCOR EGO*'.

The figure of Sirius Black appeared out of thin air alongside Harry and quickly took in the scene before him. Raising his wand towards the Death Eater he yelled '*STUPEFY*'.

The Death Eater wasn't as quick as Harry, and the spell caught him squarely in the chest. He collapsed to the ground immediately.

"Are you ok, Harry?" asked a concerned-looking Sirius, checking for any signs of damage.

"Thanks, Sirius, yes I'm ok - he didn't touch me. But look, how did he know I was here?"

"Well, I don't know, but the factory isn't protected like the Dursley house. I'll speak to Dumbledore and get him to set up full protection spells on this site. But in the meantime you'd better get back to the Dursleys and stay there until I give you the all clear to go back to

work. Right, I'll take this git back to Hogwarts and see if we can get him to talk - Snape will have some Veritaserum on hand, I'm sure."

"Thanks, Sirius. You saved my life, you know." Harry grinned, "That birthday present certainly turned out to be pretty useful."

"Don't mention it, Harry. And keep your guard up from now on."

Sirius then went over and grabbed the Death Eater by the arm. There was a slight 'pop' as both figures disappeared.

After Sirius arrived with the Death Eater at Hogsmeade, he had taken him, still under the Stunning spell, to Hogwarts using '*WINGARDIUM LEVIOSA*' to lighten the load.

The Death Eater now sat bound in a chair in the centre of Dumbledore's office, with Dumbledore, Sirius and Snape standing over him.

"What is your name?" asked Dumbledore

"Ballocks" was the only reply he could get out of the sour-faced captive.

"Well if that's going to be your attitude, we'd better move things along. Severus, have you got any Veritaserum prepared?"

"Yes, Headmaster, I'll go down to my office and fetch it," and Snape walked out of the room.

"Sirius, I'll set up the protection on the factory site as soon as we're finished here. The aurors from the ministry should be arriving shortly to take our friend, here, for further questioning." And then turning to the Death Eater Dumbledore said, "Well, Mr. Ballocks, how does a little stretch in Azkaban sound to you? You might as well tell us what we want to know now, and save yourself the discomfort of the truth serum."

The Death Eater looked nervous but remained silent.

Snape then came into the room carrying a small phial containing a dark brown liquid. Sirius held the struggling Death Eater's head while Snape poured the Veritaserum down his throat.

"Give it a minute or two, Headmaster," said Snape, wiping a small amount of the liquid, which had spilled onto his hand.

The three remained silent, watching the Death Eater for any sign that the serum had taken effect. Then Dumbledore walked up to him and started his questioning.

"What is your name?"

"Darius Lork" was the reply, given in a dull-sounding voice.

"When did you last see Lord Voldemort?"

"Two weeks ago when I was recruited."

"Where were you recruited and how many of you were there?"

"At Croyden, and there were fifty three of us"

Snape let out a surprised gasp, "Good God, I new that there were recruiting meetings going on, but I never suspected the number of people involved. The Croyden meeting was just one of about twenty back two weeks ago"

Dumbledore looked worried, "This is worse than I thought. At this rate, Voldemort will have a sizable army very soon. Sirius, I think you'd better do some snooping and try to get a feel for the size of this problem. Tell me, Lork, who ordered you to attack Harry Potter?"

"No one"

"How did you know where Potter was and why did you do it then?"

"I live close to Privet Drive, and I'd seen him going out every morning. I wanted to make a good impression on my senior commander so I followed Potter to the factory and hid until he was close by."

Sirius heard footsteps outside the office and walked into a small room at the side of Dumbledore's office. He didn't want there to be any misunderstanding when the aurors came in. He still had to be careful to whom he showed himself.

The door then opened, and Dobby the house elf showed in two tough-looking men.

"We've come to collect the prisoner," said one of them and flashed his Ministry of Magic ID.

Dumbledore nodded and said, "We've finished so you're welcome to him. Tell the minister that Voldemort is recruiting Death Eaters at a fair old rate. That's probably why we haven't seen much of him and his minions over the summer. No doubt you'll be able to get more details out of this one."

The aurors then grabbed hold of Lork, easily lifting him up, and bade their farewells as the three left.

It was a week after Dumbledore had set up the protection spells at the factory site, and Harry was now back working as normal. Uncle Vernon hadn't been very impressed with the one-day lay-off. Harry had to feign an upset stomach, which didn't get too much sympathy from the Dursleys.

Harry was reading the Quidditch book that Ron had sent him, when an owl flew in through the window. Harry took the parchment from the out-stretched leg and the owl flew back out. He was pleased to see that the letter was from Hermione.

He settled back onto his bed and began to read.

Dear Harry

I hope you are well and that you are not over-doing it at that factory.

I'm having a wonderful time in Eastern Europe. The cities and the countryside are absolutely beautiful. We started off in Austria. Vienna was positively marvellous, and we went to a Mozart music concert. The experience was absolutely wonderful - honestly.

We then went to Hungary and the capital Budapest. We had a lovely cruise down the Danube. The food there was pretty spicy, though; they seem to put tons of paprika into everything - my tongue still hasn't recovered!

Then we travelled into Romania and toured around the wonderful alpine meadows and dense forests of Transylvania. There was plenty of wildlife there - bears, mountain goats and wild boars - but I didn't see any vampires, thank goodness!

We have just arrived in Bulgaria, and I am writing this in our hotel room in Sofia. It's a beautiful city, nestling in the lovely Balkan Mountains.

Well I have to go now but I'll write to you again soon. (I've also written to Ron and Ginny). I've got to get ready for tonight - Viktor has asked me out to dinner at a posh restaurant, and I'm really looking forward to seeing him again.

Love from

Hermione

Harry grinned as he read - he was really glad that Hermione was having a good time. But he felt a bit uneasy when he read about Viktor Krum. He thought that Viktor was ok, but he had an odd sort of feeling about Hermione's date with him. He instinctively reached up and closed his hand around the amulet, which still felt warm and gave off that same feeling of security. He hoped she would be ok.

Sirius Black and Remus Lupin were warily treading their way through some dense undergrowth in the New Forest near Southampton. They had received a tip-off from Snape that there would be a Death Eater initiation ceremony somewhere on the northern side of the forest tonight, near a monument known as 'The Rufus Stone'.

Remus whispered, "This place is certainly well chosen for a Death Eater meeting. Muggles have reported spooky feelings whenever they pass by the stone. Did you know that King William the 2nd - William the Conqueror's son - was killed at this very spot? He was also known as Rufus because of his shock of Red hair. To this day, no-one knows whether the arrow that pierced his heart was the result of an accident or murder."

"Where the hell do you get these bits of information from, Remus? Next to Hermione Granger you must be the most bookish person I know," whispered Sirius. "Hold on, I think there's something in that clearing just up ahead"

They both squinted in the almost pitch dark and saw a faint light. It seemed to be a magically produced bluish light. They edged closer and baulked at the sight that confronted them. About fifty people dressed in black cloaks and hoods stood in a circle facing in towards the middle.

At the centre of the circle was a tall thin shape, also dressed completely in black. But as he slowly lifted his head, a chill spread down the spines of the two watchers. That face was exactly as Harry had described. A thin slash of a mouth, just two slits for a nose and slitty eyes that gleamed red in the darkness. Voldemort!

"You stay here, Remus. I'll try to get a bit closer and see if I can hear what's going on." Sirius changed into his animagus form, and the large black dog padded silently towards the unholy group.

"Welcome my new Death Eaters. I have summoned you all here tonight to be initiated into the Dark Side. We are growing stronger by the day and I already have over 2000 loyal servants. Soon I will be able to take action against the abomination of Mudbloods and Muggles that pollute the land. When I call your name, step forward and receive the mark that will be your treasured badge for the rest of your lives.... Mark Leeming"

One of the Death Eaters stepped forward, knelt on the ground before the Dark Lord and rolled up his right sleeve. Voldemort placed his wand on his forearm and shouted "*MORSMODRE.*" Leeming arched his back and let out a scream of pure agony as smoke rose from his arm. After about a minute the man relaxed slightly, whimpering, and then held up his arm for the rest of the group to see. Burned into his arm was the dark mark - a skull with a serpent in its mouth. The group of Death Eaters roared with approval, bringing a sneering smile to the ugly face of Voldemort.

This continued until all fifty people had been given the mark, and the air was full of the smell of burning flesh. Voldemort then raised his arms into the air, his wand pointed upwards, and yelled "*CRUCIO.*"

All fifty Death Eaters fell to the ground writhing in agony. This lasted only for a few seconds before the curse was lifted.

Voldemort laughed and shouted, "The pain you have just witnessed is nothing to the pain you will feel if you ever disobey me. Be warned. You will be contacted in a few weeks by your group commander, who will give you your instructions."

There was a 'pop' and Voldemort was gone.

Sirius felt sickened and padded his way back to Remus. Both men then made their way a little further out of the forest and Apparated back to Hogsmeade. They then walked towards Hogwarts to report to Dumbledore.

Charlie Weasley was leaning against a tree at the edge of a forest clearing in a remote part of Romania. He was watching a group of Romanian Longhorn dragons sleeping in the warm summer sunshine. It was a crucial time for Charlie. The female dragons were nearing the time when they would lay a new batch of eggs.

As the world's foremost expert on Romanian Longhorns, Charlie needed to document the birthing cycle of the beasts in great detail. He was due to give a lecture at the Ministry of Magic next year, where dragon experts from all over the world would be holding their annual convention.

He was deep in thought about the reports he'd heard from his father that 'You Know Who' was building up his forces, when he was shaken from his ruminations by an owl that swooped down and landed on a branch just above his head. Charlie looked up and saw a parchment attached to its leg. He reached up, removed the parchment, and the owl flew off.

Charlie unrolled the note, and the first thing he saw was the official seal of the British Ministry of Magic. He sat down and read the note and muttered "Well I'll be ..."

'Dear Mr. Weasley,

The French Ministry of Magic has approached me on a rather delicate matter.

It appears that the Magical Creatures in the forbidden forest in the south of France have started to exhibit some rather peculiar habits. Among the most disturbing aspects of the affair is the strange behaviour of the group of Romanian Longhorns that have taken up residence there.

A number of Muggles have spotted them wandering close to the edge of the forest. The Muggles have, of course, had their memories of the dragons removed. The French authorities have the matter contained, but have been unable to come up with an explanation for the outbreak.

While the matter has not yet reached a critical state, the French have requested that you give them your expert assistance as soon as you can. I know, of course, that your work is approaching a delicate stage and you cannot be released this year, but I would ask you to keep your diary clear for the early part of next year. You will have several months free before you give your lecture at the convention.

I will contact you at a later date with the name of your contact in France, together with an update of the current situation.

Yours truly

A Smoothy

Head of Dept. of Magical Creatures

Ministry of Magic'

Charlie wondered what the devil had caused those Longhorns to stray to the edge of their forest. By habit, they tended to keep to the central parts of the forests they inhabited. He made a note in his diary and then settled down to watch the sleeping dragons.

Harry was happily jogging around the factory when he stopped for a break just outside the main office. He sat on the lawn with his head back soaking up the sunshine.

A voice suddenly whispered in his ear, "Hello, handsome, what are you doing here?"

Harry opened his eyes to see Jake's fantasy, Melanie, smiling down at him. She sat down very close to Harry and drew her nails down the side of his well-muscled left arm. "My, you've certainly grown up since you started working here. You've got muscles growing on muscles," she said as she squeezed his biceps.

Harry was mortified. "Eh, hello Melanie. Shouldn't you be working?"

"I'm running an errand for your uncle, so I stopped by to say hello," she said, starting to stroke his shoulder. "I was thinking, how would you like to go to the pictures tonight? There's a good film showing - Spiderman I think"

"Th..Thanks for the offer M..Melanie," stuttered Harry, "but I don't think my uncle will let me go out in the evenings. Why don't you ask Jake? I'm sure he'd go with you."

"Humph. Why don't you want to go out with me Harry? What's the matter with me? Have I got two heads or something?"

"Oh no, Melanie, there's nothing wrong with you at all. I..I'm sorry. I have to go now." Harry jumped up and started sprinting towards the back of the factory. When he was out of sight, he stopped and let out a big sigh and thought, 'Jake would kill me if he found out his crush had come onto me like that. And what the devil does she see in me anyway? I'm only 15 for goodness sake - surely she can't fancy me! Perhaps it's because I'm the boss' nephew. Yep, that must be it.'

Harry reached up to hold his amulet - he tended to do this now when he got into awkward situations - and felt the familiar feelings it generated. This time, however, there was a new sensation - a sort of tingly, urgent type of feeling. He couldn't really pinpoint what it was but it was certainly there. He again made a mental note to ask Hermione if she knew any more about the amulet.

That evening, Aunt Petunia ordered Harry to go into the garden to cut the grass. It had been neglected since Harry had started working and, since the lawnmower was broken, the grass had reached almost jungle proportions. That meant that he had to use the short-handle shears. 'Great' he thought ruefully, 'this is going to take me all night.'

After about an hour, his arms were nearly dropping off. Although he was strong now, his strength was built up by lifting heavy boxes and circuit training. The action of using the shears was new, and he was using different muscles than he normally did.

He sat down for a rest, when a voice called over the fence, "Well hello there. Where have you been all summer?"

He looked up to see a pretty girl about his own age leaning on the fence post. She had shiny blond hair curved down around her shoulders, light blue eyes, full sensuous lips and a cute nose, which turned slightly upwards at the end. She was smiling at him with a teasing look in her eyes. 'Oh no, not again,' thought Harry.

"I'm Lara and I live over the road in number twelve. Why haven't I seen you here before then? What's your name?"

"Eh, I'm Harry. I work at my uncle's factory all day and I don't normally come out here in the evenings."

"Do you want to come over to my house and play some CDs or something? We'd have great fun," she asked.

"Thanks, Lara. Another time, perhaps. I've got to finish cutting this lawn and I think it's going to take me all night."

"Well ok, Harry, but I'll hold you to that. I'll speak to you again. `Bye." Lara smiled prettily and walked back over the road and into her house.

`Phew!' thought Harry, `what the bloody hell is wrong with the female population in this town? Aren't there enough blokes to go around or something?She is cute, though, and she does seem nice. Maybe I'll take her up on that offer - Hmm.' And he carried on with the backbreaking job of cutting the lawn.

When Harry got home from work the following day, he quickly cleaned the vegetables and put them on the stove to cook. He then prepared the lamb chops and placed them in the oven.

`Right!' he thought `I'll have a shower while they cook. I wonder what I can wear tonight?'

After showering and putting on some light casual clothes, Harry went down stairs to see his uncle and aunt sitting at the dining table with their arms folded and wearing matching scowls. "Where's this dinner then! You know we're going out tonight!" his uncle growled.

"We've always got to wait and poor Duddykins is nearly fainting from hunger," his aunt whined. Dudley was holding his knife and fork in his hands and glaring at Harry in a threatening way.

Harry ignored their complaints and went to dish up the food.

After dinner, Harry finished the washing-up and then sighed with relief, "Right, the rest of the evening is mine."

"We'll be home at about 10.30 tonight, and make sure the supper is on the table," shouted his aunt as all three Dursleys went out the front door to the car.

Harry glanced at the clock and saw that it was 6.30 pm. He went out the back door and locked it, putting the key under a stone by the back window. He always did this when he went out and the Dursleys were not at home. He sauntered into the garden and leaned on the fence running along the side of the house, wondering if Lara would come by. He hoped that she would - he missed the companionship of his Hogwarts friends, and really felt that he could do with an evening with a friendly face of his own age. He glanced towards the front of the house and saw Lara. She was walking on the opposite side of the street, and looking towards the front of No. 4.

"Hi, Lara," Harry shouted.

Lara turned her head and smiled before trotting over to where Harry was standing.

She glanced at the lawn "Hi, Harry. I see you've finished cutting the grass. Does that mean you're free tonight?"

"Eh ... yes I am," croaked Harry, his mouth suddenly going quite dry.

Lara beamed at him, "Well come on then. Lets go to my house and listen to some music. My mum won't mind and my dad's working away all week"

Harry climbed awkwardly over the fence and walked along beside Lara, "I have to be back by half past ten tonight to make supper for my aunt and uncle."

"Oh don't worry, we've got plenty of time," Lara caught hold of Harry's hand and dragged him towards the back door of her house.

"Hello mum, this is Harry." Lara spoke to her mother as they entered the kitchen, "Is it ok if we go into the study and play some music?"

Harry looked at the woman, and was startled to see a replica of Lara - only older

"Hello Harry, I'm Mrs. Smythe, and yes, it is ok, but keep the noise down - we don't want to give those Dursleys anything more to complain about do we!" said Lara's mother.

"Er, mum, Harry lives at No. 4 - he's the Dursley's nephew." Lara had a look of horror on her face.

"Oh my, I ..I'm sorry Harry, I meant"

Harry smiled "Don't think anything of it, Mrs Smythe. I know what the Dursleys are like. I've had to put up with them for long enough to know that. I don't live with them from choice, you know."

Mrs Smythe smiled sympathetically at Harry, although she still looked a bit flustered, and walked through to the lounge to watch television.

"Sorry about that, Harry," said Lara "Would you like something to drink?"

"Um.. have you got any pumpkin juice?"

"What's that? Is it something new they've brought out?"

Harry mentally kicked himself "Eh.. No, that was a joke, coke will be fine if you've got it"

Lara led Harry into her dad's study, carrying their glasses of coke. The study was quite dark, with a very large bookshelf along one side of the room. A large desk stood near the window, which overlooked the side garden. There was a large computer sitting on the side of the desk, and a laser printer and scanner on a smaller table to the side.

"What does your father do?" asked Harry

Lara smiled "Oh, dad's a computer systems consultant and usually works from home. He used to work for a large corporation, but he decided to branch out on his own. So we moved to Privet Drive last year because the study was an ideal size to set up an office. He designs and writes small business systems to run on PCs. He's up in Manchester this week installing a system for an insurance company. But come on," she said as she turned on the computer, "lets play some CDs on dad's computer - I've got some of the latest ones and dad's got some as well. They're old, but the music is great. The more you listen the more you like it. You know, The Beatles, Stones, Queen .."

She pulled two chairs in front of the 21" screen "Come on, Harry, sit down here and watch," and she took one of the CDs from her father's collection and placed it into the drive.

As *'Bohemian Rhapsody'* thundered out of the impressive-looking speakers at either end of the room, Harry took his eyes off the screen and glanced at Lara who was looking at him while she sipped her coke. She had an enigmatic smile on her face and Harry coloured up a bit.

'She's a very pretty girl, and nice with it,' he thought. 'She'd fit in well at Gryffindor. Pity she's a Muggle.' The two teens continued looking at each other, both caught up in their own thoughts.

Lara couldn't stop looking at Harry's eyes - they were the most beautiful emerald green and were so warm. They sent tingles all along her spine as she was becoming lost in their depths.

They both jumped when the door to the study flew open to reveal an angry-looking Mrs. Smythe. "Will you turn that music down!" she shouted above *'The Beatles' 'I am a Walrus'*. "I can't hear myself think."

"Sorry, mum," said Lara as she reached across Harry and turned down the speaker volume.

"Now that's fine - why do you kids need to listen to music so loud? You'll be deaf by the time you're twenty you know!" Mrs. Smythe went back out and closed the door smiling to her self 'They do look cute together,' she thought.

Lara put a Britney Spears CD in the drive and then turned to Harry, "So, Harry, how come you're staying with your aunt and uncle. Where are your parents?"

"They died when I was a year old - killed in a car crash. I've been staying here ever since."

"Oh I'm so sorry, Harry, that's terrible. But why haven't I seen you before now?"

"Well I only stay here now for two months of the year. I'm in boarding school in Scotland for the rest of the time."

"I go to Smeltings now. That's a boarding school too, but since it's close by I don't stay there."

"So you must know my cousin Dudley then. He goes there."

"Oh yes," said Lara ominously, "Fatty Dursley - ugh. He used to give me hell when I started last year. He and his cronies were always picking on me. They were also picking on three other girls in year 4 so we started to go around together everywhere in school. That stopped their antics - they only pick on people if they're on their own. I supposed he helped me, in a way. Carol, Beth, Josie and I are inseparable now - we're great friends, but they live in all four corners of the country so we don't see much of each other during the holidays. I can't wait for school to start next week to see them again."

"That's exactly as it is with me, Lara. I've got great friends at Hogwarts but four of us are best friends and we do lots of things together. There were three of us to start, but Ginny - that's Ron's sister who's a year younger than us - joined up with us towards the end of last year. Ron's great. We hit it off right from day one and he's a mine of information on Quidditch. My other best friend is Hermione Granger. She's the smartest witc .. I mean girl in the school. Everybody says she'll be head girl when we get to year 7. She really looks after us, and if we pass our OWL ... I mean GCSEs next year it will be down to her. She's always helping us."

"So what is this school - Hogwarts - it's a funny name isn't it? I've never heard of it. And what's Quidditch?"

"Oh, it's a .. an old sort of game we play at the school - it's a tradition, a bit like the Eton wall game. Hogwarts is a school for ..err .. special kids, I suppose."

"So how are you special, Harry ... apart from the obvious, that is?"

"Obvious? Well, I don't know - I don't think I'm special at all. I guess I was lucky to be picked to go there."

'I'm sure that's not the case,' Lara thought to herself, 'He really doesn't know how gorgeous he is does he? Wow!'

"So, Harry, have you got a girlfriend at Hogwarts? It sounds as if Hermione's your girlfriend."

"No, no I haven't got a girlfriend. Hermione and I are just best friends. Last year I liked a girl a year older than me, but she didn't like me though, and nothing came of it. Have you got a boyfriend?"

Lara pulled a face "No, not yet. There are a few nice boys at school, but nobody's asked me to go out yet."

Lara looked at Harry's mess of unruly black hair, and reached over and parted his fringe, revealing the lightning bolt scar "How did you get that?"

"Uh .. Quidditch accident - it's a pretty tough game, you know."

The two teens continued to chat and Harry warmed to the friendly Lara. She reminded him of Hermione - their personalities were very similar. He hadn't had such a good time in a long while.

Harry was so wrapped up in their conversation that he didn't notice how dark it had become outside. When he did, finally, glance at the clock on the wall he saw that it was 10.35.

"Oh look at the time! I'm late. Lara I'm sorry but I have to go now."

"Will I see you tomorrow, Harry? We can go out somewhere if you like."

"Oh I'm sorry, Lara, but tomorrow is my last day at work, and my uncle is driving me to Diagon Alley. I mean London straight after to meet my godfather. He's taking me to buy books and things for school. I'll be staying with him for a few days in a hotel before catching the train to Scotland. I only wish we'd met earlier this summer."

Harry was crestfallen as he saw the look of sadness on Lara's face.

"Me too, Harry, ... me too. Will I see you again - perhaps next summer?"

"I don't know, Lara. I may be staying with my godfather next year. I won't know for a while. But I'll owl you and let you know"

"Owl me? What's that?"

'Oh bugger,' thought Harry, 'how do I get out of this one?'

"Well, Hogwarts is in a very remote part of Scotland, and there are no towns or villages nearby. So there's no postal service to speak of. We get around it by specially training the more intelligent types of owl to carry our mail - a bit like the pigeons they used in the First World War. I've got an owl called Hedwig - she's in my bedroom now. I'll call her so that she'll know where to bring the letter when I write."

Harry stuck his head out of the window and shouted 'HEDWIG. Here girl.'

Lara's chin dropped to her chest when a beautiful snowy owl flew in through the window and perched on Harry's shoulder, and nibbled his ear.

"Hedwig, meet Lara. Lara meet Hedwig."

"Oh Harry, she's beautiful," said Lara as she ruffled Hedwig's feathers behind her ear and gave her a piece of biscuit to eat. Hedwig hooted contentedly.

"Oh she likes you, Lara. When you want to send a letter, you tie it to her leg and say the name of the person you want her to find. She knows where you live now, so there won't be a problem. I'll tell her to wait with you so you can write back to me."

Hedwig then flew out of the window back to her perch in Harry's bedroom.

Harry went towards the door, but was stopped from opening it by Lara. She leaned up and placed her lips against Harry's. His eyes opened wide when she broke the kiss, and he looked directly into her sparkling blue eyes. He felt embarrassed and elated at the same time - he didn't know how he felt, really, since this was the first time a girl had kissed him like that.

"I ... I .." stumbled Harry, lost for words.

Lara had a sad look when she said, "I hope I'll see you soon, Harry. I really do."

"So do I Lara - I'll send Hedwig and let you know how I'm getting on."

Harry then opened the door and ran to across to the back of No. 4, his mind in turmoil.

Lara had tears in her eyes when her mother walked into the study.

"Lara, are you ok, love?"

"Yes mum," she said, "but I don't know if I'll see him again. Why couldn't I have met him sooner? And why does he have to go away?" She turned and buried her head in her mothers shoulder, the tears flowing freely now.

"Oh, Lara," whispered her mother holding her close and stroking her hair. She had a tear of her own in her eye as she looked at her daughter going through the first heartache of her young life.

Harry bent to get the key from under the stone but found it wasn't there. He tried the door but it was locked. "Uncle Vernon," he shouted.

"You useless good-for-nothing," yelled his uncle through the door, "We've had to make our own supper. You can damn well stay out there tonight! I'll let you in to make our breakfast in the morning."

Harry went over to the garden shed and opened the door. The shed was just big enough for him to lie down full length. He covered himself with an old dustsheet and settled down for the night. His hand went to his lips and felt where Lara had kissed him. "If only" He thought as he drifted off to sleep.

There was a sombre mood in the headmaster's office at Hogwarts as Dumbledore, McGonagall, Snape, Sirius and Remus looked at each other with a feeling of impending doom. Sirius and Remus had just finished giving their report of what they had seen and heard in the New Forest.

"This is as bad as I feared," said Dumbledore. "In a few weeks - a month at the most at this rate - Voldemort will be able to start his evil campaign in this country. And I'm sure that he'll be recruiting in other countries then, if he isn't already. Have you heard anything about this Severus?"

Snape nodded and said, "At the last meeting, he mentioned something about 'his foreign friends'. I didn't know what he was talking about then, but it seems pretty obvious now."

"The students start back in 3 days time," said Dumbledore, "and I think we are going to have to tighten our security for their safety. Visits to Hogsmeade will have to stop for the time being - it won't be safe outside the protection spells at the school. And we are going to have to impose a curfew - we can't allow students to wander around the grounds after dark - it's just too risky"

The others nodded in agreement with glum looks on their faces. They knew how hard it would be for the kids and also for them in imposing the restrictions.

Dumbledore looked to lift the mood of the meeting and said, "Right, let's move on to a different matter - the *Anima Summa* issue. Now I've done a bit of digging over at my old University and also at our library here. This is what I've found ..."

Dumbledore glanced at his colleagues and saw that he had their full attention.

"Anima Summa can be translated from the Latin as Anima meaning 'the breath of life', 'vital principle', or more commonly - 'soul'. Summa means 'the highest part or whole'. In the ancient magical text that I've read, Anima Summa identifies what is known as a 'Highest Soul'. This is a very rare and powerful bond shared between a wizard and a witch, and when the bond is fully achieved, it gives them both immense magical powers. No one knows exactly what those powers are, or how they are achieved, or indeed, how the bond comes to be shared in the first place. In short, we know very little about it. It is common for a witch and wizard to become 'soul-mates' but this form of soul-mate is almost unheard of. When compared to soul-mates the power of the Anima Summa is right off the scale!"

Everyone in the room looked puzzled. McGonagall pushed her glasses further back against her nose and asked, "Albus, you say the Anima Summa is very rare. How rare and is there any record of such an occurrence in the past?"

"It's extremely rare, Minerva, and I could find only one recorded instance of the bond happening. That was back in the time of the great Merlin, when he bonded with the witch Morgana."

"But Headmaster," said Lupin, "Morgana, or Morgan Le Fay as she is sometimes known, was recorded as an evil witch - a mistress of the Dark Arts. How is it possible that she could have bonded with Merlin?"

"Ah, Remus. You can't always trust what you read in the history books. Don't forget that this happened before the Christian Church came to the fore in the country, and suppressed the old religions. And the victors always write the history books. The Church leaders depicted Morgana as evil to suit their own ends but they couldn't soil the memory of Merlin as well. It was a sexist thing as well, I suspect," Dumbledore chuckled.

"Anyway, back at that time, the Christians were intent on suppressing any form of witchcraft, and so not a lot has been documented about Merlin and Morgana. What we do know, however, is this .." and Dumbledore itemised what he knew.

"One - They must be completely in love with each other and be pure in mind and body.

Two - the bond is only shared between two very powerful magical people.

Three - The two must have similar qualities to a varying degree - bravery, intellect, willingness to risk all for others and also compassion.

Four - The conception dates of the two is critical. The male must be conceived first, and the female exactly 3 months later. No one knows why, but it is thought that the pairing is pre-ordained magically, and the 3-month period is needed for the spirits, or whatever, to establish the exact traits of the male so that the female can be matched to him exactly.

Five - The immense powers of the two are only realised when they are together. They are still very powerful when they are apart, but together they are almost invincible. There seems to be a number of stages or aspects to that power, but there are no details documented - except for one.

Six - The strength of the bonding depends on spontaneous realisation. They must both realise at the same time that they are each other's Anima Summa. That means that if either of them knows they are an Anima Summa, and finds out who the other Anima Summa is, before the bonding takes place, then their power will be diminished. This is why we are going to have to be very careful if we find out the identity of the female before hand." He paused briefly. "This may be a fairly complex thing to grasp. The easiest way to understand it is they must both realise at the same time that the other is their Anima Summa - even if one of them knows that he or she is an Anima Summa beforehand. As long as this happens, they will then be capable of maximum powers."

Dumbledore paused to let the information sink in, and then continued, "When Merlin and Morgana bonded, they were fully adult. They were worldly-wise and were well equipped to handle the bond. Harry has just turned fifteen!"

Sirius gasped and shouted "But, Headmaster, how the hell is Harry and his mate, whoever she is, going to be able to handle this? Good grief, they can't be expected to cope at such a tender age. They've hardly lived. And how can they be compared to the great Merlin and Morgana?" he trailed off at a loss for words.

"Sirius," said Dumbledore gently, "I don't know the answer to that. And I don't know when this bonding is going to happen, but what I do know is that the prophecy is accurate and it is urgent. It seems that the Anima Summa has been seeded with just this time in mind - the rise of Voldemort. What is absolutely essential is that we all have to support Harry in this. We mustn't tell him about Anima Summa; he must find out for himself. If he did know, then he will obviously try to find the female, and that might not be the best thing for him. We are going to have to let nature take its course here. Do you all fully understand?"

Everyone in the room nodded. They were deep in their own thoughts about the revelations that Dumbledore had made.

Lupin looked up when a sudden thought came to him, "Headmaster, we know that Harry's birthday is 31st July 1980. Now I know that we don't know when actual conception took place, but it's reasonable to assume that the female Anima Summa will be born on 31st October 1980, give or take a few days either side. Now is this any help to us? Let's face it - under normal circumstances the girl could be anywhere in the wizarding world so it'd be impossible for us to even start looking for her. But, given the nature of the prophecy, and the urgency, it may well be that the girl is already within easy reach - maybe she's already here at Hogwarts!"

"You could well be right, Remus. But I wouldn't bank on it. I know, for instance, that we are going to get a number of exchange students from Europe and America later in the school year and some of them will be in Harry's year. But I don't know yet who they'll be. In the meantime, though, I'll check the records of all the fifth year girls at the school to see if I can find a match. But even if I do find a match, it won't be certain that the girl will be the one - let's be honest, even if I find a match, how can we tell if she's Harry's Anima Summa? She won't be wearing a sign on her head or anything, and there must be many witches with a birth

date of 31st October 1980 in the wizarding world. All we would be able to do, I think, is to make sure that no harm comes to any of the girls we find with the right birthday, just in case one of them might be the one."

Remus looked dejected "When you put it like that, Headmaster, I have to agree with you. There's no way we'd be able to tell who the right girl is."

"Right, onto the next matter. Sirius, the U.S Congress of Magic has been in touch with me. The special auror they have appointed to work with you is .." and he looked at a parchment on his desk, "Ceri Jones - there's a note here that says it's pronounced 'K-e-r-r-y'. He will be arriving next week, just before school starts. Now, I've told the U.S. ministry that you will be outside the Three Broomsticks in Hogsmeade in your Animagus form - you can't be too careful - on the 31st August at 10.00 pm. He will make contact with you then - the ministry seems reluctant to give any details of their agent so I don't know anything about him apart from his name."

"That's fine, Headmaster," said Sirius, "Sounds as if he has a Welsh ancestry with a name like that. By the way, I'm meeting Harry at the Leaky Cauldron tomorrow evening. I thought it would be a good idea to spend a day or two with him before he comes back here, and don't worry - I won't say anything about the prophecy to him."

"That sounds fine, Sirius. But be careful. We don't want anyone to recognise you." Dumbledore sighed and ended the meeting, "Right, I know you want to get back to sort out your classes and schedules for the year. I'll let you know if I find any witches with the right birthday. Thank you all for coming."

They then left the headmaster's office pondering the events of the meeting.

Dumbledore drew his thoughts away from the prophecy to more mundane things, and muttered to himself, "I must remember to set up the password on the gargoyle at the bottom of the stairs before school starts ..."

Harry heaved his trunk into the boot of his uncle's car in the carport of No. 4 Privet Drive. He smiled as he remembered that he could hardly lift the trunk to drag it at the start of the summer. All his hard work and exercising had paid off, and he felt strong and ready for just about anything that may be thrown at him in the coming year. He was also excited that he would soon spend some time with his godfather and meet up with his friends.

He placed Hedwig, sitting drowsily on her perch in the cage, onto the back seat of the car and sat down next to her. As his uncle drove slowly down Privet Drive towards the junction at the end of the street, Harry glanced over at No. 12 and saw Lara standing at the upstairs window looking down at him. His heart ached as he saw the look of sadness in her red-rimmed eyes. She lifted a hand to her lips and blew Harry a kiss, before slowly raising it to wave a silent goodbye. Harry had a sinking feeling as he slowly waved back. They didn't take their eyes off each other until the car turned onto the main road towards London.

Harry sighed as he tried to take his mind off Lara by thinking back to the events of the day ...

"Come on `Arry. We've got to go up to the main office to shift some filing cabinets," said Jake with a twinkle in his eye. It was 4.30pm on his last day at the factory.

The two walked up to the office building and Jake held open the door and pushed Harry into the large open-plan office, which appeared to be empty. Harry was startled when about twenty office girls jumped up from behind their desks and shouted

"Surprise!"

They walked up to Harry and stood in a semi-circle in front of him. Jake stepped up alongside Harry and took a battered piece of paper out of his pocket and began to read.

"Well, girls, this is `Arry's last day at the factory, and he's going back to his posh school. It's been great `aveing you `ere Harry, and you've made a lot of friends. Now we've clubbed together and got you a little somethin' to remember us by." Jake took a small parcel from Melanie and gave it to Harry.

"It's not a lot, just somethin' that you can use at school. We all `ope that you come back next year - we've loved working wiv `im `aven't we girls?"

"YES" was the strident shout from the girls, some of whom had handkerchiefs held up to their eyes.

"Go on then - open it," said Jake.

Throughout all this Harry had stood with his mouth slightly agape and a pink tinge covering his face. He looked down and ripped open the package to see a small crystal paperweight, engraved with the words *'TO HARRY FROM ALL HIS FRIENDS AT THE FACTORY'*.

"Th .. thanks everybody," stammered Harry, "I d .. don't know what to say." Harry was clearly overwhelmed and hadn't expected anything like this.

"Well shuddup then," said Jake as he caught hold of Harry's hand and shook it vigorously. The girls then stepped up and each placed a kiss on his cheek - except for Melanie who kissed him full on the lips.

Harry had tears in his eyes as uncle Vernon walked in and shouted, "Come on, I haven't got all day to wait around for you - let's go. And you lot, get back to work. There's still 15 minutes left before finishing time!"

Harry walked towards the door with his uncle, and before going out turned and waved to all his friends.

Harry was shaken from his thoughts when his uncle shouted "Where's this Leaky Cauldron then. How do I get there?"

"It's in Charing Cross Road, Uncle Vernon."

"Are they here yet?"

"No, my Lord," answered Peter Pettigrew as he cringed on the floor. They were inside Voldemort's cave in northern Scotland. It was illuminated with flaming torches that showed the damp seeping down the craggy walls. The ceiling, about 12 feet above, was hung with varying sizes of stalactites, and dripped small drops of percolated rainwater into milky-coloured puddles that formed on the uneven floor. In a dank and gloomy corner of the cave lay a huge coiled snake, its head protruding above the thick coils of its body and its forked tongue flicking out at regular intervals. At the centre of the cave was a stone throne, raised about 3 feet from the ground by a stone pedestal. On it sat the sinister figure of Lord Voldemort, impatiently tapping his fingers on the head of a stone snake, which adorned the arm of the throne.

"Go outside and activate the summons again. I will not be kept waiting like this," hissed Voldemort. Wormtail scurried to the cave entrance to obey his master's command.

A few minutes later, two figures dressed in black entered the cave with Wormtail. One was quite tall and held his head up high. The other was smaller and kept glancing around the cave nervously. The nervous one stood stock still when he saw who was sitting on the throne, but was pulled towards the centre by the taller man. They both bowed reverently to Voldemort, the taller one saying, "My apologies, my Lord, I did not intend to keep you waiting. I was giving last minute instructions to my son on the correct way to behave in your esteemed presence."

Voldemort seemed appeased by this and hissed, "Don't ever keep me waiting again, Lucius. Let me see his face."

Lucius Malfoy pulled the hood down from his son's head. Draco's eyes were as large as saucers as he stared mesmerised at the legendary Dark Lord.

"So. Draco Malfoy. You look a lot like your father. Do you know why you have been brought before me today?"

"N ..no, my Lord," stuttered Draco, "But I will do whatever you ask"

"Hmm that's good Draco. Your father has no doubt told you what happens to my servants if they disobey me." He turned to Lucius and asked, "Are you sure that he can be fully trusted and that he's up to the job I want him to do?"

"Yes, my Lord," he replied, "I have no doubt at all. Potter is Draco's worst enemy and he wants to do anything he can to get at him."

Voldemort turned back to Draco and pointed a bony finger towards him. "You have been chosen to carry out a very important task for me. If you fail me, you will feel the pain of my wrath, do you understand?"

"Y .. Yes, my Lord. I will not fail you."

Voldemort nodded, "You may be wondering why I have not yet initiated you into my army of Death Eaters, Draco. Be assured that you will as soon as you have finished your schooling. Look on this as a sort of apprenticeship into the Dark Arts. I have sensed, over the last few weeks, an emanation. It is very feint and I cannot pinpoint the source, but I can feel that it involves the Light Side, and it seems to be some sort of summons. I don't know the one who is being called, but I have a feeling that it involves Potter. Now when you go back to Hogwarts in a few days I want you, Draco, to find out everything you can about the things that Potter and his friends do. Anything at all that seems a bit unusual. Send an owl to your father when you have any information for me."

Voldemort reached into his robe and pulled out a silvery, shimmering piece of material, and held it out towards Draco. "This will help you to get close to Potter without being seen. It's an invisibility cloak."

Draco's eyes were wide with excitement as he took the cloak.

Voldemort had a grim expression on his face as he pierced Draco with an icy stare and hissed, "That was very difficult to get hold of; it is very rare and valuable. If you lose it or damage it in any way, your life will not be worth living. Do I make myself clear?"

"Y .. yes, my Lord"

"Do well in the task I have set you and you will be rewarded. Now go!"

The Malfoys were led out of the cave by Wormtail as Voldemort turned his head to the snake in the corner of the cave "Interesting times, Nagini - interesting times."

Chapter 2 Diagon Alley

Harry looked out of the window of Uncle Vernon's car as it entered Charing Cross Road. As they approached the Leaky Cauldron, Harry said, "Stop here, please."

"Why? I can't see the pub," said Uncle Vernon. He didn't know that it was magically hidden from Muggles. However, he stopped the car, wanting to get rid of Harry as soon as he could. He stopped outside a large bookshop, little knowing that it was next to *'The Leaky Cauldron'*. Harry lifted Hedwig's cage out of the back seat, and heaved the trunk from the boot. As soon as the boot was closed, Uncle Vernon pulled away without so much as a backward glance.

As Harry looked around, he felt something wet on his hand. He glanced down to see a large, black, shaggy-coated dog nuzzling him.

"Padfoot!" Harry shouted and patted the dog's head affectionately. They both turned and walked towards the Leaky Cauldron.

When they entered, the main bar was almost empty, just one or two regulars sitting at a table playing wizarding chess. Harry walked up to the bar and greeted the landlord.

"Hello Tom, nice to see you again. Have you got a spare room for two nights please?"

"Well hello, young Harry," smiled Tom, "it's good to see you. I think I've got your old room free, Room 11. I'll check" and he went over to the register and drew his finger down a list of names. "Yes, it's free for the next two nights. What about the dog?"

"Oh, he can stay with me if that's all right - he's fully house trained." Padfoot looked disdainfully at Harry as a low growl escaped from his mouth.

"Well, since it's you, Harry, I'll let him stay - but he won't be allowed in the dining room, mind you," said Tom as he handed the room key over.

"Thanks, Tom. Oh, can I have dinner in my room please? I've got some reading to do for school and I've got a bit behind with it. I'm starving, so I'd appreciate it if I could have a very large meal."

"No problem, Harry, I'll send it up as soon as it's ready. Oh, and I'll send a nice big bone up for the dog."

"Thanks again Tom," grinned Harry over his shoulder as he and Padfoot made their way to the stairs and up to room 11.

As soon as they entered, Padfoot immediately transformed and a stern-looking Sirius glared at Harry. "House trained indeed!" and they both fell into the two easy chairs laughing.

Later that evening, both Harry and Sirius were feeling comfortably full after eating the extremely large meal.

"I'll keep the bone for later, after I've transformed," said Sirius. "Well, Harry, I can't get over the change in you. You're looking great. How have things been since I saw you last? Did you get up to anything interesting?"

"Well, work was great - I was really sorry to leave. They're a great bunch at the factory. Look what they gave me as a leaving present." Harry pulled the paperweight out of his trunk and handed it to Sirius.

"That's great, Harry. It's nice to see you making new friends."

Harry had a pensive look on his face and said, "Uh, Sirius. Can I ask you something? I don't have anyone else to talk to about things like this."

"Well of course you can, Harry. What things?"

"I uh .. well I met this girl living in Privet Drive. Her name's Lara and she's really nice. And .. and she kissed me. She was pretty sad when I left to come here tonight." Sirius' ears pricked up. "I .. well I really like her, but she's a Muggle. What can I do, Sirius?"

'Oh lord,' thought Sirius, 'he really is growing up. But if the girl's a Muggle, she can't be the one'

"Look, Harry, there's nothing wrong with having Muggle friends. There are quite a few people I know who have even married Muggles - although things don't always work out between them. It seems that Muggles can't always handle it when they find out that their partner is a witch or wizard."

"I'm pretty confused about things, Sirius. Some of the girls at work were trying to get me to go out with them, as well. What do they see in me? I'm not famous to them or anything."

"Look, I'm hardly an expert in such matters, Harry, but I think it's called 'growing up.' I seem to remember that it wasn't an easy time for me, either. The main thing is to be happy - go with the flow. Live a little, you're still very young, after all. You'll probably find that quite a few witches will come onto you - but I can tell you one thing. When the right girl comes along, you'll know beyond any shadow of a doubt."

"Uh, thanks Sirius - I think ...but I still don't know why these girls keep coming onto me," said Harry doubtfully.

'Oh my,' thought Sirius, 'there's going to be a few broken hearts strewn around Hogwarts this year!'

"Don't worry about it Harry - just be glad you're so popular. Right - to bed. You want to be fresh tomorrow when you fight your way through the crowds in Diagon Alley."

"Sirius, has there been any news about Voldemort over the summer?"

Sirius frowned. "There haven't been any attacks, but there've been reports that he's building up his strength and recruiting an army. Remus and I spied on one of the Death Eater initiation ceremonies - and I'm afraid 'You Know Who' looked to be pretty strong then. I think it's only a matter of time before the attacks start. But don't you worry about it. You and your friends will be safe at Hogwarts and Professor Dumbledore has organised quite a powerful spy network to get advance information on any activity."

"I hope you're right, Sirius, but I can't help worrying about what's going to happen."

Sirius smiled, "To bed, Harry. We can talk about this another time," and he transformed and curled up on the rug at the foot of the bed to eat his bone.

Harry and Sirius woke early the following morning. They weren't used to the noise of the traffic in Charing Cross Road, which was just below the front window of their room. Harry dressed in his wizarding robes, went downstairs to breakfast and managed to fill a 'doggy bag' of the choicest items on the menu. Harry went back up to room 11 and proudly displayed the bag full of food, which Sirius ate ravenously.

"Will you be all right on your own Harry? I think I'd better stay here in case I'm recognised, and I don't think Diagon Alley is the place for a dog today."

"No problem. I'm meeting Ron, Hermione and Ginny anyway, so I won't be on my own. I'll see you later this afternoon."

Harry went out to the walled courtyard outside the Leaky Cauldron and walked over to the wall that hid the entrance to Diagon Alley. He measured three bricks up and two across, just above the dustbin, then took out his wand from his robes and tapped the brick. A small hole appeared and rapidly became larger to form an archway. Harry smiled at the familiar hustle and bustle which was always the trademark of Diagon Alley, especially just before school when students, accompanied by their parents, stocked up on books and materials for the coming year.

Harry happily walked along the street taking in the sights and the excited chatter of the younger children just about to start their first year at Hogwarts. He made his way to Gringotts bank and entered the cool and somewhat gloomy reception room. He asked a goblin at the desk to take him to his vault, which was way below the floor of the bank. There he took out enough money to last him the school year, and also to buy the books and supplies he needed.

When he walked back out into the warm sunshine, the street had become far more crowded - Sirius had been right - it was certainly no place for a dog. He threaded his way over to Florean Fortescue's Ice-Cream Parlour and sat outside at a spare table, underneath a brightly coloured sun umbrella. He ordered a chocolate-flavoured ice cream and slowly enjoyed its taste while waiting for his friends to arrive. Feeling warm, he took off his wizarding robes and put them on the seat beside him, he felt far cooler in his jeans and T-shirt. He closed his eyes and had started to go into a comfortable doze when he heard, "Heelloo Haarryyy," in a young female voice.

He looked up to see three girls grinning and staring at him. He recognised them as third - no fourth year now - Ravenclaws from Hogwarts. "He .. Hello girls."

"What have you been up to during the summer, Harry?" asked the tallest girl. "It looks like you've been working out it a big way." The other two girls giggled.

"Uh, I've been working in my uncle's factory," said Harry feeling very embarrassed at being put under the spotlight. "You haven't seen Ron Weasley have you?"

"No, but I saw Ginny about 10 minutes ago."

"Thanks. Well I suppose he'll be here any time now."

"Byeeee Harryyy," said all three girls in concert as they walked away, smiling as they looked back over their shoulders at a pink-faced Harry.

"Harry me old mate! How the devil are you?" shouted a smiling Ron as he approached the table.

Harry stood up, grinning widely, and greeted his best friend. "Hello Ron, it's great to see you. What have you been doing? You look as if you've sprouted about three inches."

"Yeh, well my mother says I'll be the tallest in the family if I keep on growing," said Ron ruefully as the two friends sat down at the table.

"You're looking different," said Ron, "you must have worked your socks off at that factory."

"Uh yes, I suppose I did, Ron. Have you seen Hermione?"

"Yes, and wait till you see her! She's with Ginny looking in one of the clothes shops."

"Why, what's wrong with her?"

"Just wait, Harry," said Ron grinning widely.

About a hundred yards further back along the street, Ginny and Hermione had just emerged from the shop and passed the three Ravenclaws who had spoken to Harry earlier. They couldn't help but listen to their excited chatter.

"Ohh he's so gorgeous really hot I wonder if he'll be free this year ... you wish! You'll have to get in the queue."

"Oh, I wonder who they're drooling over," said Ginny, "sounds like there's a new stud on the block."

Hermione rolled her eyes, "Ginny! We go to Hogwarts to study! I don't intend to have any romantic involvements. My schoolwork is far too important!"

"Well I don't know about that, Hermi. Surely you can combine the two? I .. I've decided to forget my old crush on Harry, by the way. He'll never treat me other than a friend, so I won't waste my time any more. I'm going to look around at the other talent, and if I get the chance - well you never know. And anyway, what about you and Viktor?" grinned Ginny.

"Oh .. he .. he's just a friend. There's nothing going on between us." But Ginny noticed the pink flush on Hermione's face.

They walked on towards Florean Fortescue's and Ginny suddenly stopped, with her mouth wide open. "Eh, Hermi. I .. I think I know who those Ravenclaws were going on about. Look over there .. next to Ron. Wow!"

Hermione looked in the direction Ginny was staring and saw Harry and Ron talking animatedly at one of the tables. Her mouth dropped slightly open as she took in the change in

Harry. 'Those girls weren't far wrong,' she thought. She felt something stir deep inside her - it seemed to be more than just seeing a gorgeous boy. She didn't know what it was and shook herself mentally and tried to put it out of her mind.

"You know, Hermi, every girl at Hogwarts is going to fancy Harry - there's going to be a stampede. And they are certainly going to be jealous of us two - you know, being best friends with him and spending so much time with him."

"Honestly, Ginny. Come on, let's go."

Harry glanced up and noticed Ginny and Hermione coming towards their table. He stood up and smiled as they approached. "Hi, Ginny," he said as he hugged her. Ginny held on to Harry longer than she should have for a friendly hug. Harry, however, didn't seem to notice - he'd looked at Hermione and was astounded.

What he saw sent a flush to his cheeks - she had certainly grown up during the summer. Her hair was now smooth and shiny, and neatly fell around her shoulders. She was tanned, and her broad smile lit up her face. She was, in short, beautiful. She was no longer the gawky schoolgirl he first met 4 years ago, she was now rapidly becoming a woman, and even her robes couldn't hide her willowy figure. He couldn't help but compare her with Lara. He suddenly felt cheap at the way he was thinking about his best friend - the one he most respected - 'Come on, Harry, this is Hermione. Get real,' he thought to himself.

When Ginny released Harry her face was almost as red as her lovely hair. But Harry didn't notice. He went over to Hermione, "Hello, Hermi. Great to see you," and they hugged - briefly.

"Hello, Harry. Glad to see you're better." Hermione couldn't help but marvel at the beauty of Harry's eyes. They seemed to have a more mature look and had a sort of mesmerising effect, twinkling with all sorts of emotions as they appraised her. She again felt a jolt deep within her. She shook herself. "Shall we stay here for a while before getting our school stuff?" she said looking around at the other two.

They all sat around the table, and Harry ordered ice creams all round. "Where's Fred and George?" he asked.

Ron grinned, "Oh you know them - they've gone to Gambol & Japes, the joke shop, to eye up the opposition and to stock up for their last year. I think they're planning to go out with a bang."

All four laughed, thinking about the pranks they would be witnessing, mostly on the Slytherins no doubt, in the coming year.

"Well, Hermi," said Ron with a smirk on his face, "how was crumby Viktor this summer?"

Hermione flushed at the jibe, "Oh he's ok. We had a great time"

"Yeah, I'm sure you did," Ron replied with a hint of sarcasm.

"Now look, Ron, what I did in Bulgaria is none of your business. So drop it!"

Harry looked at his two friends and groaned inwardly. They hadn't taken long to start one of their legendary slanging matches. He tried to divert Ron from another frosty reply, "Ron, hey thanks for the Quidditch book - it was great, and the chapters on Seeker tactics were brilliant."

"That's ok, Harry. What else did you get for your birthday?"

Harry told them about the presents he'd received, and they all laughed at Ginny's singing birthday card. He then took hold of the amulet and pulled it outside his T-shirt. "I had this from Hermi - and thanks," he said looking towards her. "It feels warm when I touch it, and I get a feeling of security."

"Yes, I had the same feeling," said Hermione.

Ron and Ginny each took hold of the amulet but they said they could feel nothing out of the ordinary. Harry then looked at Hermione and said, "Lately, I've felt something else when I hold it. It's a sort of feeling of urgency - it's hard to describe. You try it."

Hermione held the amulet, "Well I still get the warm and secure feeling, but I can't feel anything else."

"What do you know about it, Hermi, and where did you get it?"

"I got it at this new shop that hasn't long opened. It's a few doors up from Flourish and Blotts - come on, I'll show you. Perhaps we can ask the old man who sold it to me if he knows anything more."

Harry put his robes back on and the four friends made their way through the crowds to the shop.

Hermione was astonished to see that the sign over the window had now disappeared, and the shop was boarded up. "Well that's odd. Come on, let's ask in the shop next door - they might know when it closed and if he's moved somewhere else."

They walked into the little shop next door and Hermione went up to the lady behind the counter, "Can you tell me when the shop next door closed - El Hamri I think it was called?"

"El Hamri? No dear, the shop next door has been closed for years."

"But I was there about a month ago. A foreign gentleman owned it, and he was selling old curiosities."

"No I think you are mistaken, my dear. I've been here all summer - haven't missed a single day. I pass by that old shop every morning when I open up and I'd have noticed if there was something new there."

"Oh well thanks for your help," said Hermione with a frown on her face, and the four walked back out to the shop next door.

"This is weird," said Hermione, "It's almost as if the shop was there only when I passed by, especially to sell me the amulet. I think there's something odd going on here. Harry, I think you should get rid of the amulet in case it has any more nasty surprises."

"No Hermi. I don't think there's anything nasty going on here. All the feelings I've had from it are good feelings. Even the feeling of urgency has a good sort of feel to it. No, I'm keeping it. And anyway, how could I throw away my birthday present from you?" said Harry with a smile on his face.

"I don't know about this. We'll have to do some research when we get back to the school library - I've seen a few books there about magical amulets and there must be something about it I can find. The old man said that it was pretty rare and dated from the Crusades."

The four turned around and walked towards Flourish & Blotts to get their fifth year school books - except for Ginny, of course, who already had her fourth year books from Ron. They were just about to enter when they heard, "Well if it isn't Potty, the two weasels and the Mudblood - are they letting you rabble back into school this year then?"

They turned to see Draco Malfoy's sneering face flanked by his two minders, Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle.

"Push off Malfoy," said Harry as Ron bristled beside him, "It's bad enough that we've got to put up with you at school, let alone before it starts."

Draco sneered at them, "Just keep out of my way Potter. I don't want to be near you when 'You Know Who' comes to get you this year." And he and the two heavies sauntered off in the direction of Florean Fortescue's.

Ginny and Hermione grabbed hold of the backs of Ron and Harry's robes as they made to follow. "Hang on you two, just ignore them," said Ginny with a curious smirk on her face, "I know exactly how to teach them a lesson they'll never forget."

They looked at Ginny with astonishment. It was so unlike Ginny to act this way. "Well," said Ron, "she is a Weasley, and she's been pretty close to Fred and George this summer. What have you got up your sleeve, Gin?"

Ginny just smiled but said nothing.

The next few hours were spent stocking up their supplies for the new school year. The visit to Flourish & Blotts was particularly long, since the book list for Harry, Ron and Hermione's OWLS was quite formidable. And of course Hermione just had to get some extra tomes that weren't on the list. The other three ended up having to drag her out of the shop.

They then went into Madam Malkin's for Ron and Ginny to get new dress robes - they said that Fred and George had given them the money, but they didn't know where it had come from. Harry just grinned at this.

The four friends were pretty tired by the middle of the afternoon, and finished up with another visit to Florean Fortescue's and another round of ice cream. They then walked slowly towards the entrance to The Leaky Cauldron where they were all staying overnight, together with Fred and George. Mr. Weasley had arranged to pick them up in a ministry car the following morning to take them to Kings Cross station.

Six rather noisy and exuberant teens sat at a table in the bar of The Leaky Cauldron that evening. They had just finished a huge meal and were chatting among themselves over a round of butter beer.

Harry dampened the proceedings somewhat, "Have you heard what's happening with Voldemort?" he asked.

The other five cringed at the sound of his name, and shook their heads. Harry proceeded to tell them what he had heard from Sirius. "So we're going to have to be careful this year. I know that the teachers are going to be imposing tight security - so we should be all right as long as we don't do anything stupid - like sneaking off to Hogsmeade." Harry directed his gaze at Fred and George particularly.

They all looked gloomily into their butter beers for a while until Fred put a grin on his face and said, "Come on. Who's for a game of wizarding darts then? George and I will take on any two of you in a game of doubles."

Wizarding darts was a relatively new game at The Leaky Cauldron. It was played like the Muggle variety, but the dartboard was enchanted to revolve as the darts were thrown, as were the darts that tried, not always successfully, to find the place they were aimed at. The game could be quite hilarious at times. Ron and Ginny volunteered to take them on in the first game, and the four siblings went over towards the corner of the room where the dartboard hung on the wall.

Harry and Hermione stayed at the table, sipping their butter beers. Harry told Hermione about the Death Eater attack at the factory and the 'find-me' stone. He pulled it from his pocket to show her. She looked at the stone with some interest, as Harry told her how it worked.

"Uh, Hermi. I haven't thanked you properly for what you did - you know, back at the beginning of the summer. I thought I was going crazy, and I think I would have if you hadn't asked Sirius to speak to me." He squeezed her hand in a friendly gesture of gratitude.

Hermione flushed, "It was the least I could have done. You really worried me when I read your owl." She smiled at Harry and continued, "Thanks for stopping Ron having a go at me about Viktor this afternoon - I really didn't want to get into an argument with him."

"Yeah - I know. He can be a git on times, but you know Ron! So how did your dinner date with Viktor go?"

Hermione flushed slightly and looked down at her hands.

"What's the matter Hermi? Is anything wrong?"

"Oh Harry, I need to tell somebody about this but please promise not to tell Ron - I'll never live it down." Hermione looked imploringly at Harry.

"Of course I won't tell him, Hermi. What happened?"

"Well, Viktor picked me up from our hotel and took me to this really nice restaurant. We had a lovely dinner, and the atmosphere was so romantic. We were there for about three hours, talking about loads of things - it was nice. When he walked me back to the hotel we stopped

outside and talked for a bit. Then he .. he .. well he kissed me." Hermione face went bright red, but continued, "It was quite cute and charming, I suppose - it was my first kiss. But .. but he didn't stop there. He kissed me again, but harder this time and I started to get a bit panicky. You see, Harry, I look on Viktor as a friend - but that's all, despite what Ron keeps saying. There was never anything more to it than that. I pushed him away and told him. Well, he got a bit angry and called me a cheap tease. And then he walked off leaving me standing there. I was mortified, Harry. I .. I'm not a cheap tease am I?"

Hermione had a pleading look on her lovely face and Harry felt a sudden burst of anger and stood up as he growled, "That .. that dirty sod. I'm going to punch his lights out if I see him again."

"Please, Harry. Calm down." Hermione gently caught hold of his arm and pulled him back into his seat, "Ron and the others will hear!"

"Sorry, Hermi. But there's no way that you're cheap or a tease. You're one of the nicest people I know. Just don't pay any attention to what Krum said. He was probably feeling the blow to his ego because you didn't give in to him. He just isn't worth it, Hermi."

"Thanks, Harry. I'm glad I spoke to you about it and that you understand. But please, please don't tell Ron."

Harry looked at Hermi and said, "I think you're underestimating Ron, Herm. If he knew what happened, he'd react the same way as me I'm sure." He glanced over his shoulder to make sure that the others were still engrossed in their darts game, and continued, "You .. err.. you weren't the only one to get a first kiss this summer - but for goodness sake don't tell Ron. I think I know how he'll react to that. It would give him at least a month's worth of teasing."

Harry then told her about Lara, and how confused he felt about her.

"So - do you really like her?"

"Yes, I do. But she's a Muggle, Hermi. I just don't know what to do about her."

As he said this, Hermione felt another jolt deep inside her - and again she couldn't put her finger on what exactly it was. They looked at each other for a few moments, both silent and thinking about what the other had said and both feeling a close bond of friendship with each other. They both jumped at a great shout from the corner of the room, where they saw Fred and George dancing with delight at their victory. Ron and Ginny sat back down at the table and gulped their butter beers, while Fred and George continued to play darts.

"I've got a surprise for you," said Harry with a grin on his face. "Come upstairs to my room - it's up there." And he reached down and picked up a bag of food that he had filled during their dinner.

As they entered room 11, they heard a low growl from the foot of the bed, and a large shaggy-haired head with a shiny black nose peeked over the blanket.

"Snuffles!" shouted Ron and Hermione as they ran over and affectionately ruffled his fur.

"Oh I didn't know you had a dog, Harry," said Ginny as she walked over to pat Snuffles. Ginny didn't know about Sirius/Padfoot/Snuffles and still thought, like the vast majority of the wizarding world, that Sirius Black was an escaped killer on the run.

"Uh, Ginny," said Harry, "He isn't my dog, and we've got a surprise for you. Now don't shout out or anything." He looked at Snuffles, who transformed back into his human form.

"SIRIUS BLA..." yelled Ginny, as Harry clamped a hand over her mouth. He turned her round to face him, looking into her lovely brown eyes that had suddenly gone very wide.

"Ginny, Sirius is my godfather. And he didn't do anything wrong. He was framed by Wormtail - Peter Pettigrew." And he then told her about what had happened fourteen years ago. He looked over at Ron and Hermione "And Cornelius Fudge has secretly, but officially, cleared him of those crimes. The only people who know are the four of us, Professor Dumbledore, Remus Lupin of course, and a few other teachers at Hogwarts. Fudge wants to keep quiet about it because otherwise he'd have to admit that Voldemort is back."

Ron and Hermione grinned at the news, and Ron shook his hand. Hermione hugged Sirius and said, "I'm so glad, Sirius. Perhaps Fudge will tell everyone soon - I'm sure 'You Know Who' will surface pretty soon, from what Harry's told us."

"Can I take my hand away now Ginny?" said Harry. Ginny nodded, although her eyes were still wide as she looked at Sirius.

Sirius went over and held his hand out to Ginny. She nervously shook it as Sirius said grinning at her, "It's nice to meet you at last, Ginny. Harry's told me a lot about you."

"Yeh, me too," said Ginny, "Look, I'm sorry if I seem a bit quiet, but I need to get used to this." Sirius nodded and looked at the other three grinning teenagers.

Harry gave Sirius the bag of food, which he ate hungrily as he chatted to the four.

"So, what's happened to Buckbeak?" asked Hermione.

"Oh I flew with him to a forbidden forest in the south of France and he soon settled down with a group of hippogriffs who live there - he seemed happy as Larry when I left. So - you're all off to Hogwarts tomorrow then. Look, I'm going to have to leave now. I've got a meeting in Hogsmeade with a special agent from America. I'll be working with him to try to get a fix on what 'You Know Who' is planning. I'll be back later tonight though, and I'll see you off in the morning."

He waved at them before disappearing with a slight 'pop.'

Harry led the others back down to the bar and joined Fred and George in their discussion of a range of wizard jokes they were planning.

Padfoot was sitting on the pavement outside 'The Three Broomsticks' in Hogsmeade. He looked a miserable sight in the light drizzle that was falling from the grey sky. He shifted,

uncomfortably, as he waited for the American to arrive. But the only people he could see on the cobbled street were a witch and wizard, who walked past him and went into the pub.

He let out a growl of frustration and kept looking up and down the street for any sign of his contact. He jumped slightly as he felt a hand on his head.

"Padfoot, I presume?" Said a voice that was definitely not that of a man, although it had an American accent. Padfoot looked up and was startled to see a woman in her early to mid thirties. She was very attractive, with dark brown hair, cut to just below her neck, twinkling hazel eyes, and a very pleasant smile on her heart-shaped face. "I'm Ceri Jones. Do you think we can go somewhere more pleasant?"

Padfoot dumbly nodded his head and set off towards the shrieking shack, closely followed by the woman. He looked around before transforming and leading her into the sinister-looking house via a side door.

"Well," said Sirius, "you're a bit of a surprise. I expected to see a man." He beckoned her to a seat by a table that had food and pumpkin juice on it. Sirius had earlier prepared the shack for the meeting.

Ceri laughed, "I always seem to get that response from people I've never met before. Ceri is a Welsh name, as you've probably gathered. In Wales, Ceri is a name given to both boys and girls. My ancestors came over to New England - Maine - a long time ago, and most of the Welsh families have kept up a tradition of naming their kids with Welsh names. Some of us can even speak the language, and we try to teach it to the kids from an early age. In fact, our community is a sort of little Patagonia on the North-East coast."

"Patagonia?"

"Oh you know - the Welsh community in Argentina. Like them, we keep up quite a few of the old traditions. We hold an Eisteddfod every year, and we've even sent a group of singers to the International Eisteddfod at Llangollen - that's in North Wales."

"Eisteddfod?"

Ceri laughed at Sirius' attempt at the pronunciation, "Yes - an annual competition of traditional music, dancing, and literature. All in the Welsh language, of course."

"Amazing," said Sirius, "Do you still have any relatives left in this country?"

"Oh yes - my family came from a little village in the foothills of the Brecon Beacons Mountains - that's in Mid Wales - and I've got some distant cousins still living there. They're Muggles, but we still keep in touch. The wizarding parts of the family were the ones who emigrated."

"That's interesting, Ceri. Perhaps you'll find some time to visit them?"

"I certainly hope so." Ceri looked at Sirius reflectively, "Uh, It's not a problem that I'm a woman is it?"

"No .. no, of course not. I just didn't expect .." Sirius trailed off. "Uh, why don't you get stuck in to some of this food?"

"Ok - thanks. Well, I was pretty surprised as well when I was told I had to meet a dog! What's with that?" said Ceri as she started munching on a chicken sandwich. She appraised the man before her 'Hmm, quite attractive in a rugged sort of way,' she thought to herself.

"Well, I don't suppose you've heard of Sirius Black in the States, but in this country ..." Sirius told Ceri briefly about what had happened fourteen years ago and the recent events that had cleared his name. "So, you see, I still have to act as if I'm a wanted criminal - and it's all down to that filthy scum, Wormtail!" Sirius' eyes blazed as he said the name of his former friend.

Ceri winced. "Sirius, I .. I'm an empath and I can feel people's emotions, if they're strong enough. What I felt from you then nearly blew my head off. You really must try to curb that anger - it'll cloud your judgement if you get close to Wormtail, as you surely will given what we're going to be doing."

"Yes, I know that Ceri. But it's difficult. That bastard not only deprived me of my freedom, but also of my godson for twelve years. I feel I've let down my two best friends, his parents. I wasn't there to look after him after they were killed, and at a time when he needed me most."

Ceri winced again and looked at him with sympathy in her eyes. She felt herself warming to this strange man, and she couldn't help but compare his past with her own. She had also been deprived of the ones she loved most. A tear rolled down the side of her face as she thought of her own private agony.

"Ceri, what's the matter? Did I say something to upset you?"

Ceri looked at Sirius, "What you've gone through just reminds me of my own pain."

"Want to talk about it?" said Sirius

She looked at Sirius and before she knew what she was doing, she started to tell him ..

"I married Siôn - that's Welsh for John by the way - when I was only seventeen. We soon had a lovely baby daughter - we called her Siân - that's Jane. Well we were sitting having lunch at a restaurant in Portland when about six Death Eaters ran in - 'You Know Who' had some pretty active cells in the States back then, fourteen years ago. They were just intent on killing as many Muggles as they could - they were shouting out slogans like 'long live purebloods.' A few of us witches and wizards who were there tried to fight back and they did run off as soon as they saw they had opposition. But .. but not before my husband and daughter were killed." More tears ran down Ceri's face, and Sirius put a hand on her shoulder to comfort her. Even after all those years, the memory was obviously still very painful.

"Well, I guess I lost it for a while after that. I don't even remember what I did for about two years. Then one of my friends suggested that I fight back. She said there were quite a few female aurors around, especially since 'You Know Who' was gone and it wasn't so dangerous any more. So I took her advice and joined the U.S. Congress of Magic and started my auror training. I did reasonably well and I was put in charge of my own team. Then about five years ago we got a lead on the group of Death Eaters that we suspected of carrying out the attack at

the restaurant. My team was sent to investigate. When we got to the house, which was in a remote part of Vermont, I set up the team to stake it out. That's when it all went pear-shaped. I recognised one of the men. I'll never forget the face of the man who sent the curse that killed my little girl. That's why I warned you earlier, Sirius, of anger clouding your judgment. It certainly clouded mine back then. I threw the rule book out of the window and went charging into that house, my wand blazing. My team were thrown into confusion and they ran in after me. In the fight that followed, one of my team was killed. We captured all the Death Eaters, but the damage had been done. If it weren't for me, Jerry would still be alive."

Ceri had to pause for a moment before she continued, "The Death Eaters were convicted and sentenced to life in Demenota - that's your equivalent of Azkaban. All except for the one who killed my daughter. It turned out that he'd also killed my husband and the other person to die that day, a Muggle. He got the Dementor's kiss. I was suspended from duty and had to face an internal enquiry. I don't know why, but I wasn't fired - I guess they had some sympathy for my position. But I was barred from ever again leading my own team. Ever since, I've been given special assignments to do on my own. This is the first job I've had with another agent for five years. Does that make you nervous, Sirius?"

"No it doesn't, Ceri. It seems that I'm the one with things to learn - not you. You know, we've both got pretty strong reasons to hate the Dark Side - we've both lost loved ones and we've both got deep regrets. I think, maybe, we'll make a pretty strong team."

Ceri smiled, "So what's on the agenda, and when do I get to meet Albus Dumbledore? I'm looking forward to meeting the greatest wizard in the world."

"Oh you'll meet him soon enough. But first we've got a bit of spying to do. I've had a tip-off from one of our spies that there's going to be a meeting of 'You Know Who' and his inner circle tomorrow night. He's given me the time and location. I've got an early meeting at Hogwarts tomorrow morning, then we can meet here and talk through the details of the mission. We'll no doubt have to report to Dumbledore after that, so you'll meet him then. He's not far away from where we are at the moment, you know - over at Hogwarts just outside Hogsmeade. My godson will be going there for his fifth year tomorrow."

"You know it's strange that the three most famous wizards in the world are Brits. 'You Know Who' of course, Dumbledore and Harry Potter. I wouldn't like to meet the first one, but I'd love to meet the other two. Isn't Harry at Hogwarts at the moment? He must be about the same age as your godson. Does he know him?"

"Uh, Ceri, I guess I didn't tell you before, but Harry Potter *is* my godson."

Ceri's mouth dropped open for a moment, "Oh, so that means your two friends who were killed were James and Lily Potter!"

"Yes, that's right. Harry's a great kid. I just don't know how he grew up to be like that. He had to live with some horrible people for ten years. I suppose there's a lot of James and Lily in him. You know, Ceri, he's faced 'You Know Who' several times already - he was even forced to duel with him just over two months ago - and he's survived every time, and he's only just turned 15. Many kids that age would be walking around with a swollen head and full of his own self-importance - but not Harry. Do you know that the biggest thing on his mind at the moment is the safety of his friends?"

"He sounds like a very special person, Sirius. You must be proud of him."

"I certainly am." Sirius laughed, "The other problem he's wrestling with at the moment is 'girls.' He told me last night about a Muggle girl he's met, and he's pretty confused about the way he feels about her. I tried to give him some advice, but I can't help feeling that I only made things worse. But there, I suppose I'm not too clever myself when it comes to girls."

Ceri smiled, 'Men!' she thought to herself.

"Have you met anyone since you .. well .. lost your husband, Ceri?"

"No. And I don't intend to - at least not in that way. I've had more than my share of despair and heartache and I don't intend to put myself in a position where I'll get more of the same!" Her eyes held a hard edge at that moment, so unlike the way they had looked earlier.

Sirius smiled sadly at her, "I lost a lot of my youth in Azkaban. Being that length of time close to Dementors makes you pretty gritty, you know. I doubt if I'll meet anyone - probably no one would want to get too close to me with the sort of baggage I carry around in my head. Anyway, I suggest you stay at 'The Three Broomsticks' tonight. I've got to go back to London and make sure Harry and his friends leave for Hogwarts on time."

"Ok, Sirius, that sounds fine to me." They left the shrieking shack and walked back down to the pub. It was quite dark by then, so there wasn't much risk of anyone recognising Sirius.

"See you tomorrow, Ceri," said Sirius as he Apparated back to London.

The morning of 1st September dawned, and Harry was woken up by a cold wet nose being thrust into his ear. "Ugh, Padfoot, please don't do that so early in the morning." Harry looked at the clock on the wall and said, "And do you know what time it is?"

Sirius transformed and said, "Sorry Harry, but I waited as long as I could. I've got a breakfast meeting with Dumbledore so I have to go shortly."

"Oh. Will I see you at Hogwarts soon, Sirius?"

"Yes, I should think so. I'll be popping in to see Dumbledore at fairly regular intervals."

"How did your meeting with the American agent go? What was he like?"

Sirius grinned, "Well, first off, he is a she. It seems that Ceri can be either a male or female name - it's Welsh. And she's very nice - you'll like her. She wants to meet you, you know. It seems you're pretty famous in America."

Harry looked askance at Sirius, "What's that twinkle in your eye, Sirius? Perhaps I'd better meet her to warn her about you!"

Sirius laughed, "Don't you dare! But seriously, this is on a purely professional level. She made it very clear that she's finished with romance forever. She's had a hard life, Harry. She

lost her husband and baby daughter to Death Eaters at about the same time you lost your parents. She was only about 18 at the time."

Harry's eyes clouded over, "That's awful. Losing my parents before I really knew them is bad enough, but to lose .." he shook his head.

Sirius put his hand on Harry's shoulder and squeezed. "Before I go, please make sure you look after yourself - keep an eye out for anything strange going on, and if your scar starts to hurt, report it to Dumbledore straight away. Do you promise?"

"Yes Sirius, I promise," said Harry as Padfoot quickly left the room.

Harry did a quick half hour of his exercises and then showered and dressed. He saw that it was now 8.30 and went to wake up his three friends to go to breakfast. Only Ron needed any sort of encouragement to get up and it was only the thought of a good breakfast that eventually roused him.

The ministry car arrived at 10.15 precisely, and they set off for Kings Cross to catch the 11.00 am Hogwarts express. Mr. Weasley chatted happily to Harry and Hermione on the trip, asking them if there had been any new Muggle inventions in the last few months. They arrived with 15 minutes to spare, and proceeded up to platform 9 3/4. Ron and Ginny went through the wall first, followed by Harry and Hermione, and finally by Fred and George. The platform was fairly crowded, with pupils and parents saying their goodbyes until the Christmas holidays. Fred and George went off to find their 7th year friends, and the others found an empty compartment towards the front of the train. They flopped down onto their seats and chatted companionably as the train got into motion towards Hogsmeade.

Earlier that morning, Professor Dumbledore and the others settled down to their meeting.

"I've made contact with the American agent." Sirius reported, "And he's a her, by the way. She seems a pretty capable witch though. I'm meeting her later this morning to plan our spying mission tonight."

"Be very careful Sirius," said Dumbledore, "and bring Ceri to see me afterwards. You can both give me your report on what you see and hear. Now concerning the Anima Summa, I've been researching the school records for any witches with likely birthdays around 31st October 1980, but I haven't come up with anything conclusive. I'm afraid that the two girls most friendly with Harry are not contenders - Ginny Weasley is much too young, and Hermione Granger was born on 19th September - that's about six weeks too early. Of the other girls in year five, only two were born within two weeks of the right date. Hannah Abbott from Hufflepuff was born on 23rd October 1980, and Pansy Parkinson was born on 4th November 1980. That leaves Pansy as the most likely girl."

Sirius raised his eyebrows and mouthed to Remus Lupin, "What's she like?"

Remus let out a loud snort, "You've got to be kidding. Pansy Parkinson is a Slytherin, and she's .. well .. she's pretty ugly. Not at all Harry's type!"

"Well I never!" Said professor McGonagall, "If that's not a typically chauvinist comment then nothing is! Now if Pansy was a beautiful blue-eyed blond then you'd be all for her, wouldn't you? Pansy may not be the prettiest girl in year 5, but she is .. eh she is ..eh"

"Thanks, Minerva. You've just proved my point," laughed Remus. "You can't think of a single thing going for the poor girl. Now Hannah is a nice little girl, but still not Harry's type. And anyway, she's Ernie McMillan's girlfriend."

"Now, now, there's no need to squabble," said Dumbledore with a devilish twinkle in his eyes. "All we can do is keep an eye on those two girls and make sure no harm comes to them. Severus, you keep an eye on Pansy, and I'll ask Professor Sprout to keep an eye on Hannah. Severus, have there been any more developments with Voldemort?"

"No, Headmaster - only the meeting that I told Black about."

"Right, so if there's nothing more to discuss, you'd better go and meet your American lady, Sirius. Be sure to give her my regards. I'll see the rest of you in an hour to go over the opening ceremony tonight."

Padfoot left the school grounds and trotted into Hogsmeade to the shrieking shack. He transformed and went in through the side door. Ceri was already there, brewing a pot of coffee.

"Good morning, Sirius. How did your meeting go?" said Ceri as she poured Sirius a steaming mug of coffee.

"Fine, Ceri. Dumbledore sends his regards and has asked that we both brief him after the spying mission."

Ceri smiled, "Great. So how are we going to go about it tonight? Tell me what you know."

"Well, the meeting will take place at midnight in a clearing at the northern end of the Forbidden Forest. I know where it is - I spent a fair amount of time in the forest as Padfoot when I was hiding out."

"How are we going to get close enough to hear what's going on? They're bound to place some pretty powerful wards around the area."

"Yes, but I should get close enough in my Animagus form - Padfoot's ears are pretty keen, you know, and the wards will only be set for humans - there are loads of animals in the forest, so it wouldn't be practical for them to be interrupted by every creature that'll be scurrying about. You'll have to wait for me a little way off so that you won't be detected."

"Is that so?" said Ceri as she transformed into a rather handsome she-wolf. After a few moments, she transformed back to human form to see Sirius gaping at her.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he asked.

"A woman doesn't go around giving away all her secrets, Sirius - not until it's necessary, anyway."

"Ok, then. So we'll both get close to them. By the way, I don't know if Padfoot will be able to resist your lupine charms." Sirius grinned.

"Oh get real, Sirius. If you know what's good for you, then you'd better try pretty hard to resist," she said grinning, but with a steely look in her eye.

Sirius gulped, "Anything you say Ma'am. Anything you say."

The Hogwarts express was an hour into its journey. Harry and Ron were chatting about the coming Quidditch season, and who would be the new Keeper, now that Oliver Wood had finished school.

Opposite them, Ginny was dozing and Hermione was reading *'Transfiguration for 5th Year Students.'* Ron smirked at Harry and glanced across at Hermione. He just couldn't resist it, "Hermi, why are you reading that book? I would think it would get pretty boring after reading it six times. Haven't you memorised it all yet?"

Hermione gave a snort, "Bog off Ron, it would do you good to get some reading under your belt before the start of school. Don't you know that our OWLS are this year?"

Their banter was interrupted by the rattle of the refreshments trolley outside the compartment. Harry got up and bought enough goodies to keep them going for the rest of the journey. Ginny was woken up when Harry threw a chocolate frog into her lap, and they all settled down to eat.

A little while later, their friendly chatter stopped as the door opened to reveal a smirking Draco Malfoy flanked by his two goons.

"Oh no," said Harry, "What do you want, Malfoy? Have you run out of people to annoy?"

"Shut up, Potter. I just want to take a last look at you lot before 'You Know Who' comes to get you. If I were you I'd pull the emergency cord to stop the train, and start walking back to London. You might be safe there in amongst all the Muggles." He turned and grinned at his cronies, "And while you're at it, take all the weasels with you - they might be able to find jobs. Lord knows they can do with the money!"

Ron and Ginny jumped to their feet, but were restrained by Harry and Hermione. "Ignore the silly git and sit back down," said Harry.

Ginny was having none of it, however. She pulled out her wand and pointed it in the direction of the intruders. "*VENTULUS INFLATIO*," she shouted.

Nothing seemed to happen, although Ginny had a smirk on her pretty face. Draco blinked and said, "What was that Weasel - I think you'd better brush up on your wand work. Nothing ..."

He was interrupted when a loud noise came from behind Goyle. It sounded like the air being slowly let out from a very large balloon. Goyle coloured up, and had an odd look on his face. Then a similar sound erupted from behind Crabbe. Malfoy looked at both boys, "You dirty ...," but was stopped in full flow by the loudest noise of all coming from his own backside.

For the next minute, the cacophony of rude noises increased both in volume and frequency, until the three turned and ran down the corridor.

A red-faced Malfoy shouted over his shoulder, "I'll get you for this." But his words were drowned out by the awful noise.

By this time, Harry, Ron and Hermione were staring in disbelief, but Ginny was rolling on the floor, laughing her head off, and clutching her sides.

"Ginny, honestly!" gasped Hermione.

Harry looked at Ron. Ron looked at Hermione and Hermione looked at Harry. Then they all collapsed onto the floor in uncontrollable fits of laughter.

They remained in this way until Fred and George rushed in, also laughing. "Ginny," said George, "did you use that farting spell we taught you on Malfoy and his mates?"

Ginny could only nod. She was incapable of speech. They were all sent into further bouts of laughter at the ensuing conversation between Fred and George.

"This is a great opportunity, George. That spell will last for about an hour!"

"Yes, Fred, you're right. We know which compartment they're in. We could charge everyone 5 knuts each to go and listen to them."

"Hmmm. Except the Slytherins, of course. Come on, let's go!"

Fred and George rushed down the corridor to make their killing.

An hour later, Fred and George came back into the carriage. "Not bad," said George, "we made over 3 galleons out of that. Here you are Ginny, here's your share." And he handed 1 galleon to Ginny - made up of a large number of knuts and sickles.

"This is the best train journey we've ever been on," said Fred, "You're learning, Ginny. When we open our shop, you can have a job there any time you want. You know that Malfoy will never be able to live this down - practically all the kids at school saw it - or should I say heard it. There's only one topic of conversation on the train at the moment - you're famous Ginny! We were planning to go out with a bang, this year, but it seems that Malfoy's beaten us to it."

"Yeah, Malfoy is going to have to keep a pretty low profile for a bit," said Harry, "but we're going to have to keep a close eye on Ginny, too. I don't think Malfoy is going to take it lying down."

Soon, the train started to slow down, and they all put on their robes, ready to get off at Hogsmeade station. When the train stopped, the pupils streamed out onto the platform talking amongst themselves excitedly - a lot of them came up to Ginny and started slapping her on the back.

"Firs' years over `ere. Firs' years over `ere." Hagrid shouted, and led the new students down towards the lake, to be taken to the school in a fleet of small boats. The rest of the students

clambered into the many horseless carriages that lined the roadway that run alongside the platform.

Harry and the others had seen no sign of Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle on the platform. Harry looked back at the train and caught a glimpse of them crouching down behind one of the doors. It wasn't until most of the students had gone that the red-faced three emerged to run over to a spare horseless carriage.

Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ginny piled into one of the last free carriages, which soon set off along the road to Hogwarts.

Chapter 3 Kidnapped

Harry looked out of the horseless carriage as it rounded a bend in the road, and the magnificent sight of Hogwarts came into view. It gave Harry a warm feeling inside - he was coming home.

The carriage pulled up outside the main entrance and Harry, Hermione, Ron and Ginny tumbled out and stretched their legs in the warm early evening air. A lot of students were milling around the entrance, chatting amongst themselves, waiting for the doors to be opened. Harry saw Cho Chang, who was on her own, looking out towards the lake. She had a sad look on her pretty face, no doubt thinking back to the times when she was with Cedric.

Harry felt a pang of guilt, and slowly walked over towards her. "Hello, Cho. How are you feeling?"

Cho turned around and smiled. "Oh hello Harry, I'm doing ok."

Harry wanted to say more but was interrupted by his nemesis, Professor Snape, who shouted, "Come on you lot, into the Great Hall quickly, the Headmaster is waiting to start the opening ceremony. Quickly now!"

Harry went back to join his friends and the students slowly made their way into the Great Hall and sat down at their house tables. There were a number of gaps at each of the tables, vacated by last year's seventh year students, shortly to be filled by the new first years. The top table held the usual array of professors, flanking the Headmaster. A buzz went up from the students when they noticed that Remus Lupin was there. He was sitting between Hagrid and Professor Flitwick at the end of the table.

The door to the side chamber opened, and Professor McGonagall entered leading the very nervous-looking first year students. Harry looked on with sympathy as he thought back to the time he had been one of those new students. No one had told them what was going to happen in the sorting ceremony, and all kinds of horrible things had gone through their heads. McGonagall then placed the sorting hat onto the stool, which stood at the front of the top table.

The hat opened its 'mouth' and sang its song, following which there was thunderous applause. Professor McGonagall then unfurled the scroll containing the names of all the first years and the sorting began.

"Andrews, Virginia," she shouted, and whispered to a scared little girl who sat on the seat and placed the hat on her head.

Without any sort of delay, the hat shouted "Hufflepuff," and Virginia staggered over to the Hufflepuff table whose students applauded warmly.

"Appleby, Simon" - was quickly sorted into Ravenclaw.

"Bones, Jeffrey" - was sorted into Hufflepuff, and ran over to join his sister, Susan.

"Bryant, Clare" - there was a long delay before the hat shouted "Gryffindor." There was loud cheering from all the Gryffindors as the pretty little dark-haired girl took her place. She glanced nervously at Harry as she sat down.

Bagshot, Butch became the first Slytherin - there was not much doubt that he would, since he appeared to be a clone of Vincent Crabbe.

And so the sorting continued until all the first year students had taken their allotted seats. Then Professor Dumbledore stood to give his welcoming speech.

"Hello all students and welcome to a new school year at Hogwarts. First, let me get out of the way some nasty things. You may or may not know it, but Voldemort is back." There were loud gasps from most of the students.

"I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but security around the school has been increased, and I'm afraid that Hogsmeade visits are suspended until further notice." There were groans all around the room.

"The Forbidden Forest is still forbidden, Mr. Filch will still frown on after-hours exploration of the school corridors, and no-one is allowed outside the school buildings after dark," he stared pointedly at the Gryffindor table as he said this - and in particular at Fred, George, Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ginny.

"Now onto more pleasant matters. We have a new professor this year - Professor Remus Lupin has kindly agreed to take the Defence Against The Dark Arts class again," there were boos from the Slytherins, but cheers from everyone else. Remus grinned.

"I know you are not happy about the Hogsmeade visits, so I've arranged a few things to make up for your disappointment. There will be a Halloween Ball and a Yule Ball as well as the normal End-of-Year Ball." There were excited whispers from the girls and groans from the boys.

"House Quidditch matches will start late this year." Groans all around, as Dumbledore paused, a twinkle in his eye. "Because I have arranged a special inter-school challenge match with The Salem Enchantments School," there was an excited buzz around the room. "As you may know, Salem is the premier Wizarding School in the United States and are currently school champions of their country, as indeed they have been for the past five years. But I know we can give them a good game - we aren't that bad ourselves, are we?" There were cheers around the room.

"That match will take place on 1st October. Now the school team has already been selected by Madam Hooch and the rest of the professors, and here it is." The students leaned forward excitedly.

"Keeper - David Bletchley from Slytherin

Chasers - Ernie McMillan from Hufflepuff, Terry Boot from Ravenclaw, Katie Bell from Gryffindor.

Beaters - Fred and George Weasley from Gryffindor.

Seeker - Harry Potter from Gryffindor"

There were a mixture of cheers and boos all around the room. Malfoy, in particular, had an angry expression on his face.

"The captain will be", Dumbledore paused for effect, as everyone held their breath, "... Harry Potter!" There were loud cheers - except from the Slytherins. Harry sat stunned, not believing that he was the school captain. He felt honoured and nervous all at the same time. All the Gryffindors had got up from their seats and were patting Harry on the back.

"Harry," said the headmaster. "You should arrange practice sessions as soon as you can - you only have a month. Madam Hooch will be team manager, so you will need to get together with her quickly. Right, Quidditch House Captains. Your votes at the end of last year have been counted, and here are the names of the captains of each house. Slytherin - Draco Malfoy. Hufflepuff - Ernie McMillan. Ravenclaw - Cho Chang. And Gryffindor - Harry Potter." All tables cheered for their captain this time.

"There will be four new prefects this year. Slytherin - Draco Malfoy. Hufflepuff - Hannah Abbot. Ravenclaw - Terry Boot. Gryffindor - Hermione Granger. Will you please come up and collect your prefect badges. Professor McGonagall will brief you on your duties after the feast finishes."

Harry, Ron and Ginny were the first to congratulate Hermione, who sat stunned and had to be pushed up towards the top table to get her badge. Her friends looked proudly on as she walked back to her seat with the badge pinned to the front of her robes.

"And now, students, let's eat!" Dumbledore waved his wand and masses of steaming food appeared on the tables. Ron was, of course, the first to tuck in and grab a piece of every dish on the table.

"Ron!" said Hermione. "How are you going to get all that into your stomach?"

"Just watch, Hermi," he said as he started stuffing the food into his mouth.

Just before the feast finished, Harry walked up to the professors' table and spoke to Madam Hooch, "Excuse me, Professor. I think we should arrange a team meeting for tomorrow if that's ok."

"Yes Harry, bring the team to my office at 10.00 in the morning, and we can start on our campaign to win this match."

"Oh Harry," said Professor Dumbledore. Harry turned towards him. "I want to have a word with you - come into the side chamber for a moment if you will." Harry turned and gestured to Ron that he was going with the Headmaster.

Professor McGonagall was already in the chamber waiting for Harry and Dumbledore. She smiled at him and gave her congratulations on the team captaincies.

"Harry, I suppose you must be wondering what our birthday present is going to be?" In the excitement of the opening ceremony, Harry had forgotten about it until now.

"Yes, Professor, I've been wracking my brains, but I can't think how I'll be following in my father's footsteps."

"You know, of course, that your Patronus is a silver stag," Harry nodded. "And that your father was an Animagus - a stag, Prongs." Again Harry nodded. "Well, Professor McGonagall and I thought it would be a good idea, and it will help in the struggle against Voldemort, if you too, became an Animagus."

Harry gasped at this; he knew that it was very unusual for a witch or wizard to become an Animagus, especially at so young an age. "But .. but .. how?"

"It is not certain, of course, that you *can* become an Animagus, but we think that since your father became one quite young, you would probably follow suit. Now Professor McGonagall has agreed to instruct you in the process, which will take a few weeks probably."

"We can start next week, Harry," said McGonagall. "You'll need a week to settle back in and make arrangements for the school team. Meet me after classes, one week from today, and I'll start your training. It would be best, for now, not to say anything to your friends about this."

"But .. but what if I can't become an Animagus? Why is it so difficult?"

"Because they never reach the lake," said McGonagall enigmatically.

"The Lake? What lake?" Asked Harry.

"That will have to wait until next week, Harry. You have to be patient."

Harry felt weak and elated. He'd had surprise after surprise in the last few hours, and he could only manage to squeak, "Th .. thanks. Thank you both," before going back into the hall, which was now empty apart from his friends and the new prefects.

Harry, Ron and Ginny talked excitedly about the school team while McGonagall was briefing the new prefects. Ron was particularly excited, and suggested that they go through the book he gave Harry for his birthday to find some new moves and tactics that he could use.

Hermione finally joined them, her face beaming, and they made their way up to the seventh floor to Gryffindor tower. Hermione gave the Fat Lady the password 'Acid pops', and the portrait swung forward to reveal the entrance hole. As they entered, Harry was mobbed and marched over to the middle table in the room. He was lifted onto it by Fred and George.

George turned to the students "Ladies and gentlemen of Gryffindor. I give you our school captain, and house captain, Harry Potter!" The room full of students erupted with cheers, and shouted 'SPEECH, SPEECH'

Harry's face was a picture by this time, eyes wide and face pink. "Uhh .. You know I don't like making speeches you lot. Fred, George, Katie - school team meeting in Madam Hooch's office tomorrow morning at 10 am sharp. We are going to win this game aren't we?"

"YES" everyone shouted, and Harry jumped down from the table, went over to his favourite corner and flopped down next to Ron, Hermione and Ginny.

He was followed by seven first year students - four girls and three boys. They formed a semi circle around him, staring tiredly and shuffling their feet before Clare Bryant said, "Harry, we're all quite tired. Can you show us where we sleep please?"

"It's normally the prefects who do that, Clare," said Harry as he glanced over at Hermione.

Hermione grinned. "Not tonight, Harry. I think they want *you* to show them."

Harry grinned and stood up. "Come on then, let's go." Clare reached out and caught Harry's hand as he led the group up the stairs.

Ginny grinned after them. "I think Harry's added 7 more to his fan club - and in particular Clare. I hope she doesn't turn out to be another Colin Creevey." 'Or another Ginny', she thought to herself.

As Harry and the first years, with Clare still clinging onto his hand, reached the top of the staircase, the other Gryffindors at the bottom let out a chorus of "Aaawwww."

Ron and Hermione laughed, and they went up to their own dorms, looking forward to a good night's sleep.

Padfoot and the she-wolf crept stealthily through the northern end of the Forbidden Forest. It was almost a half-hour before midnight, and they were close to the meeting place that Snape had indicated. Up ahead they saw a clearing in the dim light given off by the moon, but it was empty. They crept as close as they dared, far enough away to avoid detection but close enough to listen to the proceedings with their ultra-sensitive hearing. They settled down to wait.

Just before midnight, they heard several slight popping noises, and saw six figures dressed in black cloaks and hoods. They stood silently waiting. A few minutes later two more figures appeared.

The two figures pulled their hoods back from their faces to reveal Wormtail and Voldemort. Ceri winced as a low growl came from Padfoot's throat, and she felt the strong emotion of anger coming from him. Sirius had seen the ratty features of Wormtail, and instinctively rose and started towards the clearing, intent on doing him as much damage as possible.

Sirius found however, that his progress was halted. The she wolf had bitten down hard on his tail with her powerful jaws and was dragging him back to their hiding place. The pain in his tail brought Padfoot to his senses, and he looked at the wolf gratefully as they again settled down to listen to what was going on.

By this time, the other six Death Eaters had pulled back the hoods of their cloaks, and Sirius recognised them as Lucius Malfoy, Walden Macnair, Avery, Nott Snr, Crabbe Snr and Goyle Snr. 'This must be the inner circle,' he thought.

Voldemort began to speak, "The time is drawing near, my faithful servants. We are growing stronger by the day. The world will soon be shaken by the power of the Dark Side. My plan is to take over the governments of both this country and the United States. Already, I have my

supporters in the Ministry of Magic of both countries, and we will strike there first. Once these major powers have fallen, the rest of the world will be easy. My servants in the U.S. are recruiting followers at an ever-increasing rate, and within a few short months they will be ready. We will need to carefully plan our campaign of terror so that it strikes in both countries at the same time. I want our attacks to be far-flung around both countries. They will be diversionary attacks to keep their defences stretched as much as possible. It will then be far easier to strike at the centres of power."

The Death Eaters nodded and muttered their approval at the vision and tactical awareness of their master. "I will be contacting my inner circle in America to arrange a meeting with us, so that we can plan the campaign in detail. I will summon you to my headquarters when I am ready, but in the meantime, I want you all to start identifying the best targets for our attacks in this country - I want to strike in all four corners of the land at the same time." He rubbed his hands with glee. "They won't know what's hit them."

"Lucius, I am still feeling the emanations I told you about earlier, but I still can't get a fix on them. Tell 'our friend' that I want Potter and his gang to be watched closely - I'm sure that he's involved with this." Lucius nodded.

"Now go, all of you," and everyone in the clearing Apparated away.

Sirius and Ceri transformed to their human forms and looked at each other, stunned. Sirius cleared his throat. "I had no idea of the scale of his ambition, nor how far down the line his plans had gone. And what's this thing about 'emanations' and how does it affect Harry? This is serious stuff, Ceri. We have to get back and report to Dumbledore straight away."

"You'll have to go alone, Sirius. Things are far more advanced in the States than I thought. I'll have to go back and report without any delay. I'm scared about what's going to happen back home, Sirius - both our homes. The sooner our people start working on this the better. Look, I'll get back as soon as I can, but it may be a few weeks - it's going to be hard to convince my people how far along this thing is."

Sirius nodded, with some regret showing on his face. "Yes, I understand, Ceri. But .." and he ruefully rubbed his rear end, "couldn't you have found a less tender part of me to bite?"

Ceri chuckled, "You should be glad it was only your tail I grabbed hold of. The way you acted, it should have been your head! Do you know what would have happened to us if you'd shown yourself?"

"Yes, I know. I'm sorry, Ceri, I won't let that happen again. And thanks for stopping me."

She smiled at him. "You're welcome. Right, I'd better go now. I'll get back to my room in Hogsmeade - I've got a Portkey there. Goodbye Sirius." And Ceri disappeared with a feint pop.

Sirius transformed back to Padfoot, and started back towards Hogwarts to give his grim report to Dumbledore.

Ginny woke early on the first morning of the new school year at Hogwarts. There were no lessons today - the students would be given their class schedules for the coming year, and would have time to prepare for their first lessons the following day. She got out of bed and padded out towards the bathroom to take her shower. She paused before entering - she had heard some strange sounds coming from the common room. She crept over to the landing at the top of the stairway and looked down. The sight that greeted her brought a flush to her face.

Harry was dressed only in a pair of training shorts, and was energetically going through his circuit training exercises. He was in the middle of a set of push-ups and was grunting, "Thirty three ... thirty four ... thirty five"

Ginny stared at the splendour of Harry's tanned and well-defined body, and felt weak at the knees. She quickly rushed into the 5th year dormitory and shook Hermione, who was up until then sleeping peacefully. "Hermi .. Hermi.. Wake up, you've got to see this!"

Hermione groaned and opened her eyes to see Ginny's flushed face before her. She jumped quickly out of bed. "What's wrong, Ginny. What's happened?"

"Come on, Hermi - come with me .. quick"

Parvati and Lavender were both awakened by the excited chatter, and followed Ginny and Hermione out of the dorm, with curious faces.

"Be quiet - come and look at this," said Ginny.

Four mouths dropped open at the sight of Harry exercising.

"Will you look at that," breathed Lavender.

"Ohhh, wow," said Parvati.

Hermione could only stare in admiration, and she again felt that jolt deep within her.

Parvati whispered, "He is so gorgeous! Do you think he'll be doing this every morning? I'd better start setting my alarm from now on, I could watch him forever!"

Hermione shook herself and rolled her eyes. "Honestly! This is Harry we're talking about - he's our friend. Come on, back to bed - let him have some privacy." And she ushered the others, quietly protesting, back to the dorms, but not before taking one more glance over her shoulder.

Harry, unaware that he had been the centre of attraction, finished his exercises just as he heard the sounds of the Gryffindors waking up and taking their showers. He quickly ran up to his dorm, and sat cross-legged on his bed breathing deeply as he willed his heart rate to slow down.

The others had gone down to breakfast by the time Harry had finished his shower, and he quickly followed, running down to the Great Hall. After all his exercising he was feeling hungry. Still feeling warm, he was carrying his robes on his arm, and just had on his usual T-shirt and trousers. He was looking forward to the meeting with Madam Hooch and the school

Quidditch team that morning, and he was deep in thought about training and practice strategy as he entered the hall. The buzz of conversation that was normal at breakfast suddenly quieted. Harry stopped and looked up, wondering what had caused the lull. He saw most of the girls in the room looking at him, most with unrestrained longing in their eyes - Parvati and Lavender had been quick to tell as many people as they could about the early morning entertainment they had witnessed earlier.

'Oh no!' Harry thought, 'not here as well. What's the matter with these girls?'

Harry quickly donned his robes, and walked self-consciously over to the spare seat between Ron and Ginny. He noticed the odd stares he was getting from the Gryffindor girls at the table, but when he looked over at Hermione she seemed to be her normal self. She smiled at him. "Morning Harry. How are you this morning?"

"All right - I think!" he replied, and started piling his plate with eggs, bacon, fried bread and black pudding.

"Hey, Harry," said Fred who was sitting next to Ron, "what're we going to be talking about in the meeting this morning?"

"Madam Hooch will be running the meeting, but I want to talk about our training and practice schedule for the next month."

"Training?" laughed Ron. "How are you going to get Fred and George to do that? Their idea of training is sitting down and playing an energetic game of Wizard Snap! I wouldn't like to be in your shoes for the next month."

Harry grinned nervously at Fred and George. "You're not going to give me a hard time are you?"

"Well I wouldn't bank on it, Harry. You know us!" said George with a wicked smile on his face. Harry groaned inwardly.

Ron looked down at Harry's overflowing plate and said quietly, "Harry, it's not like you to stuff yourself full in the mornings. You'll be getting as fat as your cousin if you're not careful."

Harry laughed, "If you had the diet I had this summer, you'd be putting away three times as much as this on your first morning back in civilisation. And there's no way I'll be like Fatty Dursley! That's what Lara calls him." Even as the last words left his mouth, he kicked himself angrily, hoping that Ron hadn't noticed.

Ron, of course, picked up on it straight away. "Lara? Who's Lara then Harry?"

"Oh she's just a girl I met - she lives in Privet Drive." Harry whispered.

"What's she like? Is she your girlfriend?" shouted Ron, so that everyone close by could hear him.

'Oh no .. please,' thought Harry, trying to get out of answering by stuffing his mouth full of hash brown.

"Come on, Harry. Tell us - is she your girlfriend? Did you kiss her?" There was a lot of interest in the conversation at the Gryffindor table now.

Harry coloured up. "No she's not, and no I didn't kiss her." At the sound of the 'K' word, all the girls at the table leaned forward to try to hear more.

Hermione let out an indignant gasp, "You fibber, Harry. You told me you'd kissed her!" Hermione immediately put her hands over her mouth, and with eyes wide and a look of horror on her face mouthed to Harry. "Oh I'm sorry"

Harry stood up and his chair fell backwards onto the floor with a clatter. His face was burning as he shouted, "No I didn't kiss her - she kissed me!" and he stormed out of the Great Hall.

By this time, there was great interest around all four tables, and everyone started whispering, speculating on whether Harry had a girlfriend and who she was. Hermione, Ron and Ginny looked at each other, and followed Harry out of the room but there was no sign of him.

At the far table, Draco Malfoy was smirking, and he got up and quickly followed the four Gryffindors.

"I think he must've gone up to the common room. Come on - let's go," said Hermione. She was now feeling terrible that she was the cause of Harry's embarrassment, and it showed in her face.

"Hermi, it's not all your fault," said Ron. "I was the one who was taunting him in the first place. I should have known he'd react like that."

"Some friends you are!" said Ginny angrily. "You'd better tell us what you know, Hermi, if we're going to try to limit the damage you've caused."

Hermione hesitated before telling her two friends about Lara. She didn't want to make things worse for Harry, and she had promised him that she'd keep quiet. But the cat was well and truly out of the bag now, and Ron knew. So she didn't think there was any point in keeping the secret any longer. "Well he met a Muggle living in his street - No. 12, I think - Lara goes to the same school as Harry's cousin - Smeltings. He only met her just before coming to Hogwarts and he's a bit confused about his feelings for her - I think he likes her a lot."

"Well, come on let's go," said Ginny. "He must be feeling awful, and the sooner we can talk to him the better." And they rushed up the marble stairs towards the common room.

As they disappeared down the corridor at the top of the stairs, Draco Malfoy slipped off his Invisibility Cloak and put it back inside his robes. He grinned, evilly, and muttered, "Well that's a turn-up. Potty's got a girlfriend, and a Muggle at that! Now I'm sure dad'll be interested in that piece of news." He rushed off to the owlery, mentally composing the message to his father.

Harry was sitting in his favourite chair in the common room when his three friends burst in through the portrait hole. He looked at them angrily and went back to staring at the floor.

They tentatively approached him, and Ginny said, "Harry, are you ok? Look Ron and Hermione are really sorry about what happened. Talk to us, Harry!"

Harry looked up, and there was anger and hurt in his eyes. "Ginny, you haven't done anything, but do you know how I'm feeling right now? Two of my so-called best friends have just humiliated me in front of the whole school."

Ginny looked helplessly at Ron and Hermione.

"I .. I'm sorry, Harry. I didn't mean to needle you like that, but well, I was just surprised that you didn't tell me about Lara. If I'd known how you felt about her, I wouldn't have shot my mouth off."

"And I just didn't expect that two of my friends would do that to me!" Harry retorted, still feeling hurt and angry. Ron and Hermione looked at their feet, not really knowing what to say. Hermione, in particular, was feeling terrible and she was close to tears.

"Oh Harry, I'm really sorry. It just slipped out before I realised what I'd said." And a tear rolled down her cheek. Harry looked at Hermione and saw the agony she was going through. He melted. He never could be angry with Hermione for very long.

He breathed out loudly, "Don't cry, Hermi. I know you didn't mean it. I suppose it was my own fault that I let slip Lara's name to this git here." He looked at Ron and smiled ruefully. "I knew that you'd never be able to resist having a go."

The three looked with some relief at Harry. "So are we still friends?" asked Ron.

"Of course we are, you silly git," said Harry as Hermione rushed over and hugged him. "Hey, enough. You'll get my robes all wet." He said grinning fondly at her.

"Hey I've got to go," said Harry. "The meeting with Madam Hooch is in ten minutes." And he rushed out through the portrait hole.

"Just to give you some idea of the task ahead, I've been researching Salem's match history," said Madam Hooch. The seven team members sat around her desk and listened intently.

"In the last five years, they've played 54 games - and lost only one. And that was only because their Seeker was injured and they had to put out a reserve. I'll go through their team for you. The keeper is John Ballot, and he's 6'5" tall. The Chasers are Tom Broadbent, who's 6'2," Julie Mount 6' dead and Garry Kawalski who's 6'1."

"The Beaters are David Petrucci who's 6'4," just as wide and weighs 225 lbs, and Bill Bludge who comes in at 6'3 and 217 lbs. The Seeker is Kristen Davis, the smallest member of the team at 5'4" and as fast as lightning."

"Bloody hell!" said Fred looking aghast at Madam Hooch.

"Weasley! Language, please." Madam Hooch glowered at Fred.

"I've heard they breed 'em big in the States, but that's ridiculous. What do they do - bulldoze their way through the opposition?" said George.

Harry took in the worried faces around the table. "Look, so they're big. So what? A good little un is as good as a good big un any time - especially when they're on a broomstick."

"That's easy for you to say," said Ernie McMillan. "You've got the smallest one up against you."

"And she's also the fastest," said Harry and paused. "I'm going to have to be at my best to stand a chance against her. I think we can get over their size with two things. One - we've got to get fit. And I mean really fit. Two - we've got to work out some tactics for the Chasers to get around their superior reach. If we work at it, we can give them a good game. I'm sure of it"

"Thank you, Harry", said Madam Hooch. "You're the only positive one here. Now we can do this, I know we can. You're the best that Hogwarts has so don't underestimate yourselves. Now I think that Harry's ideas are good. We can have three nights of fitness training, 2 nights of practice, and 1 night of tactics every week. I know that's a pretty heavy schedule, but if you feel you can't keep up with it, then now's the time to resign from the team." Madam Hooch looked around the table, and was pleased to see a far better attitude from the players. With the exception of Fred and George. She raised her eyebrows at them, questioningly.

"We're not afraid of them. But all that training, Madam Hooch - that's terrible," said George.

Harry grinned at his two friends; he knew exactly what to say, "Fred, George. You'll be the key to beating the Yanks. You're going to have to keep their Chasers off balance with some pretty hefty bludger work. I know you're good - very good. But for that lot you'll have to put on a bit more muscle. There's only one way to do that - arm and upper body training - and plenty of good food." His friends' expressions picked up a bit when they heard the magic word. "But it's no good you eating well unless you train - you'll just get fat. So, Madam Hooch, do you think they can have treble portions of fillet steak every evening for the next month?"

A glazed expression had settled on Fred and George, and they were drooling. They both looked hopefully at Madam Hooch.

"I think I can arrange that, Harry," she smirked, and then turned towards Fred and George. "But the minute I see you slack off training, it stops. Is that clear?"

"Yes, yes, anything," they both said together.

"Ok. Harry - work out a training schedule for each of the team by tomorrow, if you please. I'll arrange for a training room down by the Quidditch field. Tactics meetings will be held on Tuesday nights, and practice on Wednesday and Friday nights. That leaves Monday and Thursday nights and Saturday mornings for training. Is everyone happy with that? Right. And good luck to you all."

The seven players left the office, chatting about the heavy schedule. Katie Bell asked Harry what training they needed to do.

"Apart from Fred and George who'll have to do a lot of weight training, the rest of us can do basic circuit training. We'll all have to do some running as well. We can jog around the

Quidditch field to warm up, and more serious running after the circuit training. It'll be fun, don't worry."

At the end of the corridor, the team split up and went their separate ways to their common rooms.

Hermione and Ginny sat in the common room that night, reading their school books in readiness for the following day's lessons. Hermione, of course, didn't need to do this - she had read them three times already. Harry and Ron were playing wizard chess over by the centre table.

Ginny looked up from her book with a thoughtful expression on her face. "Don't you think Harry's become far more mature since last year? - I don't mean just his body. I'm talking about, well, his attitude and the way he speaks."

Hermione looked up and thought for a moment. "Yes. I think you're right, Ginny. Katie said that she was surprised at the way Harry conducted himself at the team meeting this morning - she said he was really cool. And look at when Ron and I upset him at breakfast - he didn't take long to forgive us. Last year, he'd have been pouting for a week! Yes, he's certainly changed."

"And he's so sexy as well, don't you think? I don't suppose I'll get a look in now," said Ginny sadly.

"Ginny! I thought you'd got over your crush on Harry. You told me that you'd resigned yourself to just being his friend."

"Yes I know I did, Hermi. But that was before I saw him after the summer. I mean, look at him. He's so ... so ... "

"Oh Ginny .."

"I bet there'll be a queue a mile long of girls wanting to ask him to the Halloween ball." Ginny looked sad as she went back to reading her book.

Ron's knight had just clobbered one of Harry's pawns when he looked up at Harry. "So what do you think of Hermi? Didn't I tell you?" he said.

"Well, yeah. She's certainly changed," said Harry

"She's growing up Harry. And she's gorgeous. I think I'll ask her to the ball - if I can get up enough courage to ask her, that is. Perhaps she won't want to go with me."

Harry grinned at Ron. "Well don't act like last year. Get it over with quickly this time. I bet there'll be loads of the guys after her, so the sooner you ask the better. At least that Viktor Krum won't be on the scene this year."

"What about him, Harry. Has Hermi said anything to you? Whenever I ask her, she won't tell me anything. Do you think she likes him?"

Harry thought before he answered - he didn't want to let slip Hermione's secret. "I don't think you need worry about him. I think she sees him as just a friend."

Hermione was looking at her Potions textbook, but she wasn't taking anything in. She was thinking about her life since coming to Hogwarts and how it had changed her. She was so grateful that she now had the best friends anyone could hope for. She thought back to the time before she knew she was a witch.

Hermione spent a lot of time lying on her bed at home, back then, feeling very sad. She had no friends to speak of - only Julie down the road, but she had other friends that she hung out with a lot. She had no brothers or sisters and she was left on her own a lot of the time. The other children at school gave her a wide berth after a number of strange things had occurred when she was around. She hadn't known then that she was a witch and could make things happen. She remembered the time when Billy Jones kept annoying her at school. He would creep up behind her and pull her hair. One day she had had just about enough of it, and shouted at him 'GO AWAY'. No one really knew how the boy ended up at the top of the tallest tree in the school grounds. But he didn't bother her after that, and neither did anyone else - they were very suspicious of the little bushy-haired girl after that incident.

The only thing left to her was reading. She was a naturally curious child and loved learning about all sorts of things. The other kids thought she was a bookworm and a swat, so they didn't really like her. They wouldn't take the trouble to get close to her and find out what she was really like and she had given up all hope that she would ever have a 'best friend'. It was only when she met Harry and Ron that things changed. And even then, she remembered how bossy she was at first, and had almost not been their friend because of it. It was those two, and Harry in particular, who took the trouble to get to know her - and they had become best friends because of that. She had changed for the better since knowing them and now she had Ginny as well, as a best friend - she could talk to her about things she could never talk about with Ron and Harry.

She looked over at her two friends, laughing over their game of wizard chess. As she looked at Harry, she again felt that strange jolt deep within her. What was that? Did she like him only as friend or was it more? What was it? She gave up in the end and tried to concentrate on her book.

Harry ate a more healthy breakfast the following morning and he had made sure that he was with his friends when he entered the Great Hall. He didn't want a repeat of the previous morning.

"Will you look at this, Harry!" said Ron with a pained expression. "Double Potions with the Slytherins - what a way to start our 5th Year."

Harry looked at the class schedule he was reading. "Ugh! But at least we've got Charms and then DADA in the afternoon. Oh no - we've got Trelawney to finish the afternoon off. I wonder if she's thought up any new ways to kill me off?"

Ron laughed. "Don't worry, Harry. At least none of her predictions have worked. You're still with us, you know."

A great fluttering of wings filled the hall as the morning post arrived. There was nothing for Harry, but the last owl to enter dropped an ominous red parchment in front of Ginny. It was a HOWLER.

Ginny went red and looked nervous as she fingered the parchment, not wanting to open it in front of her school mates.

"Go on, Ginny. You can't delay the inevitable. Open it. It's already starting to smoulder at the edges," said Ron.

Ginny slowly opened the parchment and Mrs. Weasley's angry voice filled the hall ...

GINNY WEASLEY ... I EXPECTED BETTER FROM YOU. WHEN I HEARD OF THAT .. THAT ... SPELL ... YOU PUT ON THREE OF YOUR FELLOW STUDENTS ON THE HOGWARTS EXPRESS I COULD HAVE DIED WITH SHAME.

I NEVER BROUGHT YOU UP TO ACT IN SUCH A WAY AND IF YOU'RE NOT CAREFUL YOU'LL END UP LIKE YOUR BROTHERS FRED AND GEORGE.

I DON'T WANT TO HEAR ANYTHING BAD ABOUT YOU FOR THE REST OF THE YEAR.

YOUR MOTHER

Ginny cringed as she put her head on the table, mortified. The howler burst into flames.

The other students however, thought it was hilarious and loudly cheered and started chanting .. GINNY .. GINNY ... GINNY. The cheering was led, of course, by Fred and George.

That was the signal for Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle to cringe, and they left the hall as inconspicuously as they could. At the top table, most of the professors, including Dumbledore, were not very successful in hiding their amusement.

Harry shook Ginny's shoulder and whispered, "If I ever get a howler, then that's the type I'd prefer. Come on, Ginny, your fan club awaits."

The four friends got up from the table and made their way to the first class of the year. Harry, Ron and Hermione went into the Potions classroom, which was in the dungeons, to see the grim face of Professor Snape looking at them disdainfully. They sat down at the back of the room while the other students entered and took their customary places.

Snape stood up. "Before we start, I want to alter the seating arrangements. I know that some of you," and he glared at Harry, Ron and Hermione, "like to hide at the back, and frankly, your last year's results show it. So from now on, I want you, Potter to sit with Pansy Parkinson at the front - right here in front of me. Weasley - go and sit behind Potter with Lavender Brown. And you, Granger, take the seat along side Weasley with Neville Longbottom. MOVE!"

The three groaned as they went to their seats. 'Why is he putting me with Pansy?' thought Harry as he looked at the smirking face of the Slytherin girl.

"Alright - settle down. This lesson will be concerned with the emphasis of facial features. Now the Potion you are about to brew shouldn't tax even your feeble brains - eh Longbottom?" Neville shook visibly as Snape skewered him with one of his evil grins.

"If you brew the potion correctly, then your most prominent facial feature - whatever that may be," Snape glared at Harry, "will be emphasised. The effect will last for only 20 minutes. If you do *not* brew the potion correctly however, then the results may be unpleasant.

"I want each of you to work on your own today, no helping the person sitting next to you. The brew should be ready in about 1½ hours, which includes heating, and you will then test it on each other. The ingredients are up on the board, and if you need help, consult your text book. Right, get your cauldrons out and start."

Hermione looked with trepidation at Neville. He was prone to extreme nervousness in Snape's class, and had been known to get his Potions wrong more than once. She kept glancing at him as she got out her knife and started chopping up the daisy roots, while Neville looked frantically through his Potions book.

As Neville poured the bubotubor puss into his cauldron, Hermione nudged him and whispered, "No, Neville. The daisy roots have got to go in first."

"Five points from Gryffindor," said Snape with an evil grin. "I said no helping the person sitting next to you, Granger." Hermione scowled and resigned herself to whatever fate was in store for her in just over an hour's time.

After 1½ hours, everyone's potion was bubbling away nicely in their cauldrons, but whereas most were a biley yellow colour, Neville's was a dark green. Hermione feared the worst.

"Right, everybody. The Potions should now be ready to test. Now who shall go first? ... um Potter, come here and stand facing the class. Let's see if Pansy has got it right, shall we?"

Harry scowled and went to the front, as Pansy poured a measure of her potion into a glass jar. She handed it to Harry, who looked at the foul-smelling liquid with horror.

"Drink, Potter." Said Snape, as the Slytherins leant forward eagerly to see what humiliation was to befall Harry. Harry closed his eyes and held his nose as he gulped down the potion.

"Ugh. That was terrible. Whew!" he exclaimed, as he felt his scar throbbing.

"Oh look," shouted Malfoy, "he's grown an aerial!" The Slytherins roared with laughter. Harry's scar, arguably his most prominent feature, stood out from his forehead by about three inches.

"Excellent, Pansy," smirked Snape. "Five points to Slytherin. Five points from Gryffindor for the histrionics, Potter." The Gryffindors groaned - Potions was not going to be any different to previous years, with Snape looking for any excuse to favour his own house at the expense of Gryffindor.

"Sit down, Potter. Now all of you drink a measure from your partner's cauldron so that we can see the results."

The next half hour was quite hilarious and somewhat embarrassing. Ron's nose grew by about 4 inches, and Pansy's nose resembled that of a large pig's. Neville's jaw dropped down towards his chest, ending in a point, and Malfoy's eyes were like saucers. Hermione, however, was not so lucky.

"Longbottom! You forgot to peel the Abyssinian shrivelfig didn't you. 5 points from Gryffindor," shouted Snape as he looked at Hermione. She had no features whatsoever! Her face was completely blank, no eyes, no nose, no mouth, nothing.

She was obviously in trouble, since she had nothing to breath through and Harry shouted frantically at Snape to do something, while Ron tried to calm her as she thrashed her arms in front of her.

Snape slowly picked up his wand and uttered an incantation as he pointed it at Hermione. She gasped out loud as her eyes, nose and mouth appeared, drawing in large gulps of air.

"I'm s ..s... sorry, Hermione," squeaked Neville as the bell went for the end of the class. Ron and Harry helped Hermione out into the corridor and it wasn't until they had reached Professor Flitwick's class that she was back to her normal self.

As they made their way down to the Great Hall for lunch, Harry spotted Cho Chang leaning on the front door, looking out towards the lake. "You go in," he said to Ron and Hermione. "I want to speak to Cho for a moment."

As he walked towards her, he realised that the feelings he'd had for Cho the previous year were not there any longer. She was still one of the prettiest girls in the school, but he was over his crush. The main feeling he had as he looked at her now was great sadness. He said quietly, "Hello, Cho. Can I speak to you for a few minutes?"

Cho looked up and smiled. "Ok, Harry. Let's go outside, shall we?"

Harry rubbed his thumb nervously as he looked at Cho. "I .. I wanted to speak to you about what happened at the Triwizard Tournament last year," he began.

"Look, Harry," Cho interrupted. "I know most of what happened. And you really weren't to blame, you know. I suppose that if you were a selfish person, Cedric would still be alive - you wouldn't have offered to share the trophy with him. But I know that you were thinking of Cedric when you did that. I can't blame you for being brave and noble now can I?"

"Thanks, Cho. It's true that I blamed myself for a long time for Cedric's death. And it wasn't until my godfather talked some sense into me that I faced up to the truth of it. It was Peter Pettigrew who killed Cedric, using Vol .. `You Know Who's wand. If I could have stopped him I would have, you must believe me. But neither of us had any time to react." Harry paused before saying a white lie. He wanted to try to ease Cho's grief. "Cho - there's something that you probably don't know. When I was forced to duel with `You Know Who', the light from our wands clashed, and the spells that his wand had done were forced out - I think the effect is called Prior Incantatem. Cedric appeared from his wand as a spirit, and he spoke to me."

Cho was listening intently now, and it was clear that she knew nothing about this.

"Cedric asked me to take his body back to you and his parents, for safekeeping. I'm glad that I managed to do that, Cho."

Cho had tears on her face now, but she was still smiling. "I didn't know that, Harry. And I'm glad that you told me. I've agonised over what his last thoughts were, and now I know. Thank you." And they walked back into the school, Harry to the Great Hall and Cho up to the Ravenclaw common room.

Harry felt as if a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders. The white lie he had told Cho niggled at him, but he was glad that it had seemed to have eased her mind a bit.

That evening after classes saw the first school team session at the Quidditch field. Madam Hooch and the 7 players were inside the training room, going over the training schedule that Harry had prepared. He demonstrated the circuit training exercises, much to the delight of Katie, and went through the routines for Fred and George on the Muggle weight machine that Mr. Weasley had managed to get for them. When everyone was happy with what they had to do, Harry led them on a fairly gentle 4 laps of the field.

Harry then supervised the circuit training sets, and was pleased to see everyone throwing themselves into it with great determination. At the end of the session, they did a more strenuous 10 laps of the field, followed by 2 more at a gentle jog to wind down. They were all pretty tired at the end, and after showering, limped into the Great Hall for dinner.

Fred and George were the envy of their fellow Gryffindors as they each greedily tucked into three enormous fillet steaks, muttering, "It was worth it, it really was."

"How did it go, Harry?" asked Ron as he watched his brothers make pigs of themselves.

"Oh fine, Ron. If we keep this up I think we'll be ok."

"I must say that was a stroke of genius to get Fred and George to train. I thought you'd never be able to manage it."

"Well, Harry can be smart when he wants to be, Ron," said Hermione. "It's nice to see him using his brains for once."

"For once? Hermi! - I resent that," laughed Harry.

They had been back at Hogwarts for 1 week, and Harry felt excited that today he would get his first Animagus lesson. He thought about what it would involve as he went through his early morning training routine. He didn't notice a pretty face that held two beautiful hazel-brown eyes looking wistfully at him from the staircase landing. Parvati and Lavender did though.

They had had the same impulse as Hermione and had decided to come and watch Harry that morning. Hermione jumped and squealed as they poked her in the back, and the three crept back into their dorm before Harry could notice them.

"Well Hermione Granger. What have we here?" said Lavender with a twinkle in her eye.
"Fancy your best friend, do you?"

Hermione went a deep pink as she replied, "Of course not, Lav. What do you take me for? Harry's my best friend and nothing more."

"It doesn't seem like that to me, the way you were ogling him back there," argued Parvati.
"What's going on between you two?"

"Nothing .. nothing at all. I .. I was just going to the bathroom, and just happened to notice Harry working out. I was only there for a second before you came," she started to regain her composure. "You must be mad to think I like Harry that way. Come on you two, there's no way I'd let anything get in the way of my studying. You know that."

Parvati and Lavender seemed to accept her explanation, but Hermione wasn't sure that she accepted it herself. She'd had that jolt again, and just couldn't work out what it was. She felt angry with herself and quite a bit confused.

That evening after classes, Harry rushed to Professor McGonagall's office and knocked.
"Come in, Harry," she called.

Harry opened the door and walked in. "How did you know it was me?"

"I knew you wouldn't be late for this, Harry. You are dead on time. Who else could it have been?"

Harry sat opposite his house professor as she explained the process of becoming an Animagus. "This session will be very short, Harry. It will only last 10 minutes at most."

Harry raised his eyebrows and looked at her questioningly.

"Remember I told you that very few witches and wizards get to become an Animagus. They never get beyond the first stage of the process. This first stage requires that you dream, Harry. I will place a special charm on you before you leave my office and you will then dream every night until the first stage has been completed. Now you will dream for up to 1 month only, and if you haven't managed to complete the first stage in that time, then I'm afraid you will never be able to become an Animagus."

"What will I dream about, Professor?"

"You will dream that you are seeing your surroundings in your Animagus form. For example, you know that I'm a cat Animagus. When I dreamt, I saw grass and trees and ferns as I ran through a forest. I knew that I was a fairly small animal, but I couldn't see myself then. You can only become an Animagus if you see your Animagus form in your dream. Luckily, I did. It always happens the same way, to each Animagus, that is. You will seek out clear water. You must reach the lake and look in its smooth waters to see your reflection. What you see will be your animal form. Very few witches and wizards reach the lake, Harry, as I told you before."

"How long do you think it will take?"

"As I said, you must reach the lake within 1 month. Most Animagi reach the lake within 3 weeks. And don't worry if you don't find the lake in the first week - it is very rare that that happens within even two weeks. So be patient. Now I'll set the charm."

McGonagall picked up her wand, pointed it at Harry's head and uttered

"SOMNIO ANIMAGUS"

A yellow light surrounded Harry's head for a few moments and then disappeared.

"That's it, Harry. There's nothing more to be done until you reach the lake and find what animal your Animagus form will take. When it happens, come to see me straight away and I'll instruct you on the transformation process. And Harry, don't be too disappointed if you don't reach the lake. Very few do, so it's no disgrace. Goodnight Harry."

Harry wandered back to Gryffindor tower deep in thought. He couldn't help but feel that it would be a disgrace if he failed. After all, his father and Sirius - even Wormtail - had managed it. Perhaps that was why Professor McGonagall had told him not to tell anyone - to save him the humiliation of telling them he'd failed. He reached up and held the amulet in his hand, as he usually did at times like this. He was comforted by the warmth and security it gave him, and the feeling of urgency was still there, but Harry thought that the urgent feeling was a bit stronger than the last time he had felt it.

Harry couldn't wait to go to bed that night. But he couldn't go to sleep. He was far too excited by what he would see in his dream. He lay awake in his four-poster for ages, listening to Neville snoring his head off, and he thought about ways to make himself sleep. He quickly gave up on the idea of counting sheep. He didn't want to tempt providence - he certainly didn't want to be a sheep Animagus!

Just when he thought he'd never sleep that night, he drifted off. And dreamed.

He felt free - the most wonderful feeling of freedom. He opened his eyes and saw trees - tops of trees. He looked up and saw the stars and a bright moon. He was moving very fast, faster than when he was riding his Firebolt and it felt so much better. He looked ahead but saw just the faint outlines of trees in the moonlight. He looked down again and saw the trees rushing by underneath him. He then saw a clearing, and looked for water - there was none.

"Harry! Harry! Wake up you lazy git." Harry slowly opened his eyes and saw Ron shaking him. "Blimey, I thought you'd be there all morning. Come on, it's time for breakfast. Hurry up."

Harry groaned. He hadn't reached the lake. But there was one thing he did know now. He was a bird! No wait, I might be a hippogriff or a dragonfly, or a fly - how fast can a fly fly anyway? I might even be a dragon. He gave up. All he did know was that he could fly. And the feeling he'd had - it was wonderful. He couldn't wait to go to sleep again that night.

School had finished for the weekend, and Lara and her three friends were taking the shortcut from the school to the coffee shop. They went through the same routine every day after school. Lara liked to spend some time with her friends before she went home to Privet Drive

and the others returned to school for dinner. They liked to sit and chat while drinking coke in the little café in the high street that was just a few minutes away from Smeltings.

"Have you heard from Harry yet, Lara?" Beth asked her friend, as they walked along a narrow alley.

Lara sighed, "No, not yet, Beth. But it's only been a week and he must be pretty busy at school."

"Look, I don't mean to be nasty or anything," said Josie, "but you've only known him for a day, and you know what some boys can be like."

"Harry's not just any boy, Josie. He's the nicest boy I've met, and he's so modest. I mean he's gorgeous and he doesn't even know it."

Just then, the girls heard slight popping noises coming from behind them. They turned to see four men wearing long black cloaks with hoods pulled over their faces. Each of the men was pointing a weird looking stick at them. Carol opened her mouth to scream, but nothing came out. Strange lights came from the end of each stick and all four girls went rigid. They couldn't move or speak. They looked in horror as the men approached them, each one catching hold of one of the girls' arms.

Lara felt a strange sort of lurch, and the alleyway disappeared and everything went black. She was still conscious, though, and felt rough hands lowering her to the floor. After a few moments, a light appeared about 20 yards away, and she looked at her surroundings. She seemed to be in a cave - a large cave - and she saw her three friends lying on the ground beside her. The four men were now gathered around the light, which appeared to be a bluish fire, although nothing seemed to be burning.

The men then turned and walked towards them. They uttered some strange-sounding words and the feeling returned to Lara's limbs. She could now move, and she found that she could speak as she whimpered, "Wh .. who are you? Why have you done this to us?"

Carol and Beth began to cry and Josie looked on in terror. "Be quiet, or we'll immobilise you again," said one of the men.

The men again uttered some strange sounding words, and astonishingly, rope whipped out from the end of the sticks and curled tightly around the girls. It wasn't as bad as before - they still had feeling in their arms and legs and they could speak.

"What are you going to do to us?" asked Lara, as she stared with frightened eyes at the biggest of the four men.

"If Potter behaves himself, nothing will happen to you," he said. "You'll just be our guests for a little while. Now keep quiet and don't give us any trouble." The men then went back over and sat down beside the strange flames, talking quietly amongst themselves.

"Lara, what is this? I don't understand. How did we get here, and what are those weird sticks they are carrying? I'm frightened!" whispered Carol.

"I don't know, Carol," Lara whispered back. "But it sounds as if Harry's involved somehow - but I've got no idea what it's about. The only thing we can do for now is make sure we don't make them angry."

Harry sat with his friends in the Great Hall eating breakfast. He was looking forward to the training session later on that morning. He looked up when he heard the familiar sound of the owl post arriving.

An unfamiliar hawk flew right above Harry and dropped a black-coloured parchment onto his plate of half-finished scrambled eggs. He glanced at Ron, enquiringly, as he picked it off his plate and opened it. His eyes went wide as he read ...

Potter,

We have your Muggle girlfriend and her three friends. If you want them to see the light of day again then you will do well to follow these instructions.

Go into Hogsmeade, and walk through the High Street and past the edge of the village. In a little while you will see a stile, leading onto open ground at the foot of a mountain. Go on a little while and you will come to a pile of boulders by a rough track. Wait there for further instructions.

Do not tell anyone. If we see any teachers nearby, we will kill the girls.

Come alone this morning.

It was unsigned. Ron, Hermione and Ginny looked questioningly at Harry, who was just staring at the letter. He then handed it to Hermione, who read it quietly to the other two.

"They've got Lara. If they harm her ..." Harry whispered.

"Harry, we've got to tell Dumbledore - he'll know what to do," said Hermione.

"No Hermi - you read the letter. If they see any teachers, they'll kill them. No - I've got to go there on my own."

"No, Harry, you can't. You'll be killed!" moaned Ginny.

"Let's go outside to talk about this," said Ron. "We can decide what to do then."

The four walked outside and sat on a bench beside the lake. "Do you think it's 'You Know Who'?" asked Ron.

"Who else - or at least some of his minions," answered Ginny.

"Let me see the letter again," said Hermione as she grabbed it from Harry. "What do you think they mean by 'never see the light of day again'? Does this mean they've got them holed up somewhere dark?"

"Yes! Of course!" replied Harry. "I thought I recognised those directions. I bet they've got them in that cave - you know, the one where we met Sirius last year. We went up a rough mountain track to get to it."

"You're right, Harry," said Hermione. "We've got to tell Dumbledore - he'll be able to rescue them."

"Hermi, I can't risk it. If they see any of the professors, they'll kill the girls. I've got to do this on my own. Look, I remember Sirius telling me when we were in the cave, that there was another entrance to it as well as the fissure in the rock at the front. He said that there was a narrow passageway at the top, an old rainwater gully I think he said - and it led right down into the back of the cave. If I can get to the top of the mountain without being seen, then I can take them by surprise, or I may be able to lead the girls out that way."

"You're not going on your own, Harry," said a determined Ginny. "We're coming with you. We can take our broomsticks and fly around behind them to the top of the mountain, and go down that gully together. The four of us will stand a better chance at getting them out."

Ginny looked at Hermione and her brother and they nodded their agreement. Harry looked at them gratefully.

"But you've got to do one thing, Harry," said Hermione. "If this goes wrong we've got to be able to get help somehow. Leave a note on your bed before we go, just to tell them what we're doing - you don't have to say where we've gone. But tell them that you'll use the 'find me stone' if we need any help."

Harry thought for a moment. "That sounds ok, Hermi. I'll go up to the dorm and write the note, you three go to the Quidditch field and get three broomsticks. I'll bring my Firebolt with me."

Four broomsticks were steered low to the ground around the back of the mountain that overlooked Hogsmeade. Harry flew very close to Hermione, giving words of encouragement as she clung desperately to her broom. She never had been comfortable in the air. They flew up to the summit and hovered for a moment. Harry was watching the ground intently, looking for the second entrance to the cave. He knew that it must be towards the front of the mountain, and probably in amongst a pile of rocks. He saw a likely looking place and pointed to the others to follow him down to the ground.

"Spread out and search for the entrance to the gully," he whispered, "and keep as quiet as possible." The four fanned out and started looking.

Dumbledore was sitting in his office talking to McGonagall and Sirius. They were waiting for Remus Lupin, who was late, to start their weekly progress meeting on the activities of the Dark Side. Snape had been called away at the last minute to sort out some trouble in the Slytherin common room, and would also be late.

"Have you given any more thought to the emanations that 'You Know Who' was talking about?" Sirius asked Dumbledore.

"Yes, I have. I've picked up on the emanations as well but I can't make any sense of them. They are definitely coming from the Light Side, though, and I've never experienced anything like it before. I get the distinct feeling that it is some sort of message or summons, and that it is meant for someone or something in particular. It is probable that only he, she or it is able to 'read' it."

"Do you think it's for the Anima Summa? For Harry?" asked McGonagall.

"Very likely, Minerva. And if it is, then Harry may not yet be strong enough, magically, to detect it. But he's getting stronger by the day, and I think he should be able to sense something before too long."

Just then, Remus Lupin burst in. "Headmaster, I've been checking my marauders map, and there's no sign of Harry, Ron, Hermione or Ginny anywhere at Hogwarts. Harry should be at Quidditch training, but Madam Hooch says he hasn't turned up."

"Oh no," said McGonagall. "what are they up to now? Do you know anything about this Sirius?"

"No Minerva, I don't," Sirius thought for a moment. "Look, Harry's not stupid. Haven't you noticed how more sensible he is this year? He wouldn't just go off without saying anything to us, and he certainly wouldn't miss Quidditch training unless he's in some sort of trouble!"

"Minerva, check Gryffindor common room for any clues immediately please. And see if his broomstick is missing," ordered Dumbledore. She rushed out of the room immediately, with a look of concern on her face.

"When did you last check the map, Remus?"

"Before a few minutes ago, I checked about 9.30 - that's just over an hour ago, Headmaster"

"Have you noticed anything odd with his behaviour, or that of his friends lately?" said Dumbledore. Both Sirius and Remus shook their heads. "Well they can't have gone very far in an hour, even if they are on brooms."

A breathless McGonagall rushed back into the room then, holding a note in her hand. "Harry left a note on his bed," she gasped. " Harry's Muggle friend and three other girls have been taken captive and are being held somewhere near Hogsmeade. He doesn't say where, but the four of them have gone off to try to rescue them. Harry says that if any professors are spotted by the captors, the girls will be killed. He says he has the 'find me stone' Sirius. Do you know anything about that?"

"Yes, I do," said Sirius as a spark lit up his eyes. "I gave that to Harry for his birthday. If he uses it, his exact location can be pinpointed and we can Apparate there."

"Come on, quick," said Dumbledore. "We need to get to Hogsmeade straight away. We can't Apparate from the school grounds, as you know."

The three professors, and one big black dog strode purposefully out of the office and down towards the Entrance Hall. Dumbledore quickly explained the situation to the passing Professor Flitwick, and he joined them as they rushed towards Hogsmeade.

Ron ran over towards Harry at the top of the mountain. "I think I've found it, Harry. It's over there," he pointed to a clump of rocks about 40 yards away. Harry waved to the two girls and they went over to look at what Ron had found. At the bottom of a pile of rocks was a large boulder, behind which could just be seen a narrow fissure, covered with cobwebs.

"Do you think that's it? It doesn't look big enough," said Ginny doubtfully.

"Hang on a minute," said Harry. "I'll squeeze through and check."

With some difficulty, Harry managed to get into the fissure in the boulder. He pulled out his wand and whispered "*LUMOS*." A light appeared at the tip of the wand, and he saw that he was in a slightly larger space beyond the fissure. He could just see a narrow gully running down into the depths of the mountain. Harry turned and pushed his head back out of the fissure. "Yes. This is it, I'm sure. Come on - follow me, but be very quiet."

"Eh, Harry. Can you make sure there are no big fat hairies by the entrance?" whined Ron. His friends knew that he hated spiders.

"There aren't any here Ron, come on," said Harry.

The gully was damp and slippery, and very narrow in parts and they had difficulty in keeping their footholds on some of the more steeply sloping places.

"Bugger!" winced Ron as he hit his head on a piece of rock protruding from the ceiling of the gully. This was followed by an "Ouch!" from Hermione who scraped her elbow on the narrow side of the tunnel.

As they went further down, they found that they had to get on all fours to crawl through some very tight spots. It was hard work and they were getting dirtier by the minute.

They seemed to be climbing down for ages, when they came to a large boulder surrounded by a pile of mud, dirt and small rocks. There didn't seem to be any way through.

"Sod it!" exclaimed Harry. "It looks as if there's been a rock fall fairly recently. Now what do we do?"

"Calm down, Harry. Let's think for a minute," said Hermione, as her forehead creased with concentration. "We can't levitate the boulder out, it would cause the rocks to slide down and make too much noise. And for the same reason we can't blast it away," she brightened suddenly. "But we may be able to bore a hole around it."

"How are we going to do that, Hermi?" said Ron

"Stand back," she lifted her wand and muttered, "*COMBURO CAVUM*." A bright yellow light shot from the end of her wand and started to consume the rubble that was piled to the side of the boulder. After a few minutes, they could see that a hole, just large enough for them to crawl through, had been burnt right through to the other side of the blockage.

"Wait a few minutes for it to cool down," said Hermione quietly.

They all looked at her with admiration. "Where did you learn that, Hermi?" asked Ron

"Where do you think, Ron? If you'd bothered to read your 5th year Charms book, you'd have found it in chapter 63."

Ron rolled his eyes. "I should have known!"

On impulse, Harry crawled over to Hermione and kissed her on the cheek. "You're brilliant, Hermi," he said gratefully.

Hermione was glad that the gloom hid her burning face from the others.

Harry crawled into the hole and looked through to the other side. He saw that the gully continued on downwards. "Come on," he whispered, "it's clear."

Padfoot led the professors towards the shrieking shack in Hogsmeade, and pushed open the side door for everyone to enter. Professor Dumbledore quickly explained to Flitwick about Sirius. "So you see, Filius, Sirius Black is completely innocent and he has been working for me for a while now."

The little professor gestured to Padfoot. "And I suppose that he's Sirius Black?"

"That's right, Professor," said Sirius as he transformed. "I brought you here because we'll be hidden from any prying eyes, and it'll be more comfortable to wait for Harry's call."

"Thank you, Sirius," said Dumbledore. "And that's all we can do now - wait."

They crawled through the gully for another 15 minutes before it began to level out. Harry put his arm out to halt the others, and whispered, "I think we're close to the back of the cave, see how the ground is getting flatter. Be very quiet from here on."

They crept carefully forward until they could see a faint blue light from just ahead. Harry extinguished the light from his wand and put his mouth up close to Ron's ear. "I'll go on ahead to see what we're up against. You wait here till I come back. Tell the others. I'm glad I brought this," he pulled his Invisibility Cloak from under his robes and put it over his head.

Harry cautiously inched forward and looked through the opening into the cave. He saw four Death Eaters sitting around the flame, and over towards the back of the cave, just in front of a large outcrop of rock he saw the girls, tightly bound with magical rope. He silently walked into the cave, past the Death Eaters, and out to the front entrance. He looked around outside, but could see no one else in sight. He went back to the others and pulled the cloak off himself. He gestured for the other 3 to come close and he whispered, "There are four of them sitting around a flame in the middle of the cave. When I give the signal, move out into the cave and stun them. I'll take the one on the right. You, Ron, take the one next to him, and you Hermi take the one on the left. Ginny, you get the one next to Hermi's target. Are you ready?"

They nodded.

"Now!"

The four rushed from the cave and shouted simultaneously as they raised their wands
"STUPEFY."

Three of the Death Eaters dropped unconscious to the floor, but Ron had missed his target. The surprised man recovered quickly and sent off a curse that narrowly missed Ginny, the cave wall next to her head lighting up with the force of it. Ron proved more accurate with his second try and the fourth Death Eater crumpled in a heap besides his fellows.

There was silence in the cave. "That was too easy. Something's not right here," Harry said as he looked nervously around the cave.

Lara and the other 3 girls had gone through a whole spectrum of emotions as they watched the action unfold. From terror, it changed to surprise and wonderment as they saw that their captors were being attacked, and then to relief as Lara whispered, "It's Harry" to her friends.

"Harry!" she shouted.

Harry and his friends ran over to the struggling girls and quickly released them from their bindings. Lara groggily got to her feet and limped over to Harry. She flung her arms around his neck and held him tightly, sobbing quietly.

"It's ok now, Lara. Everything's going to be all right," he whispered into her ear as Ron looked on, grinning. Hermione and Ginny just looked down at the floor.

Lara stood back and took a big breath. "What's going on, Harry? Who are those men and what are those sticks? What were those strange lights coming from them?"

"Ah, Potter! I thought you'd try something funny!" said a voice suddenly from the front of the cave. Harry looked around and saw five Death Eaters. He couldn't see their faces because their hoods were pulled over their heads, but he thought the oily voice was very familiar.

"CRUCIO" yelled the voice. The curse narrowly missed Harry, but caught Ginny on the shoulder. She crumpled to the floor, writhing in agony.

"Quick, behind that rock, and keep low," yelled Harry. Ron and Hermione ran behind the rocky outcrop, pulling the four frightened girls with them. Harry caught hold of Ginny's robes and dragged her into the shelter of the rock. As they disappeared from sight, the curse was broken, and Ginny gasped with relief.

"Oh do come on, Potter. You can't stay hidden for ever, you know," came the sneering voice of Lucius Malfoy. "Did you think that I wouldn't plan a surprise of my own?"

Harry peeped around the rock and saw Malfoy. The other four Death Eaters were reviving the ones they had stunned earlier.

"I'm getting impatient, Potter. Come out or face the consequences. Maybe you'd like a taste of our power to convince you?"

Curses were flung in their direction, dissipating against the rock they were hidden behind, and laughter filled the cave as the nine Death Eaters enjoyed their target practice.

"We're done for," said Ron. "How are we going to get out of this one?"

"You three keep them occupied," replied Harry, "and I'll signal Sirius."

Ron, Ginny and Hermione sent stunning spells blindly around the rock, missing the Death Eaters by a fair margin, not daring to raise their heads to take aim, but it was enough to buy Harry the time he needed. He pulled the 'find me stone' from his robes and said into it *'EXPISCOR EGO'*.

No more than 5 seconds later, Harry was relieved to see Dumbledore, Sirius, McGonagall, Lupin and Flitwick suddenly appear alongside him with a feint 'Pop'.

While the others sent stunning spells at the Death Eaters, Dumbledore pointed his wand at the eight crouching teenagers and whispered an incantation. A blue light shimmered around them, and spread in a semicircle to cover them all.

Dumbledore then turned back to help his colleagues. He saw that there wasn't much left to be done. At the sight of Dumbledore appearing before them, Malfoy and five of the Death Eaters had immediately Apparated away. Three of them weren't so quick witted, however, and found themselves bound tightly by magical rope before they could get off any shots. Dumbledore turned back and removed the shielding spell he'd put over the youngsters.

"Are you all ok?" Said Sirius as he ran over to them. "Are any of you hurt?"

"No, Sirius, we're fine," said Harry, "but Ginny took the brunt of a Cruciatius curse and she's still a bit groggy. Other than that and a bit of dirt, we're all ok."

Professor McGonagall bent over the reclining form of Ginny and quickly examined her. "Madam Pomfrey needs to take a look at her. I'll take her to the hospital wing," she said, and she took hold of Ginny's arm before both disappeared with a 'pop'.

This was all a bit too much for the four Muggle girls. Strange lights, dark caves, men in black, people appearing and disappearing, and to top it all, an old and very strange man stood in front of them, looking like the Wizard of Oz!

"Harry," wailed Lara, "please tell me what's going on?"

"Lara, it's a long story but I don't think you'll believe me if I tell you." Harry looked pleadingly at Dumbledore.

"Go ahead, Harry, you can tell them. You realise of course, that I'll have to use the Obliviate charm on them before they are taken back?"

"Wh .. what's Obliviate, Harry? What's that?" Said Lara as she eyed Dumbledore suspiciously.

"Lara, everything you've heard and seen here, from the moment you were captured, will have to be wiped from your memories. You see, we can't allow you all to remember anything of

this - it's too risky." Harry took a deep breath, and looked towards Hermione and Ron. "These are two of my best friends - you know, the ones I told you about. That's Ron and that's Hermione. Ginny, my other best friend, was the one taken to hospital just now."

Lara looked up and regarded the two teenagers. She saw that Ron was tall, with a slightly long nose, and the reddest hair she'd ever seen. She felt a pang of jealousy as she looked at Hermione. Her hazel-brown eyes were kind and warm, and she was very beautiful. She could immediately tell that she was a very nice person, and the way she looked at Harry ..." She was startled at Harry's next words.

"Hermione's a witch. Ron's a wizard, and .. and I'm a wizard too." He looked at Dumbledore. "That's Professor Dumbledore, my headmaster, and the greatest wizard in the world. The others are two of the professors at Hogwarts - they're wizards too. And the big ugly one," he looked at Sirius, smiling, "is my godfather. Oh yes, and he's a wizard as well."

Lara and her friends were now staring wide-eyed with their mouths open. "Don't be silly Harry, everyone knows that there aren't such things as witches and wizards."

Harry, Ron and Hermione then sat down with the girls and told them about their magical world, and the Dark Forces that were trying to take over. The adults meanwhile, went over to interrogate the Death Eaters.

Lara turned sad eyes on Harry. "You can never leave your world, can you Harry? You can never .. be with .. someone who doesn't have any magic, can you?"

Harry then realised the truth of it all. The thing he had wrestled with since meeting Lara, the thing that had been confusing him. He looked at Lara and placed his hand on her cheek.

"I'm so sorry, Lara. I really do like you a lot, but it can never work out between us. I'm sorry." The six others looked at them with a feeling of sadness, and Hermione again felt a jolt deep within her. She felt sad for Lara. She obviously liked Harry a lot, so much, in fact, that she was willing to give him up for the sake of his happiness. She looked with respect at the pretty blond-haired girl.

Dumbledore then came back towards the group. "Are you ready to go back home then? You won't feel a thing when I do the memory charm. You'll wake up in the woods close to your school thinking that you'd gone for a walk and got lost."

"Professor Dumbledore," said Lara, "please, don't wipe my memory. I promise I won't say anything to anybody. I .. I .. was just so very unhappy before, not knowing if I would see Harry again. It was awful. I don't want to go back to that. I know now that I can never be with Harry, like I can with other boys. It will be a lot easier for me knowing, rather than not knowing. Please."

Harry looked at Dumbledore. "I think it would be best, Professor. And I trust her to keep it quiet."

Dumbledore thought for a moment and then slowly nodded. He pointed his wand at Lara's friends and muttered '*OBLIVIATE*' and they closed their eyes and fell asleep.

He then turned to Lara. "Lara, I'm now going put a special spell on you so that the Dark Forces will not be able to find you. Your memory will be in tact, but you can rest assured that you will be safe." He then uttered another incantation, while directing his wand at Lara. She felt nothing at all.

"Remus, Sirius. Will you take the girls back and make sure that they return to their school?"

Lara turned to Harry, put her arms around his neck and kissed him tenderly on the lips. She whispered, "Goodbye, Harry. Let me know how you're getting on, will you?"

Harry nodded.

She then hugged Ron. "Thank you for rescuing us," and then hugged Hermione. "Thank you too. Please look after Harry," she whispered as she looked at her knowingly. Hermione could only nod and squeeze the hand that held her as she looked at the girl.

Sirius and Remus then held onto the girls and Apparated to the woods around Smeltings. They said goodbye to Lara and then hid in a thicket before reviving the three girls. "Where do you think we are?" said Carol.

"You won't believe this," replied Lara. "I had a look around while you were still sleeping, and we're only about a hundred yards from the edge of the wood, just above the school. Come on, let's go."

Sirius and Remus watched from the edge of the wood as the four girls walked back towards the school. Outside the school entrance was a police car and several worried-looking adults. "Mum!" shouted Lara. A very relieved woman run to her daughter and hugged her tightly, before she starting asking a load of questions.

The two wizards smiled as Lara looked towards the place where they were hidden. They could see the wistful smile on her face. But they hadn't heard her sigh.

Ron and Hermione sat at Ginny's bedside in the hospital wing later that evening. They had just finished telling her what had happened after she and Professor McGonagall had left.

"Poor Harry," said Ginny, "it sounds as if he really liked Lara."

"Yes," said Ron, "but I guess it's for the best. When is Madam Pomfrey going to let you out?"

"I don't know, Ron. I feel fine now, but she says that there can sometimes be bad after affects with the Cruciatus curse, especially for people my age. So she says she wants to keep an eye on me. Oh there's Harry."

Harry had just come in to stand by Ginny's bedside, looking pensive. "How are you feeling, Ginny?"

"I'm ok, Harry. Why the glum look?"

"I just got a rocket from McGonagall, Dumbledore and Sirius. They're not very happy with me at the moment, and you lot aren't exactly flavour of the month either. They said I should have trusted them to work out a way to get the girls back, and not dragged you into danger with me. I suppose they're right."

"Well it worked out didn't it?" said Ron. "I mean, they should be giving us extra points for what we did."

"I don't think so, Ron," said Hermione. "We should never have gone off like that. It was exciting though, wasn't it?" she grinned.

"Come on, out .. out. This girl needs to rest." Madam Pomfrey had come over to the bed with a 'no nonsense' look on her face. The three waved to Ginny as they left the hospital and walked back to Gryffindor tower.

That night, Harry dreamt again ..

It was daylight and the tops of the trees were now in sharp focus. He flew towards them, revelling in the feel of the wind that streamed around him. He soared high above the trees looking for a break in the canopy, looking for a glint of reflected light that would signify water. But there was nothing.

Chapter 4 Strengths, Weaknesses and Quidditch

Ginny joined her friends for breakfast the following morning. Madam Pomfrey had given her a clean bill of health after she'd had a good night's sleep. Harry and Ron were deep in discussion about the best Quidditch tactics for the match, which was only about two weeks away now.

Hermione noticed Ginny looking dreamily at Harry, "Ginny, your eyes are going to pop out of your head if you're not careful."

Ginny gave a start and smiled, "I can't help it Hermi. I've really tried not to think about him *that* way, but what can I do? If only he weren't so damn gorgeous!"

Hermione shook her head sadly, "Well I'm off to the library to do my Arithmancy homework. Are you coming?"

"No, Hermi. I think I'll stay here for a while. Maybe I'll come up a bit later."

Hermione made her way up the stairs and along the winding corridors to the library and pulled out her parchment and quill, relishing a few mind-bending hours on her homework. However, she found it strangely difficult to concentrate. She kept thinking about Ginny's continued crush on Harry, and how it would affect her. Did Harry have feelings for Ginny? She knew that Harry wasn't exactly insensitive - he had shown that with Lara yesterday. But she couldn't help feeling that he looked on Ginny only as a best friend - perhaps even as a sister - rather than a girlfriend. She hoped Ginny wouldn't be hurt.

These thoughts prompted her to try to examine her own feelings for Harry. She tried to make sense of the strange jolts she had been getting sometimes when she looked at him. Were they a sort of friendly - even brotherly - concern for him? Apart from Viktor Krum, whom she hadn't thought of in *that* way anyway, she'd never had a boyfriend. She'd never experienced any romantic feelings for a boy. Were those jolts something to do with .. with any romantic notions she might have for Harry?

No, it wasn't possible. He was her best friend, and would remain so. She wasn't going to risk losing that friendship by some airy-fairy notion that she might have concerning romance.

'Get a grip, Hermione,' she thought, 'put it out of your head and get on with some work'

The following Wednesday evening saw Harry and the team on the Quidditch field. They had discussed various tactical moves the previous evening, and were now going to try to put them into practice.

Under the direction of Madam Hooch, the three Chasers and two Beaters rose into the air. The Chasers took up a 'V' formation, with Katie Bell up in front and the other two about twenty yards behind on either side of her. Fred and George patrolled on either side of the 'V'.

They flew up the field, the Chasers passing the Quaffle between them. Katie found it very difficult since she had to catch the ball coming over her shoulder, and throw it back behind

her. With her head looking back more than in front, she found it difficult to see where she was going.

"Ernie, Terry - get wider apart to give her a chance," shouted Harry.

"Don't be daft, Harry," shouted George, "That'll make the gap between them too wide, we'll never be able to give proper protection from the Bludgers, and anyway, the Yanks will find it too easy to intercept the Quaffle with all that space in between them."

Harry looked at Madam Hooch. "All right," she shouted, "come on down. Back to the drawing board." And she led the team into the training room to work out more realistic manoeuvres.

"Look. We've got to try to counteract their size and reach," said Harry, "The best way to do that is to use our speed. Why don't we try the cross-over move? One Chaser up ahead and one behind and to the side of the one with the Quaffle. Say Katie is in possession, Terry is up ahead and Ernie is wide and behind."

He drew the formation on the blackboard to illustrate his ideas. Then drawing arrows to show the direction of movement, he continued, "Ernie puts on a burst of speed and comes up towards Katie, who streaks off to the right and loops ahead, feinting that she's taken the Quaffle with her, but in fact, leaving it behind in the air before she streaked off. Ernie collects it and throws it to Terry. By this time Katie is alongside Terry, about 20 yards away and slightly ahead of him. Terry throws it to Katie, and if we do this at speed and with guile, she'll be clear on goal. What do you think?"

"That's looks good, Harry," beamed Madam Hooch.

"Would you mind going through that again, Harry?" said all three Chasers at the same time. So he did.

When everyone was happy with the play, they again went outside to practice the move. To start with, it was a disaster. Their timing was all wrong. However, by the end of the session, they had it right, and were starting to do it at speed.

"Ok, that's it for tonight," said Madam Hooch, "I think that it's been a successful session, and we can only get better. Off you go."

The following Sunday was 19th September. It was Hermione's 15th birthday. She was feeling slightly aggrieved that no one had wished her Happy Birthday yet, as she walked down to the Great Hall for breakfast. She went into the hall and saw that most of her friends were already there. She sat down beside Lavender, and started to spoon scrambled eggs onto her toast.

"Good morning, everyone," she said.

"Good morning, Hermi," everyone replied. But still no 'Happy Birthday'.

'Oh well,' she thought, 'they've obviously forgotten - typical!' and started to eat her breakfast moodily.

As the day went on, still no one said anything to her. She went up to her dorm and opened the parcel she had received from her parents - a lovely new set of robes, hazel coloured to match her eyes. She was thrilled with the present, but was still feeling down that her friends had forgotten her birthday - she thought that Ginny, at least, would have remembered.

After sulking on her bed for a while, she decided to snap out of the mood, and went down to the common room. None of her friends were there - except Harry, who was sitting in his favourite chair reading a Quidditch book.

"Hi Harry," she said as she sat down beside him, "where's everyone?"

"They've all decided to go for a walk down by the lake," said Harry, "but I needed to brush up on my tactics. You look a bit peaky today, Hermi. What's the matter?"

"Oh nothing, Harry. Nothing at all," she said with rather more force than she intended.

She'd half decided to have a go at Harry about her birthday, but looked towards the window when she heard an insistent tapping. It was Hedwig. She went over and opened the window to let in the owl. Hedwig flew over to Harry and dropped a note into his lap, and then flew off without waiting for a reply.

"It's from Hagrid," said Harry as he read the note, "He says he's got something to show us. Come on, let's go."

They walked down to Hagrid's hut and knocked. Hagrid opened the door and let them in. "What is it, Hagrid. What've you got to show us?" said Hermione.

"Oh, it's out the back, Hermione. Come on, come and see."

Hagrid opened the back door, and stood aside for Hermione to go outside. She was stunned when she saw a long table, overflowing with food, and all her friends sitting around it, beaming at her. Hagrid walked up behind her and raised his arms - and conducted them all to a chorus of "Happy Birthday."

Hermione was laughing, although a small tear escaped from the corner of her eye, as she stood and watched her friends. Hagrid then led her to the head of the table and sat her down in front of an empty plate, "Come on, then, Hermi. Tuck in!" said Hagrid.

That was the signal for everyone to start filling their plates with all manner of sandwiches, pies and pasties, sausage rolls and plenty of other goodies.

"You thought we'd forgotten, didn't you Hermi?" said Ron, who was sitting next to her.

"No I didn't ... ok, yes I did," she pouted and everyone laughed.

When the feast was finally over, Hermione was surprised when a load of parcels were put in front of her. She opened them all, thanking each of her friends in turn. She noticed that she hadn't had presents from Ron and Harry.

Ron grinned as he handed her a large package. She opened it and saw a large book entitled '2001 Recreational Spells by Gladys Helmont'. "Oh, Ron, thank you. That's wonderful - I haven't read this one!"

Everyone laughed. Only Hermione could appreciate a present such as that. Then Harry handed her a smaller parcel, about two inches wide and six inches long. She looked at him as she tore open the wrapping to reveal a long narrow box. She opened it and saw a gold chain necklace, with a gold pendant in a Celtic design. At the centre of the pendant was a beautiful hazel-brown sapphire.

Hermione gasped, "Oh it's beautiful. But it must have cost the earth. I .. I can't accept this, Harry."

"Yes you can, Hermi. I've been wanting to get you something nice for a while, and when I saw it in Diagon Alley just before school, I had to get it. It's your birthstone, you know. The wizard at the jewellery shop said that it has traditional magical properties - it is said to cool the inner heat of anger. And it's said to lessen the powers of spells cast by evil ones. It also enhances the powers of love and peace. It was made for you, Hermi."

Hermione looked deeply into Harry's eyes as he spoke. And she felt the biggest jolt yet, deep within her.

"Thank you, Harry," she whispered as she kissed him tenderly on the cheek. Everyone clapped and cheered then, and both Harry and Hermione felt their cheeks burning.

The party went on until it was almost time for the evening meal, and everyone made their way back up to the school. As they walked, Ron caught hold of Harry's arm and motioned him over to one side, apart from the rest of the group.

"Harry, can I ask you something?"

"'Course you can, Ron. What's the matter?"

"Eh .. you and Hermi. Is there anything going on? I .. I mean, that present and the way she looked at you and kissed you and everything?"

Harry looked wide-eyed at Ron, "No of course not. She's our best friend, Ron."

"Good," said Ron, "Harry, I think I like her - you know, like her *that* way - not just as a friend. I think I *will* ask her to the Halloween ball. What do you think?"

"Look, Ron. You couldn't ask her last year - and you haven't done it yet this year. When are you going to do it?"

"I don't know yet, Harry. But Krum isn't on the scene, so I haven't got to worry about him, have I?"

"Right. So don't hang about then, Ron. Ask her before somebody else does."

"Yes, I will, Harry - just give me a bit of time to build up to it."

Harry rolled his eyes and whispered, "Oh no, here we go again!"

He had been flying over the forest for some time now. The bright sunshine was warm, and he felt good - he was in his element. But there was still no sign of water.

He noticed a curiously shaped tree up ahead, it was taller than those surrounding it, and the dark trunk was bare from the top of the other trees until the very top, when the spread of leaves formed a sort of arrow, pointing straight ahead. His heart leapt - is this a sign?

He sped on until he was directly over the tree, and looked in the direction the arrow seemed to be pointing. Way up ahead he thought he caught sight of a glint of sunlight shining off something. 'Water!' he thought. It must be.

He increased his speed and swept towards the spot of shining light, and ...

He woke up. "Damn, damn, damn," he said, "I was sure the water was right there!" It had been nearly two weeks, now, since he had started dreaming and he was getting frustrated, 'Still,' he thought, 'I must be getting close. Maybe next time I'll get there.'

He looked at the window, and saw the pale light coming through the pane. It was just past dawn. Harry got out of bed and put on his training shorts, and went down stairs to do his exercises.

That evening, Quidditch practice had gone well. The Chasers had perfected the crossover move and were now looking quite slick. There was a feeling of relief in the team - the game was only one week away. It looked like they may have a good chance of winning.

Fred and George were hitting the Bludgers harder than ever, and the training had obviously helped David Bletchley. Harry had never seen him make so many saves during practice. As for himself, Harry concentrated on speed. He constantly practiced his dives, now managing to pull up from screaming dives just inches from the ground.

Another week of training and practice and they would be as ready as they ever would be.

That night, Harry still couldn't find the water in his dream. He again found the 'arrow tree' but couldn't reach the silvery glint before he woke up.

At breakfast the following morning, Harry and Ron talked about the team's progress until it was time to go to their first class - Divination with Trelawney.

As they walked to the class, Harry asked Ron, "Well - have you asked her yet?"

"No, not yet. Give me a chance, Harry. There's still about five weeks to go yet," he said nervously. Harry grinned at his friend's discomfort.

Professor Trelawney was sitting at her table at the front of the room when they entered. Lavender and Parvati were already there at the front gazing at some strange looking stones on

the table. Harry and Ron took their seats at the back of the class, hoping that they wouldn't be the subjects of any death predictions today.

The professor stood and addressed the class, "Today we will begin studying the ancient art of Prediction using Rune Stones," she pointed to the stones lying on the table, "The Runes are thought to have been made by the main god of the Vikings - Odin. This set contains 24 stones, and the person wishing to see the future casts them on the ground. It is quite complicated to read the messages in the stones, and you will need to study your *'Divination for 5th Years'* book, chapters 90 to 125 thoroughly before you'll be able to make any sense of the patterns. This will be your homework for the next few weeks. Now, I'll demonstrate how they are used. Lets see ... hmmm ... Harry, come down the front of the class please."

Harry groaned and Ron nudged him in the back, "Go on, Harry, let's see how you're going to die this year." Harry walked slowly to the front.

"Right, Harry," said Trelawney, "pick up the stones and cast them on the floor in front of my desk. The rest of you come and gather round."

Harry picked up the stones, bent down and let them fall from his hand onto the floor. The professor then sat on the floor and started to read the pattern, "I see that you are going on a long journey, and the way will be difficult and dangerous."

Lavender and Parvati sucked in their breath and looked at Harry sadly. Harry just looked at the professor and Ron started giggling.

"Weasley! This is not a laughing matter, you know," Professor Trelawney speared Ron with one of her hurt looks, "The Runes never lie. You will do well to pay proper attention," she sniffed and looked back down at the stones.

"I see that you will not be alone on this journey, but it is unclear who you are with," she suddenly gasped and put her hand over her mouth, "Oh my dear boy. There is danger here, great danger." Lavender cried out and made the rest of the students jump.

Trelawney's eyes then became glazed and had a far-away look in them. She spoke in a low-pitched voice that didn't sound like her own, "But you must come. I have been waiting for you. I have been waiting for so long now, and time is getting short."

The professor jumped slightly and looked about her, "Did I say anything just then? I felt as if I were asleep." Parvati told her what had happened, and Trelawney looked at Harry.

"Harry, heed the warning. I .. I don't feel very well. I need to lie down and think a bit more about this. Class dismissed." She staggered towards the door to her room.

"But Professor," shouted Harry, "what does it mean? Where am I supposed to go, and who is waiting for me?"

She turned round, "That I don't know. All I know is that you must do what the Runes tell you, and what the spirit told you - the spirit that used me as a medium to deliver his message." And she opened the door and went into her room to lie down.

"What do you think it's about, Harry?" said Lavender breathlessly, "What are you going to do."

"I'll tell you what he's going to do," said Ron, "He's going to forget about cranky predictions and concentrate on the real issue - Quidditch."

Harry grinned at Ron but couldn't help thinking if what he'd just heard had anything to do with the feeling of urgency he had from his amulet.

The students went out through the trap door, one by one, and walked through the corridors to their next class - Transfiguration with Professor McGonagall.

Harry lay awake in bed that night, hoping that he would get to the water when he went to sleep. Sleep was a long time coming, but he eventually drifted off ...

Flying over the trees in bright sunlight, he went towards the 'arrow tree', which he found quite easily. He looked in the direction the arrow was pointing and again saw the sunshine reflecting off something. He sped towards the glint, which he thought was brighter than in any of the previous dreams.

He flew over several clearings until at last he saw a lake up ahead. It was a fairly small lake, but the water looked glassy since there was no wind to ruffle up any waves. He started to descend towards the lake, clipping the trees that stood all around it. He landed at the waters edge and walked over to peer into its ice-blue surface.

At last, he saw his animal self, and marvelled.

At first, he saw a smallish head, with a large, sharp curved beak as the prominent feature. He smiled as he saw that his eyes were emerald green, and there was a dark brown lightning-bolt shaped mark on his forehead, which was otherwise covered in golden fur and feathers, as were his neck. He leaned further out over the water, and saw that his body and wings were dark brown. He spread his wings.

He was a golden eagle - but a lot larger than a normal bird. He saw that his body was about 5 feet in length and he had a wing-span of over 12 feet.

He rose up into the air and hovered over the lake, looking down at his reflection, making sure that he had identified the animal correctly. He had no doubt - he had seen photos of golden eagles at his Muggle school, and he had even seen one flying in the hills above Hogsmeade.

He soared upwards into the clear blue air and relished the feeling of freedom.

He awoke the following morning feeling elated. He had done it. He heard the snores of the other boys in the dorm, and looked at his watch to see that it was 7.30 am. He went quickly into the shower, and then dressed and went down to the common room. His exercises went forgotten this morning - he was too excited. He went out through the portrait hole and made his way to Professor McGonagall's office, hoping that she would be there even at this early hour.

He knocked on the door and was relieved to hear the professor shout, "Come in. It's open."

McGonagall took one look at Harry's beaming face and said, "You've found the lake haven't you?"

Harry nodded, "Yes, Professor. I'm a golden eagle - and a big one."

"I bet you're happy, Harry. You always *have* liked flying. Well, now for the next stage in your instruction. Have you got a clear image of your animal form in your mind?" Harry again nodded.

"Right, what you need to do now is to close your eyes and concentrate on that image. Then see your human self in your mind's eye, and slowly visualise yourself changing into your animal form. As you do this, think the words *CONVERTO AQUILA AUREUS* - that means 'Transform Golden Eagle'. When you want to transform back to your human form, you do the reverse. See yourself, in your mind's eye, changing from the eagle to human form and say *CONVERTO EGO*. You'll need plenty of practice, Harry."

"Can I try it now, Professor?" asked Harry excitedly. She smiled and nodded.

Harry closed his eyes and saw his eagle form in his mind. Then he saw himself changing into that form, and he said the words silently to himself. He opened his eyes and looked down at himself - and was disappointed to see that he hadn't transformed.

"Harry," said the professor grinning, "You look rather strange with the head of an eagle and the body of a human. I think you'd better change back."

Harry went through the reverse process and said, "What did I do wrong?"

"Nothing, Harry. Like everything new, you need to put in plenty of practice before you can perfect it. You've made a good start - nothing usually happens when most Animagi first try to transform. You need to concentrate more. You'll soon master it. But don't practice where anybody can see you. Remember that this must remain a secret for now. I'll give you the password to a room known only to the Headmaster and myself. It's right next to my office, behind the suit of armour. To get in, you tap the right arm with your wand and say the password 'sugar beans'."

"Thanks, Professor. Can I tell my friends now?"

"Yes, you can - but only Ron, Hermione and Ginny - no-one else. And you may like to wait until you can transform properly first to save yourself from any embarrassment. Let me know when you've mastered it"

Fred and George walked into the Great Hall late for breakfast, and went over to sit opposite their brother and sister. They were grinning like Cheshire cats. "Uh oh," said Ginny to Ron, "they've been up to something. Look at their faces."

"Hey, you two," said Ron, "what have you done now?"

"It's great," said Fred, "We've just been down to the dungeons to try out a new trick we've invented on the Slytherins. We set it over the entrance to their common room, so when they come through they'll .. well, just wait."

The two pranksters sat eating their breakfast, glancing all the while at the door to the Great Hall. The first Slytherins - Mandy Brocklehurst and Pansy Parkinson - came in and went over to their table. They were soon joined by Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle. Fred and George were sitting on the edge of their seats, looking expectantly at them as they spooned food onto their breakfast plates.

Ron nudged Harry and Hermione, "Look at the Slytherins, something's going to happen I think - Fred and George've done something."

The tension at the Gryffindor table could be cut with a knife as the word was passed around. Every Gryffindor was now staring and waiting for something to happen.

Draco Malfoy noticed the Gryffindors watching them and said - or at least he meant to say 'What are you gits staring at'. What came out of his mouth was 'Ee aaw .. Ee aaw .. Ee aaw'. He clapped his hand to his mouth, and stared wildly about him.

The other Slytherins had heard Draco and started to ask him what was up. "Ee aaw .. Ee aaw... Ee aaw .." they asked.

By this time, Fred and George were rolling on the floor in fits of laughter. The other Gryffindors just looked at the Slytherins in disbelief before they all cracked up, letting out hoots of laughter. The Slytherins run out of the hall, red-faced, but not before Draco stopped and looked at Fred and George, shouting "Ee aaw .. Ee aaw ..."

This only served to double the mirth of the Gryffindors. Eventually, Fred and George explained that they had named their new spell 'The Donkey Charm', but it would dissipate from the Slytherin entrance after about half an hour. The people it affected, however, would be talking like donkeys for about two hours.

"Great," said Harry, "That means we'll have some peace from them at the DADA class."

Harry, Hermione and Ron went to their first class of the morning. Remus Lupin was looking angrily at the Slytherins, who were already at their seats, "What's wrong with you lot?" he said, "When I ask a question, I expect a reply."

Harry went over and whispered in Remus' ear, telling him about the 'Donkey Charm'. Throughout the rest of the class, Remus had to call on all his powers of restraint to stop bursting out laughing at the Slytherins' predicament. He knew he shouldn't have done it, of course, but he couldn't help singling out Slytherin students to answer the questions he posed.

"From now until the end of the term," he said, "We are going to concentrate on spell-blocking and deflecting. With the rise of the Dark Side, you will find this increasingly helpful."

Hermione's hand shot up, "Yes, Hermione?"

"Professor Lupin, I thought that unforgivable curses can't be blocked," she said.

"Well, your right and wrong, Hermione. Nothing can block the Avada Kedavra, of course - although there has been one exception," he said looking at Harry, "But the full power of some of the others can be dispelled. For instance, you all know that Harry, there, is very adept at resisting the Imperious curse. He can't stop the curse, but he can resist it. The key to it all is having a strong mind and high powers of concentration. With practice, even the worst effects of the Cruciatus curse can be deflected."

Again Hermione's arm shot into the air, "How can you practice that, Professor? I mean, apart from it being illegal to throw the Cruciatus, how can anyone stand the curse for the number of times it'll be needed to practice? We'll be gibbering idiots before we get near to deflecting it."

"Again, you're both right and wrong. We won't be using the Cruciatus, but a very close and surprising relative of the curse - *Rictusempra* - the tickling charm. I know that they seem completely opposite in their effect, but think about it! They both work by stimulating the nerve endings - one to cause extreme pain, and the other to cause extreme itching. So if you can resist the tickling, you should be able to resist Cruciatus. Now, I need a volunteer - how about you, Ron?"

"Me!" said Ron, his face going quite pale.

"Yes you. Come on Ron, come out to the front of the class."

Ron walked towards Remus looking nervous, "Right, Ron. When I cast the charm, concentrate hard, and visualise the nerve endings of the part of the body I'll be aiming at. Visualise that you are placing a hard cover over them - a cover that can't be penetrated. Are you ready? - I'll give you a minute so that you can put yourself in the right frame of mind."

"Ready, Professor," said Ron after a little while, looking determined.

Remus pointed his wand at Ron's arm and said, "*RICTUSEMPRA*."

Ron immediately fell to the floor, laughing, and futilely scratching at his arm. "*FINITE INCANTATEM*" said Remus, and Ron got to his feet, looking shame-faced.

"I was useless, wasn't I? I can't see how I'm going to do that," said Ron.

"Ron, it will take a great deal of practice, and a lot of people can't manage to deflect it even then. Most of those who can deflect it do so with only limited success - they still feel the effects, but not their full power. So don't feel bad about it. You'll improve, I'm sure. Lavender, you next."

Lavender fared no better than Ron, and went back to her seat.

"Hermione, you come up and try."

Hermione had a very determined look on her face as she walked to the front of the class.

"Are you ready? *RICTUSEMPRA*," said Remus as he aimed his wand at her arm.

Hermione concentrated hard on putting up shields to the nerve endings in her arm. After feeling extreme itching for a moment, the tickling seemed to decrease in intensity. She was able to keep it up for about 5 seconds before collapsing in fits of laughter, rubbing her arm.

After removing the charm, Remus beamed at her, "That's absolutely brilliant, Hermione. You managed to block it for about 5 seconds. For a first try, that is really amazing. Harry, you come up next."

Harry concentrated hard as Remus aimed the wand at his arm. He felt only a slight irritation as the charm hit him. He kept up his concentration for a full minute, feeling hardly anything, before Remus lowered his wand, looking completely gob-smacked.

"Harry, I have never known anyone to completely resist that charm as you did. And at the first attempt too? That .. that's completely unheard of! Let's try it again."

Remus again flung the charm at Harry, this time with all the power he could muster. Again Harry was able to block the charm, feeling just a slight itching in his arm.

"Now, Harry. If you agree, I'll try the Cruciatus curse to make sure you can deflect it. Do you want to try?"

"Professor!" shouted Hermione, looking worried, "That's illegal. You can't!"

"It's quite all right, Hermione, I've got special dispensation to use certain unforgivables for the purpose of instruction. No laws will be broken. And Harry, if it doesn't work, I'll lift the curse immediately. What do you say?"

Harry looked nervously at Remus, but nodded. He had felt the curse at the hands of Voldemort, and didn't want to feel the agony again. But it was important that he try.

"Ready?" and Remus lifted his wand and pointed it at Harry's arm, "*CRUCIO*," he yelled.

Harry concentrated harder than ever, putting up shields on the nerve endings in his arm. As the curse hit him, he felt only the slightest pain, before it dissipated. Remus kept the curse on Harry for a full minute, but Harry stood unflinching.

"Amazing! Sit back down, Harry," said Remus after he had lifted the curse.

Remus looked distracted for the rest of the class, not believing what he had seen. Dumbledore had said that Harry's powers were increasing day by day, but this was astounding. He'd have to report to the headmaster as soon as possible.

Harry and the team were practicing down at the Quidditch field. It was the day before the big game and they were putting the finishing touches to their tactics. Madam Hooch was pleased to see that they were all looking very fit, and that the session was progressing very well indeed.

She called the team to her as she saw a group of people walking towards them from the direction of the school. The group was being led by Professor Dumbledore, and comprised six large teenagers, one smaller one and an older looking wizard.

"Ah, Madam Hooch," said Dumbledore as they approached, "This is Professor Bill Bangle. He's the Quidditch instructor at Salem, and these fine young people are the Salem Quidditch team."

Madam Hooch shook hands with her counterpart, and she introduced the Hogwarts team. Professor Bangle then introduced his team.

The two teams looked at each other appraisingly. The Americans looked very fit and very big.

"I've taken the liberty," said Dumbledore, "of offering the Quidditch pitch to our guests for a practice session. Is that all right with you, Madam Hooch?"

"Yes, perfectly," she said, "We've just finished our final session."

"Right. The facilities are all yours, Professor Bangle," said Dumbledore, "When you've finished, come up to my office and I'll show you to your rooms. We can then all go to dinner together. I've set up a separate table in the Great Hall for both teams to share."

The Salem team attracted a lot of attention from the Hogwarts students at the evening meal. The special table was arranged so that the Americans were seated along one side of it, with the Brits facing them. Harry found himself opposite their Seeker, Kristen Davis, a very pretty girl about his own age. He found himself comparing her with Lara and Hermione. Like Lara, she was a blue-eyed blond, and like Hermione, she had warm and kind eyes.

Things were inevitably a bit tense between the two teams initially, but with Fred and George at the table, they didn't remain so for long. Fred told everyone about the prank they'd pulled on the Slytherins and soon they were all laughing merrily - except, that is, for David Bletchley who had the good grace to keep a somewhat forced smile on his face.

This pleased Dumbledore, who was sitting between Madam Hooch and Professor Bangle at the top table. "It's nice to see them all getting on well together," he said to Bangle.

"Yeh, it sure is," he replied, "I was a bit worried that there would be too much rivalry, and the thing would fall flat."

"Professor Dumbledore," he continued, "my headmaster asked me to have a word with you about the student exchange programme. We've got 5 students coming to Hogwarts in two weeks time. But one of them is in the Quidditch team - and since she's here already, we thought it'd be a good idea to let her start now. What do you think?"

"That's fine by me," Dumbledore replied, "Is the student happy to stay if her friends won't be coming for another two weeks?"

"Oh yes, she's happy to start now. She's a very friendly girl and she's looking forward to meeting new people and making new friends."

"Then that's settled. Have you got her school file? I'll need to look at it and arrange for her to be sorted into a house." Bangle pulled a file from his robes and handed it to Dumbledore, and then went over to the girl to tell her that she'd be staying.

Dumbledore opened the file and glanced down the at details, until he came to an entry that made him stare, unblinking, at it.

Kristen Davies - Date of Birth : 31st October 1980.

It stood out like a beacon. He quickly went over to McGonagall, Lupin and Snape "Meeting in my office straight after dinner - urgent news," he then asked Remus to contact Sirius so that he could be there.

"So you're the famous Harry Potter," said Kristen, looking over at Harry.

"Yes," sighed Harry.

"Well now that's out of the way ... I've just been told I'll be staying here after the game - you know - the student exchange program."

"That's great, Kristen. I wonder what house you'll be sorted into?"

"How do they do that here?" she replied, "At Salem, they've got a magical broomstick you have to sit on, and it flies you over to the house table it thinks is best suited."

Harry told her about the sorting hat and what the houses were at Hogwarts. "I hope you're not placed in Slytherin," he said, "but I can't see that happening. Your eyes are too warm and kind," he coloured up a bit as he said that, as did Kristen.

"I hope I'm in Gryffindor," she said, "From what you say, it sounds like the house I'm in at Salem. By the way, who's the captain of your team?"

"Eh, that's me," said Harry, "Who's yours?"

"Tom Broadbent," she replied nodding at a tall, slim boy sitting further down the table, "he's one of our Chasers."

After the meal ended, Dumbledore rushed up to his office with the other professors he'd spoken to earlier. Sirius was already there waiting for them. "What's wrong, Headmaster?" he said, "Remus told me that you had something urgent to discuss."

Dumbledore showed them Kristen's file, "Look at the date of birth - right on the button for the Anima Summa. And didn't you all notice how well the two of them were getting on tonight?"

"What's she like, Remus?" asked Sirius.

"She's a blue-eyed blond with a body to kill for," he said, grinning.

"Remus. Please!" gasped McGonagall. Remus and Sirius just grinned - they loved baiting Minerva.

"We'll have the sorting at the evening meal tomorrow after the match," said the headmaster, "but first I'll have a word with the sorting hat - and I'll suggest that Gryffindor would be a suitable house for her to be sorted into. Of course, it doesn't always listen to me, but I think I can get it to see the sense of it."

"It would certainly be a help, Albus," said McGonagall, "The closer Harry is to her, the more likely that *things* could happen. I will, of course keep a close watch for any signs."

"Thank you, Minerva. And all of you - keep a close watch on the girl. We want to make sure that nothing happens to her."

The following morning arrived, and Harry had a knot in his stomach. He was nervous about the game, and felt the responsibility of being captain weighing on him. Ron, Hermione and Ginny tried their best to help him by trying to keep him distracted with their light-hearted chatter, but Harry couldn't help but feel nervous.

After breakfast they all headed down to the Quidditch field. The others wished him good luck as he headed to the changing rooms, and they then went to try to get good seats in the stand. Harry waited for his team to arrive, thinking about what he was going to say to them. He looked up to see the six enter the room.

"Harry, I hope you haven't got a fancy speech prepared," said Fred, "We had enough of those with Oliver."

"Yes, and don't tell us how big they are - we can see that for ourselves," said George.

Harry grinned, "I can always rely on you two to lift the gloom. Anyway, I won't say anything - except concentrate on what we've talked about and practiced. We can't do anything more than that. And we're as fit as them - don't forget it."

They changed into their playing robes and Harry led them out onto the field to the loud cheers of the students. All the school was there to watch - even Professor Dumbledore. There were also a few others that Harry spotted - he saw Cornelius Fudge, the minister of magic, sitting next to the headmaster, and he also saw Percy Weasley. One person he saw made him scowl - Rita Skeeter. She worked for the Daily Prophet newspaper and was there, obviously, to report on the game. 'No pressure then!' thought Harry wryly.

They all shook hands with the Salem team and the referee, who was a wizard who normally officiated at Quidditch First Division games, tossed a sickle to decide ends. "Dragons," shouted Harry. However, the coin came down 'Centaur's' and Tom Broadbent chose to play towards the Forbidden Forest end, with Hogwarts playing towards the school.

The spectators roared as the referee blew his whistle, and fourteen players rose quickly into the air. The referee then released all four balls, and play began.

It was clear, very quickly, that the Salem team were good. They moved about like they knew exactly what they were doing, and looked like a team who were used to winning. Harry rose above the players, as he usually did, keeping his eyes peeled for the Golden Snitch to show itself. There was something different, however. Normally, the opposing Seeker would sit on

Harry's tail and follow him everywhere. But Kristen Davis was clearly confident in her own abilities to spot the Snitch. She slowly circled the field, ignoring where Harry went.

A gasp went up from the crowd as the Quaffle was thrown with tremendous pace at the Hogwarts goal. David Bletchley didn't even see the ball as it zoomed through the right-hand hoop. "TEN - NIL SALEM," shouted Lee Jordan, who was commentating on the match.

"Don't worry, David," said Harry as he flew past the Keeper, "that was a fluke. You'll be ok."

The next fifteen minutes, however, showed that it was no fluke. The score was 40 - 0 to Salem and the Hogwarts Chasers had hardly touched the Quaffle. Harry flew up to Fred and George, "Come on, you two. Get those Bludgers at their Chasers. They're murdering us."

"We would, if we could get at the Bludgers," shouted George, "Their Beaters seem to be everywhere."

"Sit on our Chasers' tails," said Harry, "The Bludgers will soon come in your direction."

This proved to be right, and as a Bludger hurtled towards Ernie, George managed to get in front of him and smash the ball in the direction of the Salem Chaser in possession of the Quaffle. The Chaser was clearly not used to this sort of treatment as he ducked his head to make sure it stayed on his shoulders. In doing so, he dropped the Quaffle and it was gratefully collected by Ernie, who passed it forward to Katie.

Harry saw that the Hogwarts Chasers were now in the ideal position, "Cross Over," he yelled at them.

Ernie immediately started to streak towards Katie, who dashed off to the right, taking one of the Salem Chasers with her. She had left the Quaffle behind her, however, and Ernie grasped it as he sped past and to the left. The Chaser marking Terry Boot flew over to cover Ernie, and Ernie passed to Terry, who saw Katie streaking past his right-hand side, with a Salem Chaser desperately trying to catch her. He passed the Quaffle to Katie and she sped towards goal, unopposed.

The crowd cheered wildly when she sent the Keeper to the right with a feint, and threw the Quaffle through the left-hand hoop. "Goal," shouted Lee Jordan. "Well done, Katie. 40 -10 to Salem"

The move had worked perfectly, and it gave them the confidence they needed. In the lull after the goal, Fred and George had a quick tactical chat and decided on a ploy to keep the Bludgers away from the Chasers. The Salem Beaters were just too powerful and were disrupting most of the Hogwarts moves.

The next time Fred intercepted a Bludger, he sent it screaming off in the direction of David Petrucci, the big Salem Beater. He ducked frantically to avoid it and glared at Fred. Fred just laughed at him and shouted, "What's the matter, Petrucci? Don't like a taste of your own medicine?"

Petrucci and his fellow Beater were never ones to resist a challenge, and the next half hour saw the Bludgers rocketing back and fore between the four Beaters. Harry saw what was going on and grinned at the way Fred and George were giving the Chasers the space they

needed - and it was paying off. Unrestricted by the Bludgers, the Hogwarts Chasers started to show their superior speed, and after 2 hours play the score stood at 170 - 150 to Salem, with Hogwarts catching up fast. They had worked the cross over move seven times by then, and Salem seemed to have no answer to it.

The Americans were not champions for nothing, though, and Tom Broadbent rushed up to his Beaters and told them not to be suckered into a contest of wills with the opposing Beaters. Unfortunately for Hogwarts, they took his advice and once more started to concentrate on the Chasers.

The game continued at a fast pace and the Americans, with their Beaters back to normal again, started to pull away once more. Even though Bletchley made some great saves, after three hours the score was Salem 340 Hogwarts 220.

The pace of the game was fast and furious, and Harry was pleased to see that his team mates were not flagging. The training was certainly paying off. He was still circling above the field slowly, looking everywhere for the Snitch. It hadn't shown itself once, yet. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the Salem Seeker go into a sudden dive toward the centre of the field.

'She's seen the Snitch,' he thought, and started to dive himself. Before he had gone 10 yards, he pulled up. He couldn't see the Snitch. 'Wronski Feint,' he thought.

Kristen laughed as she stopped her dive and flew up past Harry, "I see you're not fooled that easily, Harry," she shouted.

"Nice try, Kristen," he replied.

After 4 hours, the score was 420 - 290 to Salem. Both teams had slowed up by now - it was impossible to keep up with the earlier pace of the game. And as the game slowed, the superior height and reach of the Salem team began to show. After another 10 minutes it was 460 - 320 to Salem.

Harry started to get worried. If the game went on much longer it would be beyond their reach. He couldn't blame the team - they had given everything and had played well. It was up to him, he had to find the Snitch. He increased his speed as he flew above the play, looking everywhere for the glint of gold that would reveal the position of the Snitch.

He was behind his own goal posts when he spotted it. It was very close to the ground in the centre of the pitch. Kristen was behind her own goal posts and by her actions, Harry knew that she had spotted it as well. They both put on furious bursts of speed and streaked downwards towards the Snitch.

By the time they neared the middle of the pitch, they were both moving so fast that they were just blurs to the crowd. "They've seen the Snitch," shouted Lee, and the level of noise increased as the crowd's excitement grew.

'I've got to get there first,' Harry thought as he approached the Snitch, with his right arm held out, ready to grab it. Kristen obviously had the same idea. She was also screaming towards the Snitch with her right arm outstretched.

They both arrived at the Snitch at the same time, and their hands grabbed the fluttering little ball simultaneously. Now, obviously, they were moving in opposite directions, and when their forward momentum was suddenly stopped with the Snitch as their centre of gravity, something had to happen.

Ron later told Harry that what happened next would go down in the annals of great sporting moments at Hogwarts, and what was even better, Colin Creevy was on hand with his camera to capture it all. The forward momentum of the Seekers was immediately transformed into angular momentum, and they cartwheeled around the Snitch, both of them determined to hold onto it. They were a blur as they spun round and round.

Something had to give eventually. The crowd by this time were in a frenzy, and the other twelve players had stopped and were just staring, holding their breaths. Lee Jordan was going mad, not knowing who had the upper hand in the duel of the Snitch.

Suddenly, both Seekers went hurtling away from each other and skidded along the ground, both falling from their brooms. They both then stood up and looked at each other. The crowd had suddenly gone quiet - even Lee Jordan was quiet.

Then slowly, Harry held up his arm to reveal the golden Snitch fluttering in his hand. He had a broad grin on his face.

"Hogwarts wins - 470 to 460," shouted Lee excitedly. The crowd erupted.

The six Hogwarts players zoomed down to Harry and surrounded him, ruffling his hair and patting his back, and Katie kissed him. "Don't you dare kiss me, Bletchley," growled Harry, still with a grin on his face.

The students were now milling around and cheering, congratulating their team. Ron ran up to Harry and pulled him into a bear hug, and Hermione and Ginny were close behind, each kissing him on the cheek excitedly.

When the excitement died down a bit, Harry walked over to the dejected Salem captain and held out his hand, "That was the closest game I've ever played in," he said.

Tom Broadbent grinned ruefully, "That it was, Harry - and well done."

Harry then went over to Kristen, who was still staring at the ground in disbelief. It was the first time she had not claimed the Snitch in all the matches she had played. Harry grinned at her and said, "I don't think I want to come up against you again. You're good, Kristen, the best Seeker I've ever played against."

"Thanks, Harry. I can't believe I didn't get to the Snitch first."

"Well neither do I. We got there together - remember? It was just luck that I managed to keep hold of the Snitch."

Kristen's brow creased in a frown, "Oh I don't think so, Harry. I guess your arms are more powerful than mine. That's what it came down to in the end. You're a boy and I'm a girl!"

Harry just nodded, thankful for all the arm exercises he had done over the summer and during training. Harry was grabbed by his excited school mates just then and was lifted onto their shoulders and paraded around the field with the rest of the team. Harry looked over at the 'celebrity stand' and saw the beaming professors applauding, and was surprised to see Madam Hooch and Professor McGonagall hugging each other, with tears in their eyes.

It was a moment to savour for Harry and the team. But Harry couldn't help but reflect, as he looked towards the watching Salem players, on how close it had been. It could easily have been him and his team who were looking on wistfully as the opposition celebrated.

Lee Jordan's voice rang out over the stands and the field, "Professor Dumbledore has asked me to announce that dinner will be served in thirty minutes. Will everybody please make their way up to the Great Hall. Thank you."

The two teams went over to the changing rooms to shower while the rest of the school walked slowly back to the school building.

The fourteen players walked up to the school together, about thirty minutes later, and the mood was that of friendly rivalry. Fred and George had struck up a good rapport with the other two Beaters, and as they walked along, they exchanged views on the noble art of Bludger-smashing.

They walked into the Great Hall to tumultuous applause, and just stood in the middle of the hall where their table had been the previous evening.

Professor Dumbledore then stood up, "Would the Hogwarts players please sit at their usual tables. The Salem students will tonight sit in among their many friends at each of the four house tables." He then directed the two Beaters to the Slytherin table, two of the Chasers to Hufflepuff, Kristen and the Keeper to Ravenclaw, and Tom Broadbent to Gryffindor. Tom took a seat between Harry and Katie Bell as the headmaster remained standing.

"Before we eat, let me and my fellow professors pay a tribute to the two teams. Without doubt, this was the best match ever seen at Hogwarts, and all who took part are to be congratulated. Will all the players stand up please," Dumbledore led the applause that filled the room as all fourteen players stood, a bit self-consciously, grinning at everyone.

"Now Professor Bangle is understandably disappointed at the result of the game, and feels that another game should be arranged. I have agreed to this, and a return match will be held, this time at Salem, next year. I know that we all look forward to that."

After the applause had died down, Dumbledore continued, "And now for another announcement. The Salem Seeker, Kristen Davis, will be staying at Hogwarts until the end of the school year under the student exchange program. Since she is here already, it has been agreed that she will start straight away. So that means that she will have to be sorted into a house - and we will do that now. Kristen, will you come up to the top table please."

As Kristen walked up from the Ravenclaw table, Professor McGonagall brought out the stool and placed it in front of the teachers' table. She then placed the sorting hat on top of it. She whispered to Kristen, who sat on the stool and placed the hat over her head.

`Hmmm,' said the hat, "It has been suggested that Gryffindor would be the best house for you, but I'm not so sure. I see that you are very intelligent, and that makes you a prime candidate for Ravenclaw. Hmmm."

`Oh please,' thought Kristen, `I'd like to be in Gryffindor. My house in Salem is similar to that.'

`Now let's see Yes, I can see those qualities in you - brave and true. It's very difficult ... but I think that you should be in .."

"GRYFFINDOR," shouted the hat.

The Gryffindor students jumped up and cheered as she walked over to their table - not least because she wouldn't be opposing them in the Quidditch tournament later this year. For the same reason, the students in the other houses groaned - except for Draco Malfoy who was pleased that he'd still be the Slytherin Seeker. Kristen sat opposite Harry and between Parvati and Lavender.

Harry introduced Kristen to his friends at the table, and Parvati and Lavender especially gave her a friendly welcome, and told her that she'd be in their dorm along with Hermione. The rest of the evening was spent mainly talking about Quidditch.

Early the next morning, Lavender and Parvati shook Kristen awake, "You've got to see this, Kristen. Come on," whispered Lavender, not wanting to wake Hermione.

They pulled her, grumbling, out onto the landing at the top of the spiral staircase and pointed down into the common room. Harry was there doing his usual morning exercises. Kristen looked admiringly at Harry, before turning and going back to her bed.

"Hey," said Parvati who had followed her, "didn't you like the show?"

"Yeh, he's ok, Parvati. But I think he deserves a bit of privacy."

"I quite agree," said Hermione who had been woken by the chatter, "If Harry knew you were ogling him every morning, he'd be mortified. Come on, Parvati, give him a break." Parvati returned sulkily to her bed, as did Lavender.

At breakfast, Kristen was sitting with her new friends, when Fred and George came and stood behind her, one on each side.

"Right, Kristen," said Fred, "Just a few pointers on being a Gryffindor. See those slimy gits over there?" and he pointed to the Slytherin table, "They're the Slytherins, and you won't find a more objectionable bunch on the planet."

"That's right, Kristen," said George, "Nobody likes them, not even the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs. If they get the slightest chance to drop you in it with the teachers, they will."

"And if they give you any grief, just call us," said Fred as they both went back to their seats.

Kristen looked at Harry and raised her eyebrows questioningly, "That's Fred and George's standard introduction for new Gryffindors," he said laughing.

That first day, Kristen found it strange getting into the way things were done at Hogwarts but by evening, she was pleased that she hadn't done anything that could have embarrassed her and was happy that she seemed to be fitting in. She was helped by her fellow 5th years, especially Parvati and Lavender, and the three seemed to have struck up a budding friendship. Feeling tired, she went to bed early that night, leaving most of her friends in the common room.

A few hours later, only Harry and Hermione were left in the common room, all the others having gone up to their dorms. They were sitting next to each other at the end table by the window. They were putting the finishing touches to their essays on the causes of the third Goblin uprising, which had to be handed in to Professor Binns the following day. Hermione sighed as she finished writing and took out her ruler to measure the length of the parchment - it turned out to be five feet, even though the requirement was only two feet.

She leaned over and looked at Harry's parchment, to see if he had nearly finished. At the same moment, Harry turned his head and looked up. Hermione found herself staring into Harry's eyes, their faces only inches apart. As she stared into the depths of his emerald greens, she felt the biggest jolt yet, deep within her. What she did next she just couldn't explain. It was as if something had taken her over, and she felt helpless to resist. She leaned closer and gently and sensuously brushed her lips against Harry's, their eyes still locked together. Harry's eyes were wide as she drew back slightly, and then taking in a deep breath, she kissed him again, this time more passionately.

Feeling the passion in that kiss, Harry responded and he brought his hand up behind her head and pulled her closer.

When they broke apart, they were both quite breathless, their mouths open and their eyes wide, both trying to make sense of what had just happened. They jumped as they heard a noise at the top of the stairs and looked to see Ron gazing at them, with a hurt look in his eyes.

"Ron, I ... I ..." stuttered Harry, a feeling of guilt suddenly coming over him. He knew that Ron liked Hermione, and he felt that he had just stabbed him in the back. Ron didn't wait to hear any more and he turned and went quickly back into the dorm.

"Oh no. What have I done?" whispered Harry. He looked at Hermione who was now gazing with a distraught expression at the spot that Ron had just vacated. Harry briefly glanced at her and then ran up the stairs to the dorm. When he got there, the curtains were pulled around Ron's bed.

"Ron!" groaned Harry, "let me speak to you .. please." He was met by silence from the other side of the curtain.

"Damn!" he whispered to himself and went back out onto the landing. When he looked down at the common room, Hermione was nowhere to be seen, "Damn, damn, damn!" he again said to himself as he slowly climbed into his bed and pulled the curtains around him. He knew he was in for a sleepless night. He had a lot to think about.

'I've lost them both,' he thought, 'what was I thinking of? My two best friends - I've screwed up big time! But it was Hermione who kissed me first. Why did she do that? She's never said that she liked me that way before - so why? And why the hell did I kiss her back? She's my best friend for God's sake! If I lose her friendship, I don't know what I'll do. And Ron ... oh what can I do?'

These thoughts bounced around Harry's head all night before he at last fell into a disturbed sleep. He woke late the following morning, to find that everyone had left the dorm. He was glad that the 5th year Gryffindors had a two hours free period this morning. He was filled with trepidation as he made his way down to the common room, but only a few first years were there, getting ready to go down to breakfast. He sat down in his favourite chair to think, and looked up as he heard someone coming down the stairs - it was Hermione. By the look of her she, also, hadn't had much sleep. She looked at Harry as she reached the bottom of the stairs, and he stood up to go to speak to her. However, she looked guiltily at Harry before quickly going out through the portrait hole without saying a word. Harry groaned inwardly - his worst fears were being realised.

When he walked into the Great Hall, only a few Gryffindors were there eating breakfast - Hermione wasn't there. When Ron saw him coming in, he got up and walked right past him without saying anything. Again Harry groaned and sat down beside Kristen.

Kristen had noticed that Ron had ignored Harry, and saw the stricken look on Harry's face as he sat down, "What's wrong with you two, Harry? Have you had a fight or something?" she asked, a look of concern on her pretty face.

At that moment, Harry was very grateful for someone to talk to, and he told her what had happened the previous night, "What am I going to do, Kristen?" he pleaded.

She thought for a moment, then said, "How do you feel about Hermione, Harry?"

"Well, we've been best friends for 5 years. I've always seen her as just that. I mean .. I've always been very protective of her and I'd go through hell and back for her - but I'd do the same for Ron too."

"Are you sure you only see her as a best friend? You did return her kiss, Harry"

"Oh .. I don't know Kristen. It .. it just seemed the right thing to do at the time."

"Well, I'm sure you've noticed that Hermione is a very beautiful girl, and any red-blooded wizard would have done the same I'm sure. How do you think she feels about you?"

"I .. I just don't know, Kristen. Until last night I always thought she saw me as .. well as a sort of brother. But now, I just don't know!"

"It seems to me that the first thing you've got to do is to find Hermi and talk to her. You've got to sort out what you're feeling for each other. Then you've both got to patch it up with Ron somehow."

"I suppose you're right. But I'm so scared of losing her .. both of them .. as my best friends."

"Harry - you've got to do this, and do it now. You can't let it fester, or you *will* end up losing them both. Now go!"

Harry got up from his chair leaving his breakfast untouched, and walked out of the Great Hall, thinking where Hermione could be. 'The Library!' he thought. She always went there when she had to think about anything. He quickly made his way up the stairs and through the corridors, trying to sort out in his mind what he was going to say to her.

Hermione, at that moment, was indeed in the library. She was sitting in a quiet corner, away from the few other students who were there. Her eyes were slightly red from all the crying she'd done the previous night, and she wasn't far from a few more tears now. 'How could I have been so stupid!' she thought to herself, 'what made me do that? I don't know what Harry must think of me. I hope to goodness that I haven't lost him as my best friend.'

As these thoughts went through her mind, she couldn't help but think how she felt when Harry had kissed her back. She had felt strangely elated.

'And yet,' she thought, 'he'd run off after Ron - he hadn't stayed with her. He must be feeling guilty about what happened. No, I have to put things right, somehow. Back the way they were before.'

She heard a noise behind her and turned to see Harry standing there, looking very nervous. She drew in a deep breath, "Harry. Sit down - we need to talk. Look, I'm sorry for what I did last night. It was stupid, and now you, Ron and I are all suffering. It's all my fault. All I can say, Harry, is that any witch in the school who found herself sitting so close to you would have kissed you then. You can be irresistible, you know. After all, you're the sexiest boy in Hogwarts. Will you forgive me?"

As Harry listened to what she had said, he had an odd sinking feeling - which he quickly dismissed. He now knew how she felt about him - she obviously didn't like him *that* way - it sounded as if it was just an attack of hormones.

"Of course I forgive you, Hermi. And it was just as much my fault. You can be pretty irresistible as well, you know. I had a terrible night thinking that I'd lost you as my best friend - thank god I haven't."

Hermione also had the same odd sinking feeling that Harry'd just had as she listened to him. But at least he was still her best friend! "Thank you, Harry - I don't know what I'd have done if I'd lost you as a friend," she reached over and squeezed his hand - and felt another odd jolt - which she quickly put out of her mind.

"What are we going to do about Ron, Hermi? He .. well don't say I told you, but he likes you, you know - *that* way, and he must be feeling that we've both put the boot into him."

Hermione's eyes went wide, "Ron *likes* me? I knew that he was a bit jealous of Viktor and me - but I always thought it was because he didn't like Viktor - not so much that he liked me. Or lord, this gets worse."

"Do .. don't you like Ron that way, then Hermi?"

"Well no - he's my other best friend. I could never think about Ron that way." Again Harry had that sinking feeling - Hermione could never feel that way about her best friends - and that included him. The thought was again quickly dismissed.

"We've got to speak to him - together. Tell him that nothing's going on between us. And the sooner we do it the better." They walked out of the library together, and went to find Ron. They went to the common room but he wasn't there. Harry looked out of the window, and saw Ron standing by the edge of the lake, skipping stones over the surface of the calm water, "He's there - down by the lake. Come on, Hermi, let's go."

"Ron!" they both shouted as they ran over to the lake. Ron turned and looked at them and then turned back to skip another stone over the water.

"Look, Ron - there's nothing going on between me and Harry"

"Come off it, Hermi. I know what I saw last night - and that wasn't just a friendly peck on the cheek between friends."

"I know what it must have looked like, Ron," said Harry, "But Hermi's right. There isn't anything going on between us. What you saw .. well it just sort of happened. It was a stupid thing and it didn't mean anything. We've sorted it out between ourselves, and we're still best friends - and we don't want to lose you as a best friend either."

Ron looked at them both, and saw the pleading look in their eyes, "Are you sure? I mean, are you sure nothing's going on between you?"

"Nothing Ron. Come on, you've got to believe us," said Hermione.

Ron smiled, "Well don't let me catch you doing that again. I might have to throw up all over you both."

Harry and Hermione grinned with relief as they each put an arm around his shoulder, and pulled him back towards the school for their first class of the day - History of Magic.

That night, Harry left the common room and went to the special room that Professor McGonagall had let him have to practice his Animagus transformation. After giving the password, he walked into the room, which was fairly small and completely empty, except for a mirror standing against the wall. He walked over and stood before it, looking at his reflection.

"Oh my," said the mirror, "aren't you something then. You can look into me any time you like."

Harry groaned, 'Trust me to end up with a female mirror,' he thought.

"Will you please keep quiet - I have to practice my Animagus transformation."

Harry concentrated and visualised himself as a golden eagle. He then saw himself as his human form changing into the eagle and thought, '*CONVERTO AQUILA AUREUS*'.

He watched, fascinated, as he saw his head and shoulders change to those of a golden eagle, but the rest of him was still Harry Potter. "Oh dear," said the mirror, "You really do need the practice don't you."

Harry spent the next hour trying to transform, but by the end of that time he had only managed to change his right arm into a wing, apart from his head and shoulders, that is. He was feeling quite weary by that time - the transformation process was very tiring if repeated so often. So he went back to Gryffindor tower and went straight to bed.

The middle of October saw the onset of autumn in Scotland, and the evenings began to take on a chilly feel to them. It was a beautiful time of year at Hogwarts, with the leaves changing to russet, gold and red before dropping to leave a kaleidoscopic carpet over the fields that surrounded the school.

Sirius was sitting in the shrieking shack, looking out of the window at the fields. It never failed to amaze him - the beauty of this place in autumn. He was waiting for Ceri to arrive. He had received her message that she would be returning tonight, and he hoped she would be in time so that they could both spy on another meeting of Voldemort's inner circle. Snape had told him that it would take place at 10.00 pm in the same location as the last meeting.

It had just started to get dark when the side door opened and Ceri walked in, "Hi Ceri. It's been a long time. How did it go?"

"Hello Sirius," she said cheerfully, "Well after a long, hard slog, I finally managed to convince them to take my report seriously. Then they insisted that I be involved in setting up special infiltration teams before they let me come back over here."

"We've got another spying mission tonight. And we haven't got much time to get there. Do you feel up to it, or do you want to go to the hotel for some rest?"

"Lead on, kind sir," said Ceri, and they went off towards the Forbidden Forest.

The she-wolf and the big black dog had settled down under a large bush as the first of Voldemort's inner circle arrived. Then came the man himself, with Wormtail in tow. This time Sirius did not react - he had learned his lesson.

"Lucius," hissed Voldemort, "What's the delay? Why is it taking so long to recruit these past few weeks?"

"My Lord," replied Lucius Malfoy, "We've found spies at some of our recruiting meetings. We've dealt with them, but we've had to be more careful with our security. This has slowed us down, but it hasn't stopped us. It'll just take a while longer to swell your army to the required size."

"Hmmm, I've had the same reports from my servants in America. It seems that the Light Side have noticed our activities. You're right to increase security - nothing must stand in the way of my destiny. I've told my foreign friends to be on their guard as well. At this rate, it won't be until next spring before we are ready - but we must be patient. I don't want anything to go

wrong now. Keep me informed of your progress. Has there been anything more from our friend at Hogwarts? What has Potter been up to lately?"

"No nothing, my Lord. Things are very quiet there."

Voldemort and Wormtail then Apparated away, quickly followed by the inner circle. Sirius and Ceri stayed in their animal forms as they made their way to Hogwarts to report to Dumbledore.

"Sirius - welcome," said Dumbledore as the black dog entered his office, followed by a pretty young woman, "And you must be Ceri Jones. I'm pleased to meet you at last."

Sirius transformed as the professor shook Ceri's hand, "I'm glad - no - privileged to meet you Professor Dumbledore," she said as she looked into two twinkling blue eyes.

"The privilege is all mine, my dear. Sirius has told me all about you. Did you manage to convince your people of the seriousness of the situation?"

"Yes, Professor, after a while. We've set up a number of teams to infiltrate the Death Eater meetings to try to slow them down."

"And it seems to be working," said Sirius as he told Dumbledore about the meeting they'd just spied on.

"Well that's something, anyway. It should buy us the time we need to set up our defences for the coming attacks. Ceri, the rest of my team will be here shortly, and I'll introduce you to them. I've laid on supper for you both, and you can help yourselves later. Sirius tells me that you normally stay at the Three Broomsticks. You are welcome to stay here in one of our guest rooms if you wish?"

"That's fine, Professor. I'd love that. But how are you going to explain my appearance to your other teachers and students? As Sirius has told you, there's a spy hanging around watching Harry Potter."

"I'll tell them you're a visiting observer from one of the premier Witchcraft and Wizardry schools in America - here to see how we do things at Hogwarts. And yes, I know about the spying on Harry - he and his friends are being watched by us too - not that he really needs it. He's quite capable of looking after himself these days. Did you know that he can now block the Cruciatus curse with ease?"

Ceri gasped, "How can he do that? I didn't think anyone could block that curse."

"I told you he was special, Ceri," said Sirius. Remus had told him all about the DADA class.

Dumbledore nodded, "He's growing stronger all the time - both physically and magically. Ah, here they are," Dumbledore waved in McGonagall, Snape and Lupin and introduced them to Ceri. Then she and Sirius again gave their report for the benefit of the newcomers.

After the meeting was over, Sirius and Ceri went into Dumbledore's anteroom to eat supper. The headmaster then showed her to the guest room.

The Halloween ball was fast approaching, and the excitement of all the girls was rising. They constantly talked about who had asked who to go to the ball, and in particular, if anyone had been asked by Harry.

About a week before the ball, Harry was sitting alone at the breakfast table when a pretty 6th year Ravenclaw - not Cho - came up to him, nervously wringing her hands.

"Harry, I was wondering, are you going to the ball with anyone?"

"Eh .. no, Sarah. I don't know if I'll be going, yet."

"Well if you do decide to go, would you .. come with me?"

Harry looked at Sarah, feeling sorry for her obvious agitation, and marvelling at her courage in asking him. He searched for the right words to let her down gently. "Thanks Sarah, I .. I'll bear it in mind. But I really don't know if I'll go."

Sarah walked dejectedly back to her table, where she was pounced on by all her friends, excitedly wanting to know what Harry had said. This was only the first of several offers by girls from all four houses, and it got to the stage where Harry was almost afraid to go outside his dorm. The trouble was that he found it very difficult to say 'No', especially to a pretty girl.

He thought about what he could do and came up with the obvious answer. If he asked someone to go to the ball and it became common knowledge, then they would stop asking him. But who could he ask? Just as he was thinking about it, Ginny walked into the common room. 'Ginny - of course!' he thought. 'Who better than one of my best friends - she's long over the crush she used to have on me, so we'll just be going as friends - just as long as she hasn't already been asked, or there's no one she expects to ask her. I don't want to cramp her style, after all.'

He called Ginny over to him.

"Hi, Harry. What's up?"

"Has anyone asked you to go to the ball yet, Ginny?"

She looked at him with narrowed eyes, "No, why?"

"Is there someone you think might ask you?"

"Noooo," she said wondering what was coming next.

"Ginny, what do you say we go to the ball together?"

Ginny couldn't believe her ears. Harry Potter had just asked her to the ball! "Yes, ok Harry. I'd love to go to the ball with you. Eh .. can you excuse me now? I have to do something," and she ran up to her dorm looking for her friends.

'That went ok,' thought Harry, 'Ginny's a nice girl and she obviously doesn't mind that we're going just as friends.'

How wrong Harry was.

The next day just before their DADA class, Harry whispered to Ron, "I'm taking Ginny to the ball."

"WHAT!" shouted Ron, attracting the attention of the other students in the class.

"Ron!" whispered Harry, "I'm only taking her as a friend. I had to ask someone to keep all those girls off my back. Ok?"

"Well, ok Harry. As long as that's the only reason!"

"It is, Ron. It is"

Later that evening, Harry went to his secret training room to practice his Animagus transformation. He had been steadily improving over the last few days and had great hopes that he'd succeed during this session.

His first attempt had the mirror in fits of laughter. She said she had never in her life seen anything so funny. Harry was grateful for McGonagall's advice that he not tell his friends before he had perfected the technique - he had to admit that the sight of a magnificent golden eagle, perfect in every respect except for a pair of human feet, was hilarious in the extreme.

Unabashed, however, Harry persevered and after half an hour managed to complete the full transformation. He was elated, and repeated the change four times to make sure that it wasn't a fluke. He'd done it.

He went to Professor McGonagall's office and told her the good news, and demonstrated the transformation. The professor nodded her approval, and told Harry she would inform the headmaster that the task was now completed.

Harry walked happily into the common room, and saw a very downcast Ron sitting in front of the fire. He looked as if he had the troubles of the world on his shoulders.

"What's up Ron?" asked Harry, "Why are you looking so miserable?"

Ron raised his chin from his hand, "I've done it again, Harry. I'm a stupid git."

"What - what have you done, Ron?"

"I just asked Hermi to go to the ball with me, but she said that Neville's already asked her."

"Oh," said Harry. He wondered if Neville had asked Hermi, or if Hermi had asked Neville - just to have an excuse not to go with Ron. He wished that he hadn't told her about Ron's feelings. 'You're not the only git, Ron,' he thought.

Afterwards, he cornered Hermione, who seemed a bit distant, and asked her about Neville. "No, Harry. He asked me three days ago. And what's this I hear about you and Ginny? The whole school is buzzing about it - but I don't suppose you've noticed as usual!"

Harry frowned slightly at Hermi's odd attitude, "I only asked Ginny to keep the other girls off my back, Hermi. We'll only be going as friends, you know."

"Are you sure about that, Harry? You may think so, but does she? I don't want to see her get hurt, Harry." And she stormed off.

Harry was confused now, 'I did tell her we'd be going just as friends, didn't I?' He tried to think back to when he'd asked her. But he couldn't remember! 'But it doesn't matter anyway. Ginny doesn't like me that way any more. She must realise we're only going as friends - mustn't she?'

The day of the Halloween ball arrived, and everyone had been given a day off from school. Although the boys didn't mind a day off, they couldn't really see the need for it. There was plenty of time to get ready - after all, it wasn't due to start until 7.30. Not so the girls. They seemed to think they needed every minute of their day off to get ready. There was a buzz of excitement about them, and all you could see that day was one group of girls after another talking excitedly and running here there and everywhere. Harry thought that Dumbledore had put a spell on the female population of the school.

Dumbledore had organised dinner before the dance, but the tables were not the usual four, one for each house. There were now quite a few smaller tables, each seating 10 people. Harry and his friends sat together, eating their meal - Harry with Ginny, Hermione with Neville, Ron with Lavender, Dean and Parvati, Seamus and Kristen.

The ten friends chatted together and had a great time. Until the dancing started, that is. There were no romantic feelings between any of the 5 pairs and they just let their hair down and enjoyed themselves. But Ginny was the exception. When the band played a slow number, the others danced in the prescribed foot-apart manner. But Ginny moved in close to Harry, put her arms around his neck and rested her head on his chest. Harry was in turmoil. He looked over to Hermione pleadingly, but was met with a deadpan expression, which said 'I told you so!'

Harry let Ginny stay in that position as the song continued, wondering what on earth he was going to do. At the end of the song, he said, "Ginny, come outside for a minute?" and she happily went with him, holding his hand. She attracted quite a number of envious stares as they went outside onto the balcony.

Harry sat down on a bench and motioned for Ginny to sit down next to him, "Ginny," he said nervously, "I've got a confession to make. And I don't think you're going to like it."

That was the high-point of the ensuing conversation. Things then went quickly downhill as Harry explained why he'd asked her to the ball. Ginny was mortified. She hardly heard Harry's apologies, and she got up and ran back to Gryffindor tower, wiping the tears from her face. Harry felt terrible and knew how Dobby must have felt when he used to beat himself up when he'd done something he'd been ashamed of.

He knew he had to go after Ginny. He knew he had to make things right between them. She was one of his best friends, and like a stupid git, he'd put that friendship at risk - just as he

had with Hermione and Ron. 'What the hell is wrong with me?' he thought, 'If I've hurt her - and all because I was thinking of myself. All because I wanted to get the girls off my back. Did I once think about what I might be doing to Ginny? Did I hell!'

He walked back to the common room, but there was no one there. He went up the stairs and walked towards Ginny's dorm and then stopped. He could hear her muffled crying. He knocked quietly on the door, "Ginny? Ginny .. can I speak to you please?"

"Go away, Harry," came the reply.

"Ginny, please. I really need to talk to you. I can't leave you like this."

He put his ear to the door, and heard a rustle of clothes. Ginny slowly opened the door and walked back to her bed and sat down. Harry followed.

"Oh, Ginny," he said, "I've been such a stupid fool. I never thought you still felt anything for me. I thought that was all in the past," he paused and took a deep breath, "I've always liked you, Ginny. We've become best friends. I haven't told you this before, but I do love you, Ginny," her eyes widened, "I've come to love you as the sister I've never had, and always wanted. So you are special to me, and when I asked you to the ball, it was on those terms. But like a fool, I just assumed that you felt the same. I can see that I've hurt you, but I just don't know what to do about it. The only thing I could do is to tell you how I truly feel. I hope you won't hate me for what I've done."

"You have hurt me Harry. I've never felt so bad. I wish you'd told me how you felt earlier - before I made a fool of myself. I'll speak to you tomorrow, Harry. But now, I just need to be on my own."

Harry squeezed her hand and then left the dorm. He walked down to the common room to see two very angry faces looking at him, "What have you done to my sister, Harry?" shouted Ron. That was bad for Harry to take, but nowhere near as bad as Hermione's angry whisper, "I told you Harry. I warned you about this. You're nothing but an insufferable, insensitive, bloody fool. I really despair for you sometimes Harry."

Harry sank forlornly down into his favourite chair as Hermione raced upstairs to Ginny's dorm. Ron sat down next to Harry, "Care to explain?" he said.

Harry told Ron all about how he'd messed up, and how bad he felt about hurting Ginny. He half hoped Ron would hit him - it would at least make him feel better. He told him what he'd said to Ginny, loving her like a sister, and then put his face into his hands, feeling too bad to continue.

Surprisingly, Ron didn't hit Harry. Nor did he shout at him. He could see how upset Harry was. He put his hand on his shoulder, "Harry, I do understand you know. Ginny had us both fooled. I didn't suspect that she still had some sort of crush on you - she certainly disguised that pretty well. If I'd known, I would have warned you."

"But Hermione warned me Ron. But I didn't think she was right. I ignored her. How stupid can I get? When is Hermione ever wrong?" he wailed.

"Look, Harry. I know you didn't intend to hurt Ginny, and she'll come around to that way of thinking soon enough - she's not stupid. And to think," he grinned, "How long have you thought of her as a sister? And does that mean you think of me as a brother?"

Harry looked up to see Ron's grinning face, "Of course I do, Ron. I've never told you this, but I really envy you. You've got the best family anyone could possibly have, and ever since I met you, I've hoped that I could be part of it. Does that surprise you?"

"In a way it does. I've always been envious of you Harry - oh in a friendly way of course - Captain of the School and House Quidditch teams, youngest Seeker at Hogwarts, fame - the list is almost endless. I never thought that the famous Harry Potter would ever be envious of me!"

They both looked self-consciously at each other. They had rarely spoken in such an intimate way to each other before. But a strong bond between them was forged that night - even stronger than the one they'd already had. They went up to bed, both feeling a little better than earlier in the night.

The next morning, Ron and Harry went down to the common room to see Hermione waiting for them. She spared Harry with a glare and said, "Ginny wants to see you - up in her dorm. She's on her own." And she turned and went to sit over by the fire. Ron sat next to her as Harry went back up the stairs.

Ron told Hermione everything that he and Harry had talked about the previous night, "I understand how Harry's feeling," she said, "But if only he'd thought - that's the trouble with you boys - you don't think! Harry didn't even realise that he was playing with Ginny's emotions. He's hurt her Ron - badly. She really thought she had a chance with him. But your sister is one noble witch - she's the best. She's going to forgive him, you know. She can accept that Harry sees her as a sister - she's even flattered by it. But it's going to take a while before she fully gets over this. We'll need to keep an eye on her."

Harry felt relieved that Ginny had accepted his apology, and had forgiven his stupidity. When she had finished speaking, he hugged her and whispered in her ear, "So is it all right if I think of you as my sister?"

"Yes, of course it is," she replied, "brother mine." Harry didn't see the tear that ran down her cheek.

It was getting impatient now. It had waited for a long time, there beneath ancient Rhedae, and nothing had happened. It increased the power of its summons, sending it out into the four corners of the world. It had to do something for time was getting short.

Buckbeak lifted his noble head. The emanations had changed. They were stronger. He flew into the air above the forest to join his friends, craving the comfort of their nearness.

The noise increased in the forest, and the wizards patrolling the perimeter noticed the change in activity. The creatures were still confined, but they sent their report to the French ministry, hoping that something would be done soon.

Chapter 5 The Amulet

It wasn't until fully four days after the Halloween ball that Hermione even spoke to Harry. Ron had tried to get her to patch things up with him, but she was stubborn - the sight of Ginny crying forlornly into her pillow had affected her badly. She loved Ginny, she was her best female friend and her feelings had been mangled by Harry.

The worst part was that she couldn't forget the way she and Harry had kissed a few weeks ago. However she tried to put it out of her mind, she just couldn't forget those feelings she had when it happened. She hoped and prayed that she wouldn't be put in the same position that Ginny was in right now - she refused to let that happen. The red-head was suffering bravely, and she really felt for her.

The event that made her speak to Harry occurred in the common room one chilly evening. The four were sitting around the fire reading, when Harry suddenly clutched his amulet. It had grown suddenly warmer as it lay against his chest. When he felt it, that familiar urgent feeling had grown much stronger, but he couldn't tell what the urgency was.

Hermione noticed Harry clutching the amulet, and a look of concern crossed her face. She still thought that he should have got rid of it when they spoke in Diagon Alley, and she was afraid that something bad was going to happen. "What's the matter Harry? Why are you holding the amulet like that?" she asked.

"The feeling of urgency I told you about has just grown stronger, and it feels a lot warmer than it did. It doesn't feel like anything bad, but I get the distinct feeling that I've got to do something."

"I knew there was something I'd forgotten!" she exclaimed, "I was going to do some research on the amulet. I'm sorry, Harry, I just forgot. I think I'll go down to the library and see if I can find that book I told you about. I shouldn't be long."

"I'll come with you, Hermi," Ginny said and they both went out through the portrait hole and headed towards the library.

As much as they tried, they couldn't find the book on magical amulets that night, although they hadn't had much time before Madam Pince closed the library. They resolved to go back the following day, which was a Saturday, when they would have plenty of time to look for it.

They had just finished breakfast the following morning when Hermione and Ginny got up to go to the library.

"Hang on a minute, you two," said Harry, "I have to show you something. Come on Ron. Lets go."

They followed Harry up the stairs until they reached Professor McGonagall's office. They looked at each other with furrowed brows, wondering what Harry had to show them. They were even more confused when Harry walked up to the suit of armour standing next to the professor's office. They were intrigued when Harry pulled out his wand, tapped the right arm of the armour, and said '*sugar beans*'.

To their surprise, the suit of armour stepped aside to reveal a doorway, which Harry opened and he beckoned them inside. They were in a room they hadn't seen before. It was empty with only a mirror standing against one of the walls.

Harry turned to his friends, "I've got something to show you. I've had to keep it secret up until now and it must remain a secret - only you three will know, apart from Professor Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall. Promise?"

"Yes, we promise. Now tell us what it is," said Ron impatiently.

"Now don't be frightened by what you are about to see. I'm new to this. Are you ready?"

"Come on, Harry, get on with it," said Hermione, who had a strange feeling about this.

They saw Harry close his eyes and his brow furrow in concentration. Then they saw him change. Three pairs of eyes opened wide, and three mouths dropped open as they looked at a huge golden eagle standing before them, "Bloody hell!" shouted Ron.

Ginny, however, looked very excited, "You're an Animagus! When did you do this Harry?"

"And how the bloody hell did you do it?" said Hermione sternly. Two humans and an eagle looked at Hermione with disbelief. Hermione didn't swear. Except for the other night when Harry had upset her.

Harry unfurled his wings, the ends touching each of the walls, and flapped them slowly.

"You're beautiful, Harry. When can you take me for a ride on your back?" said Ginny excitedly. The other two could only laugh.

Harry then changed back to human form; "I can't speak human when I'm a golden eagle, Ginny. And I don't know if I can carry anybody yet - I've only just perfected it and I haven't even flown yet."

Harry then explained to his astonished friends how he'd become an Animagus, with the help of Professor McGonagall.

"They thought it would help in the fight against the Dark Side. I think they know something I don't. I'm sure they think that I'm going to be involved in the fight at some stage."

"Oh Harry," gasped Hermione, putting her hand over her mouth.

They looked glumly at Harry, afraid of what was ahead, but Ron lightened the mood, "When are you going to fly, Harry? And I want first go at riding you," he glared at Ginny.

Harry laughed, "Oh no you don't Ron. My little sister gets first go - if I can do it, that is!"

Ginny's emotions were still a bit fragile, but still grinned at Harry.

Hermione and Ginny went into the library later, to look for the magical amulets book. Hermione had a sudden thought and walked over to a rarely used bookcase. She looked at the

titles closely and then pulled a large book from the shelf, "I've got it!" she shouted at Ginny, prompting a loud "Shhhhhh," from Madam Pince.

"Sorry," she mouthed as she settled down beside Ginny to look through the book. They looked at the index to see if there was anything obvious. There was - there was a section on '*Amulets that give feelings of urgency*'. They turned to the chapter impatiently, and read ...

'Feelings of urgency are sometimes emitted by a certain type of amulet. This feeling can only normally be felt by the person to whom a message is directed. This class of amulet is known as the 'Message amulet' class. The normal method of revealing the message is for the intended recipient to hold the wand onto the amulet and speak the word 'APERIO', while thinking of a parchment and quill.'

"That's it!" said Hermione, and wrote the information onto a blank piece of parchment, "Let's go and find Harry and Ron. I want to see what the message is."

They ran all the way back to Gryffindor tower and said the password to open the portrait hole and climbed in. Harry and Ron were playing wizard chess in the corner, but there was no one else in the room. "Harry. Ron. We've found something," shouted Ginny.

They walked over and Hermione read out the notes she had made in the library, "Come on, let's see if it works," she said excitedly.

Harry pulled the amulet over his head and placed it on the table. He pulled his wand out from his robes and held it directly on the knight. He closed his eyes, thought of a parchment and quill, and said "*APERIO*."

The four watched with baited breath, waiting for something to happen. Suddenly, a blue light came from the tip of the sword the knight was holding, and started to form letters in the air above it. After a few moments the message could be read ..

'The former conqueror - the true Anima Summa - must go to ancient Rhedae. There will he find the ancient secret, which must be revealed to him and his helpers'

The four looked at each other, "What the hell does that mean!" exclaimed Ron.

Hermione thought for a moment, "The former conqueror must be Harry - you know, the conqueror of 'You Know Who' when he was a baby. I haven't a clue what the Anima Summa is - but again it must be Harry. I don't know where Rhedae is, I've never heard of the place. And what is the secret to be uncovered and who are the helpers? - I really don't know." She wrote the message onto the piece of parchment, and just as she finished, the message outlined in the air vanished. Harry picked up the amulet.

"Could the helpers be us three?" said Ginny as she looked at Ron and Hermione.

"I don't know, Ginny. But you've all helped me up to now." He looked down at the amulet he was holding, "The feeling of urgency has gone. I can only feel warmth and security now - like it was the first time I held it."

The four looked down at the parchment and read the message again. Not one of them noticed the portrait hole open and close. Outside in the corridor, Draco Malfoy grinned. It had been

easy - he had been lurking outside the entrance under his Invisibility Cloak when the Mudblood and the Weasley girl came along and opened the portrait. They were so excited about something that they hadn't noticed that the portrait had remained open longer than usual. He had followed them inside without any bother. He removed the cloak, and rushed off to the owlery.

Back in the common room, Hermione was in her element, "We've got to research this," she said, "We've got to scour the library for references to a place called Rhedae, and for any information on the true Anima Summa. Agreed?"

They all nodded, and they knew that Hermione's insatiable appetite for knowledge would drive them on until they found what they were looking for. "Come on," she said, "no time like the present," and she pulled them back in the direction of the library.

They were weary by the time they went in for their evening meal. They had spent all day looking through loads of wizarding books, but could find absolutely nothing about Rhedae or Anima Summa. Hermione was frustrated, and knew that it could take some time to find the information they needed.

"I'll draw up a schedule," she said to the others, "We can work in pairs in the library. Harry and Ron can work one shift, and Ginny and I the other. We'll find something even if it kills us."

"And it probably will," muttered Ron.

"What was that, Ron Weasley?" said Hermione. Harry laughed. He hadn't seen Hermione so fired up in a long time.

At breakfast the following Wednesday, Harry was busy trying to get a list of students who wanted to try out for the Keeper vacancy in the Gryffindor Quidditch team. He already had 3 names, when he saw Kristen come into the hall with Parvati and Lavender. He beckoned her over, "Kristen, I've been thinking. The Quidditch House matches will be starting soon, and I thought that we could share the Seeker position between us. I thought we could each play one game, and the one who does best can play the last game. What do you think?"

"No way, Harry. You're the Gryffindor Seeker, and you're the captain. You've got to play. And anyway, you've already beaten me once."

"Yes, but as you know that wasn't because I was better than you. You know how close that was. I can't see you just sitting in the stands when you've got all that talent."

"Thanks, Harry. I remember having a similar conversation with my Salem house captain 3 years ago. I was playing Keeper then, but he could somehow see that I'd make a good Seeker and persuaded me to switch positions. I won't be happy not playing, but I'd be even less happy taking over from you."

"You used to play Keeper? But Kristen, I'm looking for a Keeper to replace Oliver Wood. I'm holding try-outs tonight and you've got to come." He was writing her name on the list before she even replied.

That evening, Harry looked at the list of students trying out for Keeper. He was standing alongside the Quidditch field with Katie Bell, Angelina Johnson and Alicia Spinnet - the Gryffindor Chasers. He looked down the list of four names as he waited for them to arrive. Seamus Finnegan and Dean Thomas were both Harry's room mates in the 5th year and Colin Creevey was in 4th year. Kristen's name was last on the list.

When they arrived, Harry explained how the Keeper would be selected. The Chasers would try to score from various distances, and would throw the quaffle 30 times. The one who pulled off the most saves would be the new Keeper.

"Right, Colin - you first," said Harry, and he watched Colin get onto his broom and fly over to the goal area. Harry could tell as he watched him fly that he wouldn't be much good. Colin was a whiz with a camera, but Quidditch?

Harry was proved right as he marked Colin's score on the list - 1 save. And that had been a fluke. He had dived towards the right, lost his grip on the broom and hung suspended beneath it, his back to the Chasers, as the quaffle hit him on his backside and bounced away. The Chasers had taken 5 minutes to recover from their fit of laughter before they could resume.

Dean had fared better than Colin, but not much. He was after all a soccer fan, who idolised his favourite team - West Ham United, which played in the English premiership. He did, however, manage to save 5 shots.

Seamus was by far the best of the three boys. He looked quite good as he stopped 20 of the shots flung at the goal. "Well done, Seamus," said Harry as he marked down the score.

Kristen was the last one up. Harry immediately saw that she oozed class as she patrolled the goal area. She was focused and she flew her Firebolt like a dream. She was a brilliant Seeker, but she was also an excellent Keeper, and by the end of her session, she'd saved 26 shots.

"Thanks for coming, everybody. Kristen's the new Keeper and Seamus is reserve." Harry walked over to Kristen and congratulated her, as did the Chasers, who walked back up to the school with Seamus, Dean and Colin.

"Do you want to fly around for a bit?" Harry asked Kristen. She smiled and nodded, and pushed off from the ground.

"See if you can keep up with me," she shouted over her shoulder. Harry laughed and zoomed after her on his Firebolt. After half an hour of high-speed flying and aerobatics, they went up to the school to have their evening meal, chatting amiably.

From the window of her office, Professor McGonagall had watched the two flying around and the way they had interacted. She smiled to herself as she saw them enter the school.

The following Saturday evening, Harry called Hermione, Ron and Ginny over to him in the common room, and whispered, "Early tomorrow morning, I'm going down to the edge of the Forbidden Forest to try out my flying - and not on my broomstick if you know what I mean. Everybody's going to be in bed at that time so there won't be any risk of me being spotted. Do you want to come?"

They all nodded excitedly, "Will you let me ride you?" whispered Ginny.

"It depends how it goes, Ginny - we'll see. 5.00 a.m. down here - is that all right?"

Four pairs of bleary eyes met early the following morning, and they walked quietly down to the main door and let themselves out. Thankfully, Peeves must also have been sleeping that morning. It was still dark as they walked across the Quidditch pitch towards the edge of the Forbidden Forest. Dawn was just breaking as Harry transformed into his golden eagle Animagus form.

"Magnificent!" breathed Hermione as she looked at the green eyes and slightly unruly feathers on the top of the eagle's head.

Harry opened his wings, bent his legs, and pushed off powerfully from the ground. The beats from his wings were so powerful that the other three had to shield their eyes from the dust that was stirred up from the ground, and clutched their robes that billowed out behind them. Up he soared into the lightening sky.

Harry was ecstatic. The feeling of freedom in his dream turned out to be very real, and he marvelled as he rode the thermals, his wings spread wide, rising high into the early morning air. What he hadn't felt in his dreams was the incredible sense of power. He could see his three friends as mere dots below him when he decided to try a dive. He pointed his body at the ground and with powerful beats of his massive wings, set off in their direction. He pulled his wings back in against his body as he picked up speed.

Below him, three pairs of eyes followed his every move, and gasped when they saw him hurtling toward them at breathtaking speed.

Harry could see them duck as he approached, and he spread his wings to break his speed. He came into a perfect landing right beside the others, and immediately transformed. He was grinning as he asked, "Well, what do you think?"

"Incredible!" said Ron.

"Marvellous, but I felt really sick when you went into that dive," said Hermione.

"Way out," said Ginny, "How about my ride now, Harry?"

Harry looked at the grinning red-head and smiled. She had been looking forward to this, he could tell, "All right Ginny. Let's try it. When I transform, climb on my back, just in front of my wings, but keep your legs well forward to the front. I don't want to knock you off when I start flapping. Hold onto my neck - but don't choke me!"

Harry transformed and bent his legs to let Ginny climb onto him. As she settled onto his back he flexed his legs, bouncing up and down slightly to test her weight. He then kicked powerfully off from the ground and soared up into the air. He could hear Ginny screaming excitedly above him, and she told him to go into a dive. And he did - but not like the one he did earlier. He was afraid that Ginny would fall off. After fifteen minutes, Ginny's weight started to tell and he felt a bit tired, so he came into a smooth landing beside his friends and Ginny jumped off.

Harry transformed and Ginny hugged him, "That was incredible, Harry. I haven't felt anything like it before. It's much better than a broomstick, and a lot more comfortable."

They all laughed at Ginny's obvious delight. "Can I have a go now?" said Ron.

"After Ginny, I feel a bit tired Ron. I think it's best if I get in a bit more flying before taking your weight on my back. But I promise you'll be next. Then it'll be your turn Hermi."

"No way, Harry. You know I don't like flying, and the speed that you go, you'll have half my breakfast over your head. No - I'm quite happy to watch!"

They again all laughed as they walked back to the school for their breakfast.

It was late autumn, and the weather had taken a turn for the worse. The storms, which had become more and more normal over the last few years, had started to rush in from the Atlantic, one after the other. Harry could put up with the rain, but he hated the gales that battered the school. It meant that Quidditch practice was impossible, and it made his Animagus flying very uncomfortable and hazardous.

Professor Flitwick was waiting for the 5th year Gryffindors and Ravenclaws to settle down before starting their Charms class one morning. The Gryffindors, in particular, were looking disgruntled he noticed, and smiled to himself. They had just come from double Potions with the Slytherins.

Hermione was sitting with Ron at one table, and in front of them were Harry and Kristen. Professor Flitwick cleared his throat, "The headmaster has asked me to concentrate on the blocking of charms for the rest of this term. I know that Professor Lupin is doing the same in your DADA classes, but we feel that the more practice you get on this the better. This morning we'll look at the Confundus charm. You may remember it from last year - the charm that causes confusion to the person it's aimed at. The charm works by slightly altering the electrical patterns in the brain - it manipulates the messages passed between the brain cells before they are sent to the nerves in the part of the body to be acted upon. The blocking of this type of charm is difficult - very difficult. But you can, with practice, attempt to repair the electrical messages before they are passed along."

He looked at the students and saw that he had their full attention. "Before the charm hits you, you have to keep a small corner of your brain as clear as possible. You have to concentrate hard and visualise, say, the very front of your brain, and think a clear thought - one that is familiar to you. You have to keep concentrating on that thought. And then when you do something - such as raise your arm - you send that thought to your arm. The thought doesn't actually go to your arm, but the part of the brain that controls arm movement. If done properly, your clear thought will unscramble the confusion, and allow you to react normally and raise your arm - is that clear?"

There were some very dubious looks from most of the students, so the professor once again explained it, giving different examples for illustration.

"Right, let's try it. Seamus, come out to the front please." Seamus walked up to Flitwick.

"Now think a clear thought, and nod when you're ready. Then I'll throw the charm."

Seamus concentrated for a few moments, and then nodded. "*CONFUNDO*" said Flitwick as he aimed his wand at him. Seamus had a glazed look in his eyes as the professor said, "Now raise your right leg."

Seamus scratched his nose, and everybody laughed. "*FINITE INCANTATEM*" said Flitwick as he removed the charm. "Don't be discouraged. You're all going to need plenty of practice to even approach getting this right. Hermione - you next."

Harry saw Hermione concentrating furiously before Flitwick sent the charm. "Raise your right leg," said the professor. Hermione made a great effort, and her leg twitched, but she also raised her left arm and started waving. After Flitwick removed the charm, he was glowing in his praise. "Excellent, Hermione. I saw your leg twitch. You will certainly be able to master this with practice. Come on, Harry. Let's see if you're as good as Professor Lupin says you are."

Harry walked out to the front, and started to think of his Animagus form, which he tried to push to the front part of his brain. He nodded to the professor. "*CONFUNDO*." Harry felt strange, but still held onto the image of his eagle at the front of his brain. "Raise your left arm."

Harry sent the image of the eagle to his left arm - and lifted it above his head. "Now raise your right leg," said Flitwick in a hushed voice. Harry raised his right leg. "Now turn around and face the wall." Harry did exactly that. "*FINITE INCANTATEM*," said the professor.

There was silence in the room, before Seamus started to clap. The other students also joined in the applause, marvelling at Harry's ability to block the charm at his first attempt. Flitwick just looked stunned, gazing with disbelief at Harry. "Thank you, Harry. You can sit down now," he whispered. He then recovered his composure and smiled. "That, class, is how you block Confundus. I suggest you go and pick Harry's brains - both physically and metaphorically."

"Now split into pairs and try it out on each other. I shan't be long - I've got to see the Headmaster for a moment." And he left the room deep in thought. Everybody crowded around Harry asking him how he'd managed to do it.

Harry looked embarrassed and confused, "Well I just did what Flitwick said. No more and no less. I really can't tell you any more. You just need to keep a clear thought in your head."

The others didn't really believe Harry and went to practice on each other. Kristen turned to Harry, "Come on then, Harry. Try it on me."

"Are you ready?" he asked. After she nodded, Harry threw the charm but Kristen was unable to block it, scratching her head instead of blinking her eyes.

"Oh, Harry. How do you do it?" she said after the charm had been lifted.

"Now do exactly like I tell you, Kristen," she nodded, "Think about your Firebolt. Got it? Now push the Firebolt to the front of your brain. Now when I ask you to raise your left arm, send your Firebolt to your left arm. Ready?" She nodded.

"CONFUNDO"

Harry watched as Kristen poked out her tongue at him. But he also noticed her left arm twitching. "Great, Kristen. You did as good as Hermione. Your left arm twitched," he said as he lifted the charm.

Kristen grinned and hugged him, "Thanks, Harry. You were a big help then. Come on, let's practice some more."

Hermione watched as Harry helped Kristen. She'd felt a bit uneasy when she had hugged Harry, and was a bit envious that he wasn't helping her with the charm blocking. She shrugged it off, however, and turned back to Ron, who had a finger stuck up his nose.

Ceri was sitting at her table in the guest room, reading a pile of intelligence reports from Dumbledore's spies, when there was a knock on the door. She opened it and saw Snape standing there.

"Ah, Miss Jones, is Sirius Black with you? I have a piece of information for him."

"Sorry, professor. He's gone to meet a group of our spies in London, and he won't be back till this evening. Can you give me the information?"

"Well since the both of you are working together, I can see no reason why not. There's going to be a meeting of 'You Know Who' and his inner circle on the 21st December at midnight. It will be a progress meeting, but I've heard talk that something new has come up and I can't find out anything more about it. It's going to take place on the Isle of Lewis, off the north-west coast of Scotland - inside the main megalithic stone circle at Callanish. Now there won't be much cover - no trees or anything, but there's a lot of uneven ground surrounding it, and there's an avenue of standing stones leading up to it. So with luck, you should be able to find a suitable hiding place."

Ceri made a few notes as Snape spoke, "Thanks, Professor. I'll tell Sirius when he gets back."

Snape nodded and left the room. Ceri looked pensively after him, 'He's a strange one,' she thought, 'but I guess his heart's in the right place'.

Sirius returned that evening, and Ceri told him about the meeting. "We'll have to get there early to find a good hiding place," he said, "And wrap up warm - the Isle of Lewis is not where I'd choose to be in December. It's a wild and inhospitable place - marvellous in the summer, but extremely bleak at this time of year. Still, we've got over a week to plan - perhaps you can check the library for any photos of the site - it's pretty famous so there should be plenty there."

Ceri nodded. "When am I going to meet your godson, Sirius? I haven't had much time to get about the school, what with all these reports to check, and I haven't seen him yet."

"Oh, you'll meet him soon enough, Ceri. Did you hear about what happened in Charms class the other day? Flitwick came charging into the headmaster's office, and told us that Harry'd completely blocked the Confundus charm - and at the first attempt."

"That's amazing! How does he do it? I mean he's only 15 and yet so powerful. Imagine what he'll be like when he's fully grown - he'll be as powerful if not more so than Dumbledore!"

"Well I don't know about that, Ceri. So - tell me - what do you get up to in the evenings? You must be pretty lonely here. Maybe you'd like to come to dinner at the Three Broomsticks with me one night. There's a quiet back room there, so I won't be seen - as long as you don't mind doing the ordering. What do you say?"

"Sounds good, Sirius. I'm used to being on my own, and I don't really mind, but I suppose a change of scenery would be nice. Tomorrow ok?"

Sirius nodded and transformed before going out the door towards Dumbledore's office.

"I don't know, Hermi. I don't think we'll find anything. There's just no reference at all so far about Rhedae and Anima Summa," Ron moaned after he and Harry had returned from one of their shifts at the library.

"Now don't give up, Ron. It's only been a few weeks, and we've checked less than a quarter of the wizarding books - and that's not counting the restricted section."

"But it's all right for you, Hermi. You love reading books. But it's so .. so boring," he replied.

"Oh come on, Ron," said Harry, "It's the middle of December - Christmas will be here soon."

"Yeh, and so will the Yule ball," he said with a miserable expression on his face.

"What are you all doing for Christmas? Is anyone staying here with me?" said Harry.

"Sorry, Harry," said Ginny, "Mum and Dad want me and Ron to come home. Bill and Charlie will be there and it's not often that the whole family gets together. Hey perhaps Dumbledore will let you come too?"

"I don't think so, Ginny. He's already told me not to get my hopes up about Christmas. He says it'll be safer if I stay here. What about you, Hermi?"

"I'm sorry, Harry. But my parents want me home too. I feel I must go because I may not see them over Easter. They're going to France on holiday then, and I don't think I'll be going."

Harry sighed, "Oh well, it's going to be pretty lonely, but at least I can go out and do some flying - if the weather's ok, that it. I really need to strengthen my wings."

"So Harry," said Hermione with a steely glint in her eye, "Who are you going to take to the Yule ball?"

The frostiness wasn't lost on Harry, "I don't know if I'll take anyone. I always seem to put my foot in it when it comes to dances. How about you?"

"Nobody's asked me yet," said Hermione.

"Me neither," added Ginny.

Ron looked from one to the other as they waited for him to say something, "Well don't look at me! I don't know who I'll be taking." He glanced at Hermione, but got no reaction.

Harry went to bed that night, and went to sleep quicker than he normally did. The dream that he had was different from anything he'd dreamt before.

Everything was dark. He had a feeling of claustrophobia - it felt like he was in a tunnel, not dissimilar to the one in the mountain above Hogsmeade, but he was standing on a solid, level floor. There must have been some slight illumination coming from somewhere, because he could just make out a shape up ahead. The shape seemed to be moving slowly, but he couldn't make out any details. Then he heard it - 'Come. Hurry. Do not delay' - it was a low, ghostly voice that reached him. It was not very loud and he had to strain to make out the words. Then the shape seemed to shimmer, and it was gone. The voice had gone as well.

He woke up with a start - clearly remembering the dream, and trying to make sense of it. He gave up and went about his usual morning routine, before going down to breakfast.

That evening, the weather had eased. The wind had dropped and it had stopped raining. Harry called for a Quidditch practice session and the seven Gryffindors tramped down to the field, happy that they'd get some flying in at last. The session went well and they tried out the crossover move. Angelina and Alicia picked it up fairly easily, and Harry was looking forward to using it in their house matches.

Kristen was doing well in goal, stopping most of the shots that came her way. She and Harry also had great fun dodging the bludgers that Fred and George hit at them. After the end of the session, Harry and Kristen stayed to do some racing. They enjoyed pitting their speed and skill against each other. As they raced towards one of the goal posts, they were neck and neck. They streaked towards the ground as if trying to get the snitch, the first one past the post being the winner. They arrived at the ground together, and bumped. They fell off their brooms and ended up in a tangle on the ground, both laughing joyously.

They both went to get up at the same time, and their heads banged together. Rubbing their heads ruefully, they looked at each other and grinned. They both leaned forward at the same time and their lips met. When they pulled apart, they stared at each other, both nervous of the other's reaction. Again they smiled and Kristen reached out and took hold of Harry's hand, "It's ok, Harry. I liked that. Did you?"

"Yes, Kristen, I did," he said, and pulled her close. She rested her head on his shoulder and smiled to herself. She then reached up and wrapped her hand around the back of his head and pulled him into another kiss. Harry responded with a feeling of joy in his heart.

When they again looked at each other, Harry whispered, "Does this mean you're my girlfriend now?"

"If you want me as your girlfriend, then yes," smiled Kristen.

Professor McGonagall was standing at her window watching all this. She had a satisfied smile on her face as she turned and went to inform Dumbledore of the development.

McGonagall was not the only one watching from an upstairs window. Hermione felt an icy hand clutch around her heart as she saw Harry with Kristen. She felt sad and hurt. She angrily told herself that she had no reason to be. But she couldn't help but think back to the time when she and Harry had kissed, and the wonderful feeling it had given her. Her mind started to play tricks on her - filtering in unbidden thoughts - 'that could have been me down there, if I hadn't been so stupid'. She angrily looked away from the window and resolved not to let it bother her. She would throw herself into her school work, and continue with the research they had started. No - she wasn't going to let it bother her - it wasn't as if she and Harry were together or anything - was it.

The following day, Hermione was calmer. She had spent a sleepless night thinking about all the things she would do, all the reading she would catch up on, and how to further their research. She was happy that she had a firm grip on her feelings now.

She walked into the Great Hall for breakfast and saw Harry and Kristen together. She sat beside Ron and Ginny and looked over at them.

Harry felt a little guilty as he looked at Hermione. He didn't know why that was though, "Uh, Hermione, Ginny," he said nervously, "Kristen and I - well, we're together - as a couple, I mean - we're an item. Are you ok with that?" He looked at them, waiting.

Both Hermione and Ginny smiled and nodded. Ron just sat there grinning, Harry had told him last night when they went to bed. "So I suppose you've got a date for the ball then, Harry?" he said.

Harry looked at Kristen; surprised that he hadn't asked her already, "Is it a date?"

"Yes, I suppose it is," she smiled.

After breakfast, they walked out hand in hand. A sudden hush went over the room, and there were one or two gasps. This was followed by an excited buzz of conversation as most of the girls in the hall discussed the new development.

Draco Malfoy didn't need to do anything special to find out this little snippet of information. He saw it along with everyone else. He got up from his seat and followed his well-worn path to the owlery.

As Harry and Kristen went through into the hallway, Parvati and Lavender came up to them, on their way to breakfast. "Well, and how are the love birds this morning?" said Parvati. Kristen had told them all about the previous evening's events. "You really do make a lovely couple," sighed Lavender.

Harry and Kristen both blushed furiously and went out of the main doors to go for a walk down by the lake before classes started.

Ginny was deep in thought as she went out from the Great Hall. She didn't notice a blond-haired boy waiting for her to approach him. She jumped slightly when she heard him. "Ginny, I was wondering. Would you go to the Yule ball with me?"

"Eh .. yes I'd love to Justin," she said, smiling prettily. She had noticed Justin Fitch-Fletchley the 5th year Hufflepuff before, and liked his assured and calm manner. He wasn't bad looking either.

"Great," he said, "I'll pick you up outside your common room on the night. Ok?"

"Yes, fine. See you then." Ginny smiled to herself as she walked up to the common room. She was glad someone had asked her to the ball at last, and she was also glad that it had been Justin. He wasn't Harry, but then nobody was Harry, except Harry.

That evening, Ginny told her friends about Justin. "He's a nice guy, Ginny," said Harry, "I'm pleased for you."

Ron, however, looked darkly at Ginny, "I don't know, Ginny. Aren't you a bit young to be going out on a date?" Ginny was shocked and stunned. She knew Ron was protective of her, but this was ridiculous.

"Sod off, Ron!" she replied, "I'm only just over 6 months younger than Hermi. Do you think she's too young as well?"

Ron looked shamefaced at his sister, "Sorry, Ginny. I'm only thinking of you, you know."

Ginny's angry features softened, "I know, Ron. But I'm not a baby any more. And I can look after myself."

Harry and Kristen went out for a walk, and Ginny went to her dorm, leaving Ron and Hermione together. Ron looked nervously at Hermione. "Hermi .. I .. I was wondering. Um, w .. would you go to the ball with me?"

Hermione looked at Ron feeling panic. She knew this would happen. And she couldn't tell him someone else had asked her - no one had, yet. She really liked Ron, but only as a friend. And she was determined that she wouldn't do to Ron what Harry had done to Ginny at the Halloween ball. She had to think quickly. "Yes, Ron. I'd love to go with you. But we need to have a little chat first."

Ron's beaming smile faltered, wondering what she was going to say. "Ron .. I love you .. I really do. But only as a best friend - nothing more. I'm sorry, but I can't help how I feel. I told Harry the same thing after you saw us that time. The last thing I want is to hurt you, and I'd only be leading you on if I don't say this now. Can you accept that?"

Ron's face fell, "Hermi .. I .. " He took a grip of himself then and hoped that his disappointment didn't show too much, "I understand, Hermi. And yes, if you like, we'll go to the ball as best friends. I can handle that. Eh .. Hermi .. it's Krum, isn't it? You still like him, don't you?"

Hermione was taken aback, "No Ron, it's not Viktor. He was only ever a friend. I never liked him *that* way."

"But there is someone then? Someone you like?"

"No .. no, of course not." Her face took on a far-away look. 'Those jolts,' she thought, 'the hurt I felt when I saw them together, the excitement of that kiss we shared ...'. Her eyes filled up as the realisation hit her.

"Hermi?" said Ron quietly, "There is, isn't there?"

"Yes," she whispered, only now fully realising how she felt about Harry. That simple little question that Ron asked had forced her to face up to it, and she couldn't deny it to herself anymore. She thought, 'I should have known all along what those jolts were. But there's nothing I can do about it now. If only I hadn't been so stubborn and stupid. But it's too late now - Harry has a girlfriend. And anyway, he doesn't like me *that* way - he told me that he didn't want to lose me as a best friend. I'll just have to accept it and get on with my life.'

"Who is it Hermi? You look a bit upset."

"I .. I can't tell you, Ron. He doesn't even know himself. And I know that he doesn't feel the same way about me." A tear rolled down her cheek as the full realisation hit her.

"Tell me, Hermi. Who is it? I won't let anybody treat you like this!"

"No, Ron. It's not his fault. He doesn't even know. Now please, leave it."

Ron was full of anger as he looked at Hermione's retreating form. She was so lovely, so beautiful. 'Who the hell is this guy? I wonder if Harry or Ginny knows about this,' he thought.

Later that night, after Kristen had gone to her dorm, Ron called Harry and Ginny over to talk to them. He told them what had happened with Hermione. Ginny was shocked - she thought that Hermione really liked Ron. Harry knew different of course, but didn't dare say.

"So who is it? Do either of you know?" Ron asked them.

"I haven't got a clue," said Harry, "It's the first I've heard that Hermione likes a boy. Has she said anything to you Ginny? You know - girl talk?"

"Not a thing, Harry. I'm as much in the dark as you are."

"I'm not happy about this," said Ron, "Hermi's hurting - I could tell when she told me - and I can't bear to see her like that. We've got to do something."

"But, Ron. If Hermi won't tell you who it is, what can we do? Ginny, can you have a girl-to-girl talk with her? Try to find out who this bloke is?"

"I'll try, Harry. But I can't promise anything. Hermi can be pretty deep when she wants to be."

Harry felt strange when he went up to the dorm. He'd had a jolt when Ron told them about Hermi. But it wasn't anything more than concern for his best friend - was it? Those kisses they'd shared though. No - he'd already been through this with Hermione and they'd agreed then that they would remain as best friends - nothing more. He had no right to feel anything more - and anyway, he had Kristen now and he really liked her. But he felt the same anger as

Ron. Who the hell had the right to reject a girl such as Hermione - but no, he couldn't think that way. Ron said the bloke didn't even know anything about it. Who is he, anyway?

The following day, Hermione was thinking about their research, and felt herself wishing that they had the Internet at Hogwarts. She could find anything she wanted on the Internet. 'The Internet!' she thought, 'Muggle books - of course. We haven't looked at any of those books.'

Since it was a Saturday, she knew that they could spend the whole day checking the Muggle section of the library. There weren't as many Muggle books as there were wizarding ones.

She rounded up her 3 friends and told them about her idea. They went straight to the library and pulled all the likely-looking books on places and travel onto the middle table.

They started to read through the indices of the books, but could find nothing. Deep in thought, Hermione went back to the bookcases and started to browse through the titles. She came upon a book entitled '*Mysterious Places - A Review*' and idly looked through the index. She found nothing, but on a whim, turned to the back of the book and looked at the alphabetical references.

'Now let's see - R ... Rhedae - see note in chapter 12 - there it is!' She'd found something at last. She rushed back over to the table and excitedly showed them the book and the reference.

She hurriedly turned to Chapter 12 and they saw a brief footnote ...

'Rhedae - The Visigoths founded the prosperous town known as "Rhedae." In 410, the Visigoths pillaged Rome and captured the massive treasure of Jerusalem, which had been taken there by the Roman Emperor Titus in the year 70 AD.

The Visigoths were in turn, defeated by the Merovingians led by Clovis. Charlemagne, who had become the all-powerful master of an immense empire, gave the city of Carcassonne to one of his leaders with Rhedae being a part of his lands. It was raised to the level of a Royal City by the marriage of Almaric, son of a Visigoth king, with the Merovingian Princess Clothilde, and it was to become famous for its court.

From the 11th century, Rhedae began to decline, being put to the torch by Simon de Montfort and his crusaders against the Cathar Heresy. Thus the city of Rhedae disappeared forever, leaving only the small village that still stands today. That village became the focus for one of the most incredible mysteries of the modern era - the details of which are beyond the scope of this tome'.

"What?" Said Ron, "There's got to be more on it than that?"

Hermione scanned through the book, but could find no further references. "Well, there's got to be plenty on this somewhere - we just have to go through the Muggle section and find all the books about modern day mysteries. Come on, Let's get looking."

After an hour's search, ten books were piled in the centre of the table. They each took a book and started reading. After another two hours, only one book remained and they had found nothing further about Rhedae.

"I don't know about you lot, but I'm starving!" said Ron. "Coming to lunch?"

"Ron! We've only got one book left to go through," said Hermione.

Harry laughed, "When it comes to a fight between Ron's stomach and anything else in this world, there's only one winner. Come on, let's go. We can come back here later."

"No, I'll stay and go through the book. You three go to lunch, and I'll grab a sandwich later," said Hermione.

Ginny made eyes at the boys and gestured to the library door with her head, "I'll stay with Hermi. You two go." They nodded knowingly and left for the Great Hall.

Hermione and Ginny settled down and looked at the index at the back of the book. There was no reference to Rhedae.

"That's strange," said Hermione, "This book is about modern day mysteries, so there should be something here. Wait a minute. Rhedae - that footnote said that it disappeared forever, leaving a small village. I wonder if it's called something else now - you know, like London. The Romans called it Londinium before it was renamed."

"You may be right, Hermi," said Ginny, "But before we look any further, can .. can I ask you something?"

Hermione put down the book and looked at her friend, "Of course, Ginny. What?"

"I talked to Ron last night. He told me that you liked somebody ..."

"Ron and his big mouth!" interrupted Hermione; "I wish I hadn't said anything now."

"But Hermi, we're all worried about you. Who is this boy?"

"What? What do you mean ALL? Who else has Ron told?"

"Calm down, Hermi. He only told Harry and me."

"He told Harry? Oh no!"

"But we're your best friends. And like I said, we're worried about you."

Hermione's anger evaporated then, "Look Ginny, thanks for your concern but I can handle this myself. I can't tell you who the boy is - he doesn't even know I like him. And .. and it's best if it stays that way. There's no need to worry about me, so please forget it."

Ginny wasn't happy, but she had known that Hermione would react something like this. And she also knew that nothing she could do would shift her. But she certainly wouldn't forget it - she knew what it was like to feel that way for somebody, and not have those feelings returned.

"If you say so, Hermi."

"Right, back to the book. Now let's see ... Let's look at the chapter titles, maybe that'll help." Hermione looked at the front of the book and ran her finger down the list of chapters. "No ... no ... no ... what's this? 'A Merovingian Mystery' - chapter 11. That other book referred to the Merovingians in the footnote."

She eagerly turned to chapter 11, and the two girls began to read.

About an hour later, Harry and Ron came back into the library carrying two plates of sandwiches for the girls. Harry looked at Ginny and raised his eyebrows questioningly. Ginny frowned and quietly shook her head.

Hermione looked up from the parchment, which was covered in the notes she had made. "We've found something - not a lot, but at least we now know where Rhedae is."

"Great - where?" said Ron.

"I'll read you my notes - there's a bit of background to this mystery," and she started reading from the parchment in front of her ...

Berenger Sauniere was the parish priest of a small village set on a hilltop in the Langedoc region of Southern France. During the late 19th and early 20th century, he had been receiving vast sums of money to refurbish the local church and also to build many structures in the area. Sauniere died in 1917, leaving the secret of where he got his fabulous wealth to his housekeeper, Marie Denarnaud, who promised to reveal it on her deathbed -- but sadly she had a stroke, which left her paralysed and unable to speak before her death in 1953.

Sauniere's confession before his death was so shocking that the priest who heard it rushed, pale-faced, from his bedside, having denied him absolution and last rites.

The mystery is made greater by several parchments found by Sauniere in 1891, which contained a fairly simple cipher. They were apparently written by his predecessor, Abbe Antoine Bigou. The parchments were, on the face of it, Latin transcriptions of passages from the Bible Gospels, but they contained deeper mysteries. Sauniere also appears to have left certain other "clues" in the highly unusual redesign of his church and of the other structures in the area. Hidden within those Latin parchments was a message in French, which translates as :

"THIS TREASURE BELONGS TO DAGOBERT II KING AND TO SION AND HE IS THERE DEAD."

Within the second parchment was an even stranger message:

*SHEPHERDESS NO TEMPTATION THAT POUSSIN TENIERS HOLD THE KEY PEACE
681 BY THE CROSS AND THIS HORSE OF GOD I COMPLETE THIS DAEMON
GUARDIAN AT MIDDAY BLUE APPLES.*

During his reconstruction of the church, Sauniere is also said to have discovered a secret chamber below one of the flagstones in the main aisle. When he lifted the flagstone, the underside of it contained a carving of a knight on horseback carrying a child. It is thought that the child was Sigisbert, son of Dagobert II, who was secreted to the city of Rhedae (now the

village of Rennes-le-Chateau) after the murder of his father - the last of the Merovingian kings.

To this day, despite research by writers, scholars, historians and treasure-seekers from around the world, the secret of the mystery has yet to be revealed. This is not to say that more important information and clues have not been uncovered. The following is a brief list of some of the theories put forward as to what Saunière's secret might reveal:

- *Visigoth gold, which comprised much of the treasure of King Solomon including the solid gold Menorrah, the seven-branched candelabra belonging to the Jews and of which all trace was lost after its arrival in Carcassonne.*

- *The treasure of Dagobert II.*

- *The treasure of Blanche de Castille, being the ransom money for her son, St Louis, which she later hid in the Rhazès after learning of his execution at the hands of his captors.*

- *An object of great religious significance such as the Holy Grail, the Ark of the Covenant or the Menorrah.*

- *An important document, such as evidence of the marriage of Jesus and Mary Magdalen, implying that their descendants still live on.*

- *The location of the tomb of Jesus on Mount Cardou, which is close to Rennes-le-Chateau.*

There have been many books written about the mystery, and further information can found there.'

"Wow!" exclaimed Ron, "I love stories about buried treasure."

"Look at that line there," said Harry, pointing to the item that had attracted his attention, 'Rhedaë - now the village of Rennes-le-Chateau.'

"That's right, Harry," said Hermione, "And the message from your amulet told you to go there - 'where you will find the ancient secret to be uncovered'. Now this is telling me that the mystery of Rhedaë is not about a normal treasure - although it's obvious that Saunière got hold of vast sums of money - but about something else, perhaps something spiritual - to many people, that is a treasure in itself, greater than any amount of gold and jewels. And there's something else that this is telling me. You know how the ministry hides certain things from Muggles?"

"What - like making them think that Hogwarts is an old ruined castle?" Said Ron.

"Yes, well the same thing could be at work here. We know that magic is somehow involved, because of the amulet and the message, so there might be somebody trying to hide what the mystery is. But in a very subtle and clever way."

"How's that, Hermi?" asked Ginny.

"Well, what if someone wanted to hide whatever the secret is, but someone else found out about it? And it certainly looks as if that priest found out about it. But what if he told someone

else, or someone else found out about it, somehow? Now if you wanted to keep the secret hidden, how would you go about it?"

"Well I'd alter their memory," said Ron.

"Yes, but what if you didn't know how many people had been told or you didn't know who the person was who'd been told. What then?"

All three just shrugged, not sure where this was going.

"Well I know what I'd do. I'd start putting out a lot of misinformation - you know, write articles or a book or get my friends to write articles and books about it, but each one giving a different answer to the riddle, and each one false. Of course, other people not involved in the conspiracy would pick up on it - that's just human nature - and start to write their own books, each with their own pet theory. That way, the whole issue is clouded, and you wouldn't be able to pick out the true facts from the false - and the book here says that a lot of books have been written about the mystery, and it lists a lot of weird and wonderful explanations. I think it's obvious."

"Brilliant, my dear Watson," said Harry, "Hermione, you never cease to amaze me. How on earth were you able to work that lot out in such a short period of time?"

"Harry!" said Hermione, blushing, "It really wasn't that difficult. All the signs are there."

"Well maybe," said Ginny, "But I certainly wouldn't have been able to work it out."

"So - it seems that Trelawney was right, for once. I'm going to have to go on a long journey to the south of France. But how am I going to get to Rennes-le-Chateau?" said Harry with a frown on his face.

"And if she's right," said Ron, "she also warned about great danger."

"First thing - your not going, Harry," said Hermione, "at least not on your own."

"Now hang on, Hermi. Ron just said about the danger - I'm not letting anybody come with me. I've got to do this on my own."

"No way, Harry," said Ron, "We're not going to stand back while you get all the fun. We're going. And that's that! And don't forget, the amulet message said about the helpers going as well."

"Now that that's settled," smiled Hermione, "The second thing - before anybody goes anywhere, we've got to properly research what we're getting into. We need to get a lot more information."

"But there aren't any more books on it in the Muggle section," Ginny pointed out.

"No. But there are loads in the Muggle world - this book says so. We just need to get hold of them."

"How are we going to do that?" said Ron, "We cant leave the castle, and in any case, you said yourself that most of them are a pack of lies anyway. So what's the point?"

"Whatever the different theories, there's always a grain of truth in them. Like the clues in the unusual church design the book talks about - it would be silly to lie about that because anybody can walk into the church to check it. There must be loads of other 'facts' that we can pick out from all the available books."

"All right, you've convinced us, Hermi," said Harry, "but how are we going to get hold of them?"

"I'll be going home for Christmas, so I can get them then," she replied.

"Hermione, the book shops are going to be closed all over the holidays," Harry reminded her.

Hermione thought for a moment, "Then I'll ask my parents to get as many books on the subject as they can after the holidays and send them to us here."

Harry reached over and squeezed her shoulder, "What would we do without you, Hermi?"

The buzz of excitement and activity among the girls of Hogwarts showed that it was 21st December - the day of the Yule ball. The Great Hall had been decorated, and twelve huge Christmas trees were spread around the walls, each one adorned with magical ornaments that twinkled, shone and twirled around.

The Yule feast had been eaten, and the band had started playing. Ron and Hermione were sitting at their table watching Ginny and Justin as they danced to a fast number. They were obviously enjoying themselves. Harry and Kristen were also dancing, but they didn't seem to notice the tempo of the music since they were still dancing very close together.

Hermione couldn't help but sneak longing glances at them, all the while trying to hide where she was looking from Ron. Eventually, Ron asked her to dance, and they joined the merry throng on the dance floor. Gradually, Hermione got into the spirit of the time of year and was surprised to find that she was enjoying herself. Ron helped a lot because lately, he had not been picking arguments with her as he usually did, and they were getting on better than ever.

When the ball finished, Harry, Kristen, Ron and Hermione walked back to their tower together. They had just given the password to the Fat Lady when a red-faced Ginny came running up to them. As they went into the common room, she caught Hermione's arm and gestured her upstairs to the dormitories.

"Hermi - he kissed me," said an excited Ginny as she sat on Hermione's bed next to her.

Hermione smiled, "Are you sure that's all he did, Ginny? By the colour of your face ..."

"Hermi! Of course that's all he did. It was my first kiss," she said the last part very quietly.

"So you really like Justin?"

"Yes, I think so. I mean, the kiss wasn't like I expected it to be. Parvati keeps going on about her first kiss being a mind-blowing experience, but it wasn't like that. It was nice, though. He was very romantic - and he's a gentleman. He knows how to treat a girl properly. I feel comfortable with him. Oh I had a great time tonight, Hermi. Did you?"

Hermione gave her a weak smile and nodded.

Ginny kicked herself mentally, "Oh Hermi. I'm sorry - I didn't think. Was he there tonight? The boy you really like?"

"Yes he was, Ginny," she said sadly.

"Was he with another girl?"

"Yes. ... Ginny, I'm tired now and I need to get some sleep ..."

"Sorry, Hermi. I'll see you in the morning." Ginny thought about her friend as she went to her own dorm. It was obvious that she wasn't getting over the boy, whoever he was. She just didn't know how she could help her.

Sirius and Ceri were in the Shrieking shack that night. It was 10.00pm and they'd be Apparating to Callanish a little later. They'd studied the photographs that Ceri had managed to find in the library and had spotted a good place to hide.

"Are you going home for Christmas, Ceri?" asked Sirius.

"No. There's nothing there for me any longer. I'll just have a quiet time in the guest room eating chocolates, and catching up on my reading."

"I'll be at Hogwarts over Christmas. There's only a few of us staying - Dumbledore, McGonagall, Snape and my good friend Remus Lupin. It'll just be like old times - Remus and I were at Hogwarts together as students. It's just a great pity that James and Lily won't be there," he said wistfully, "But Harry will. He's the only student staying so you'll get to meet him at last. Look, Ceri, you're very welcome to spend as much time with us as you like."

"That's nice of you, Sirius, but won't you want to be on your own with Harry and Remus? You see so little of them."

"No, of course not. I'd .. we'd love to have you spend time with us. Settled?"

"Yes, as long as you're sure I won't be intruding. Thanks, Sirius. Look, we'd better be going. We want to make sure that the hiding place is ok."

They pulled their cloaks tightly around them as they arrived at the stone circle. It was bitterly cold in the north-westerly wind that whistled around the large standing stones. They quickly found the hiding place and looked about them. It was about 30 yards from the circle, near enough for their Animagus ears to pick up what was said at the meeting. The spot was behind a partially fallen menhir, one of a number that formed an avenue leading into the main circle

of stones. Behind the menhir was a large depression in the ground, ideal for a dog and a wolf to crouch inside and listen. They transformed and settled down to wait ...

The arrival of the inner circle followed the familiar pattern. First came Lucius Malfoy and the other Death Eaters, followed by Voldemort and Wormtail.

Ceri was pleased to see that Sirius again held his anger in check.

"Report!" said Voldemort.

Each of the Death Eaters gave what turned out to be a progress report on their recruiting activities. The last one, which was similar to the others, was given by Avery. "My, Lord. We have recruited 50 new servants in the last two weeks. We have found two spies in their midst, and both are now dead. I am continuing to proceed with great caution, and our security is at a high level."

"Anything else to report?" said Voldemort.

"Yes, my Lord," answered Malfoy, "Two matters of very great interest were reported to me by our friend at the school. First, Potter has a new girlfriend. She's an American exchange student staying at Hogwarts until the end of the school year."

"Interesting, Lucius. But no doubt Dumbledore is giving her a lot of protection if she's Potter's girlfriend. Just keep an eye on things for the moment. We may be able to do something later. And the second thing?"

"This is strange, my Lord. Our friend was present when Potter and his friends activated a message amulet. He had the good presence of mind to write down what it said." He pulled a piece of parchment from his robes and read out the message. "Our friend has reported that they have been spending a lot of time in the library, lately - he's sure that they are doing some research, but he doesn't know if they've found anything yet."

"Now that *is* very interesting, Lucius. Tell our friend that I am very pleased with him. Does anyone know where Rhedae is?" Each of the Death Eaters shook their head.

"Hmmm. Anima Summa. Now where have I heard that before?" said Voldemort, as much to himself as anyone else. "I think that this is to do with the emanations - it must be! Lucius, tell our friend to increase his activities. I want him to find out what Potter knows about this message. He has to find out where Rhedae is, and if and when Potter plans to go there. If this works out, we can intercept him, and any of his friends, when they leave Dumbledore's protection. I know that Dumbledore won't go with him - he'll want to make sure nothing happens to his precious Hogwarts."

"Yes, my Lord. I'll arrange it straight away."

"Avery. I think you can take a break from your recruiting activities for a short while - leave that to your next in charge. I want you to arrange a little distraction - a nice surprise for Potter. Come to my cave tomorrow night and I'll tell you what I want done."

"Yes, my Lord," Avery bowed to his master.

"This has turned out to be a very interesting meeting, my servants. Now go."

Voldemort and Wormtail vanished, followed by the rest of the inner circle.

Sirius and Ceri transformed and looked at each other.

"What the hell is Harry up to now, Ceri? That boy's got a nose for trouble."

"Whatever it Sirius, it sounds pretty important to me. Do you know where Rhedae is?"

"Not a clue, Ceri. But knowing Harry - and especially Hermione - they'll find out. And they'll try to go there."

"Have you heard about this Anima Summa?"

"Uhh. Yes, I have. Very few people know about it - and we were all sworn to secrecy by Dumbledore. That's the one thing that I heard tonight that frightened me. If 'You Know Who' finds out what it is, he won't rest until Harry's dead - he may even stage a mass attack on Hogwarts, itself!"

"So what is it, Sirius?"

"I can't break my promise to Dumbledore, Ceri. But we have to go and see him straight away about this, and I'll ask him to tell you about it - although I don't think I need do that. I'm pretty sure he'll tell you tonight anyway - he trusts you, Ceri."

They Apparated back to Hogsmeade and made all haste to the school. Ceri and Padfoot had to knock Dumbledore up from his bed. "I hope this is urgent," he said when Sirius had transformed, "An old man needs his beauty sleep, you know."

Sirius laughed, "You - old, Headmaster? That'll be the day."

The two sat down opposite Dumbledore, and told him what they had heard. "This is serious," said Dumbledore, "You're right in your assessment of what Voldemort will do if he finds out about the Anima Summa Sirius. Ceri, I think it's about time we let you in on a little secret."

He told Ceri about the prophecy, and everything they had found out since, including Kristen's birthday. "So you see, Ceri, it's very important that neither Harry, Kristen nor anyone else finds out about this."

"I can see the sense of that, Professor. But haven't we forgotten something? Harry already knows he is the Anima Summa - it was in the message."

"Ah, yes - the message. Harry seems to be getting involved in momentous things again, doesn't he? I'm not worried that he knows the term - but I would be if he finds out what it means. Now I don't for one minute think that he'll find out - at least, not from the school library or any other source I can think of. As far as I know, there's only one book that gives the explanation - and that's locked safely away at my old University. The only person who may uncover something, or at least have a good attempt at putting two and two together, is Hermione Granger. She's a very clever girl."

"Do you know where Rhedae is, professor?" asked Sirius.

"No - but I'll bet 50 galleons that Hermione has found out by now!"

"I think I'll have to have a little talk with Harry," said Sirius, "I don't want him doing anything stupid and I want to know why he hasn't told us anything about this."

The headmaster thought for a few moments "No, Sirius. Don't say anything to him for the time being. Harry's not stupid. I'm sure he'll tell one of us two if he intends leaving the safety of Hogwarts. Just give him some time - he and his friends are probably gathering as much information as possible about Rhedae, and if I'm not mistaken, they'll have a plan all worked out before they decide to speak to us. There is something that must be done, though. I don't know what Voldemort and Avery are planning, but it won't be pleasant and it will probably be sooner rather than later."

"Yes, what are we going to do about that, Headmaster?" said Sirius.

"I'm taking you both off your spying duties, for now. I've already got Remus keeping a look out for Harry, and the others are watching all the possible Anima Summas - although from what Minerva tells me, it looks like it's Kristen Davis - but we can't be certain. I want you both to keep a close eye on Harry, Hermione, Ron, Ginny and Kristen. Work with Remus and Professor McGonagall on this. It's important that we protect them now, more than ever. I really think something very big indeed is going to take place, and the safety of the whole world depends on the outcome - I think it's that important. Will your people be ok with this, Ceri?"

"They've given me a free hand, Professor. They've told me that if you authorise something, then it's ok with them."

"Thank you, my dear. This may be a long-term job. It doesn't end when Harry finds his Anima Summa - they'll both need to be protected until they can build up their powers - and no one knows how long that will take. Now, the Christmas holidays start tomorrow, and all the students, apart from Harry, are going home. Your immediate task is to keep as close to Harry as possible - although you're probably planning to do that anyway. Just make sure he's accounted for at all times. Right, time to resume my beauty sleep - Sirius, you can take the guest room next to Ceri. Good night to you both - and well done. I appreciate your efforts."

Sirius and Ceri turned to leave, "Oh, Sirius. One more thing," said Dumbledore, turning, "Harry might just have a little surprise for you - ask him, and tell him I said it's ok to show you."

Sirius looked quizzically at the retreating headmaster as he walked back to his bedroom.

Harry stood outside the main doors of the school the following morning. His friends were leaving for home, and all the students were waiting for the carriages to take them to Hogsmeade station. He'd earlier said goodbye to Kristen, who had taken a port key back to her home in America.

"I'll be thinking about you Harry," she'd said as they broke their clinch, "I hate going home and leaving you on your own, but I couldn't persuade my parents to let me stay."

"Don't worry, Kristen. The time will fly and you'll soon be back."

"Yes, I guess," she said dubiously. But then she brightened, "But at least I'll get to see my friends and tell them all about you. They are going to be so jealous!"

Harry grinned and waved as she caught hold of the can of coke and disappeared with a 'pop'.

Now he was waving goodbye to Ron, Hermione and Ginny as they entered one of the carriages. He thought that Hermione looked a bit off colour - she wasn't her usual self at all. 'I bet she's pining over that boy she's got a crush on. The git!' he thought as his friends were driven through the main gates. He turned back to the school sadly and walked back to the common room to do his homework. 'At least,' he thought, 'that will keep me busy until Christmas day.'

Harry opened his eyes to a chilly Christmas morning. It was snowing outside. He looked towards the bottom of his bed, but was disappointed that there were no presents in sight. When they went home for Christmas, his friends normally left his presents with Dobby, and he played Santa during the night. Harry had given presents to Kristen and his friends before they left.

He went over to the window and looked out to a scene normally reserved for the prettiest Christmas cards. There was about a foot of snow covering the fields, and the branches of all the trees were bent over with the weight of the snow they carried. He was thinking about what his friends were doing right then, when the door to the dorm burst open, and he turned to see his godfather grinning at him. "Merry Christmas, Harry."

"Sirius! Merry Christmas. When did you get here?"

"Oh I've been here a while. I'm staying in one of the guest rooms all over the holiday, so I guess I'll be seeing quite a bit of you for the next week."

"That's great Sirius. I've done all my homework, and I thought I was in for a week of boredom. You've made my Christmas."

"Well, don't you want to open your presents? I told Dobby to put them in my room, so we can do that together."

"Great! Come on, let's go."

As they walked up to his guest room, Sirius turned to Harry, "Oh, and I hope you don't mind, Harry. But I've asked Ceri - you know, the American auror - to join us. She hasn't got any family any more, as I told you, so she's on her own and I couldn't see her spending Christmas alone."

"That's fine by me, Sirius. I know what it's like to be alone, and I wouldn't wish that on anyone, especially this time of year."

Harry and Sirius were grinning as they entered the guest room. Harry saw a very attractive woman in her early thirties sitting on a chair by the table. She had longish dark brown hair and hazel eyes. She was smiling at them both, and her eyes held a twinkle as she pointed to the pile of parcels on the table.

"Harry, I'd like you to meet Ceri. Ceri, this is Harry Potter, my godson."

"Pleased to meet you, Ceri," Harry smiled as he took her hand.

"You too, Harry," she said as she looked at the youngster before her. She marvelled at his bright green eyes, and there was no mistaking that scar on his forehead, above which was the unruliest mop of black hair she had ever seen. 'Whoever ends up with him is going to be one lucky witch,' she thought to herself.

"Come on. Open your presents," she said. Harry laughed and dived towards the table.

The first parcel he picked up had Ceri's name on it, "Hey, Ceri. This for you," he said handing her the package, which was quite large.

She looked surprised as she took it from him, "Strange. I don't get presents any more," she muttered. Harry heard her, and he felt really bad as he thought about the family she'd lost.

Ceri looked startled as she immediately picked up the strong emotions coming from Harry - compassion, sorrow, understanding - and was even more surprised to sense that the emotions were directed at herself. 'He's so mature,' she thought, 'kids that age don't normally feel those sort of things for older people, especially for someone they hardly know. Sirius was right - he is special'

Sirius noticed Ceri's pensive look and guessed what was going on, "Harry. I ought to warn you that Ceri's an empath - she can feel strong emotions."

"Oh - I didn't know," he looked embarrassed and said nervously to Ceri, "Sorry - I'll have to try to keep my thoughts to myself."

She walked up to Harry and gave him a motherly hug. "No need to be sorry, Harry. Your emotions then told me all I needed to know about you - and I think we'll get on just fine. Not that your godfather hasn't talked about you - he hardly stops. So I suppose I knew you even before we met."

Harry grinned at her, "Well - aren't you going to open it?"

She ripped open the package and pulled out a thick, fur-lined robe in a deep blue colour. "Oh, it's beautiful. But who'd give me this?" A small card fell to the floor, and she bent and picked it up. She read it out aloud 'To Ceri - Happy Christmas - from Sirius.'

"Uh - since you're forced to be in this cold climate, I thought it would be a bit warmer than the one you wore last night," said Sirius.

"Oh Sirius, you shouldn't have. But thank you. I really appreciate this." Her eyes filled up at the thought that someone had bothered to give her a gift. The last time that had happened.

...And a tear rolled down her cheek. She hurriedly wiped it away and laughed, "Come on, there's plenty more to be opened."

After 20 minutes, all the parcels had been opened. Ceri had given Sirius a new wizard hat, "I thought yours looked a bit the worse for wear," she had said.

Harry was pleased with all his presents - this was turning out to be one of the best Christmases ever. He grinned as he looked at Sirius and Ceri - it was like having his own family to share Christmas with.

"Ceri, I'm sorry I didn't have anything for you - I would have got something if I'd known. And thanks again for the trainers - they're great."

"Don't be silly, Harry - you weren't to know."

"Oh Harry," said Sirius, "Have you got a surprise for me? Professor Dumbledore told me that it'd be ok for you to show me."

Harry looked puzzled for a moment, and then realised what Dumbledore meant. He grinned at Sirius, "Well it probably will be a surprise to you," he said, "but I think we need to go outside first."

Sirius and Ceri looked at each other and shrugged, "Well, I suppose I need to try out my new robe, and you your new hat," she said as they skipped down the staircase.

Outside, it had stopped snowing but by the look of the leaden sky, not for long. Harry walked around to the greenhouses, and looked about to make sure no one was in sight. "Ready?"

They both nodded. Harry closed his eyes and concentrated, and transformed into his golden eagle Animagus form. To say that Sirius and Ceri were surprised was an understatement. Harry looked with satisfaction at their wide-open mouths and staring eyes.

It was then his turn to be surprised as Ceri transformed into a beautiful she-wolf, quickly followed by the appearance of Padfoot. The two land-locked animals started running through the snow down towards the lake, and Harry took flight and swooped after them, diving at them and pulling up at the last moment. They frolicked about for a while before they all transformed, laughing delightedly.

"How long have you been an Animagus, Harry?" asked Sirius.

"Oh, not long. I still need to do a fair bit of flying to strengthen my wings. Professor McGonagall helped me with it after the summer holiday."

"Who else knows about it - apart from Dumbledore, that is?"

"Only Hermione, Ron and Ginny. I'm illegal, you know - Dumbledore thought it would be a good idea to keep it secret for now."

"Well that makes two of us," said Sirius, "I won't register until it's made public that I've been pardoned."

"Haven't you told your girlfriend, Harry?" asked Ceri.

"No not yet. I'll have to get Dumbledore's permission first."

"How is Kristen, Harry? Remus tells me she's a nice girl."

"Yes she is," Harry started to redden a bit, "but we've only been going together for a few weeks."

Ceri again sensed emotion coming from Harry, but it wasn't what she expected - she found it difficult to read, and it seemed to be one of confusion - confusion about girls in general. 'Oh well,' she thought, 'he is very young and at a vulnerable age when it comes to girls. It's strange. He's so mature in some ways but not in others.'

"How do your friends feel about you and Kristen? I mean they can't be seeing as much of you now can they?" Sirius asked.

"Oh they're fine about it. And I still spend plenty of time with them," Harry frowned slightly and he continued, "I'm .. that is, we're all a bit worried about Hermione, Sirius."

"Hermione? Why? What's wrong with her?" Sirius asked hurriedly.

"Well, Ron got it out of her that she really likes this boy - we don't know who though. Ginny tried to talk to her but she just clammed up. She says that this boy doesn't even know that she likes him, but she seems certain that he doesn't like her that way, you know? We thought it was just a simple crush, at first, but Ginny can see that she's still hurting - we're worried that she might get sick or something."

"Oh no, not Hermione," said Sirius, "You haven't met her yet, Ceri, but she's the kindest, warmest, not to say the most intelligent - and I mean mega intelligent - girl I know. I hate to think that she's suffering - she doesn't deserve that."

"Tell me about it, Sirius. If I find out who it is, I'll knock some sense into him!" Said Harry angrily.

"It sounds like you, Ron and Ginny are very protective of Hermione, Harry," said Ceri, "I think the best thing you can do for now is let her know that you're always there for her and just keep an eye on her."

"Thanks, Ceri. We'll certainly be doing that," said Harry.

"Right - Christmas dinner will be ready soon," said Sirius, "I promised Remus that we'd call in on him before we all go down to the Great Hall. Come on, let's go."

Chapter 6 The Mystery of The Secret of Rhedae

Harry spent a lot of time over the holidays with his godfather, Ceri and Remus. It was one of the best Christmases he'd ever had. When the weather permitted, the three Animagi went out into the school grounds and spent many happy hours bounding (and flying) around. Harry could feel his wings getting stronger every time he flew, and he loved to just hover with his wings spread, riding the air currents and watching the large black dog and the she wolf chasing around below him.

There was a full moon during this period, and Remus - a werewolf - spent the critical period of his change in the shrieking shack, with Padfoot and the she-wolf for company. Despite his obvious dislike for Remus, Snape still brewed for him the wolfsbane potion that eased the werewolf's natural instincts to search for blood and flesh.

The new-year was just two days old when the last day of the holiday arrived - too soon for Harry, even though he'd be seeing his friends again. With Hogwarts full of teachers and students once more, it would be difficult to find the time and space to practice his Animagus flying.

He was waiting in front of the main doors, students streaming past him, when he spotted his friends getting out of one of the carriages. They smiled, waving, as they ran up to him, and started talking animatedly about the holiday and the presents they'd had. Ginny was telling them about the box of chocolates that Fred and George had jinxed, when Kristen came running up to them and flung her arms around Harry, hugging him tightly, "I missed you, Harry," she said.

Ron stood grinning at the pair as they kissed, but Hermione lowered her eyes and looked at the ground in front of her. Ginny seemed indifferent to the display of affection - she had now well and truly got over her crush.

"Come on, dinner's going to be served soon," said Harry and they all went into the Great Hall. Harry hung back and looked at Hermione. She seemed a bit pale and her eyes weren't as bright as usual. He frowned as he asked, "Did you ask your parents to get the books, Hermi?"

"Yes. But they won't be able to start looking for them until the middle of the month - they've both got to go to an important dentists' convention. But we can spend the time making sure we're up to date with our assignments, and we really should start revising for our OWLS. The more time we spend on it now, the more time we'll have to do our research when the books arrive."

"But the OWLS are months away, Hermi!"

"Harry - you can never start too early when your future's at stake. I told Ron the same." And she walked ahead and sat by Ginny at the Gryffindor table.

Early January heralded the approach of the Quidditch house matches, and Harry spent most of his free time holding training and practice sessions with the team. He followed the same pattern that had served the school team so well, but this time he had a lot of trouble getting

Fred and George to put in the work - there were no carrots to dangle before them any longer, since their triple fillet steaks had stopped after the match with Salem.

Harry spent many exasperated hours trying to think up ways to get them to train properly but eventually, on the sound advice of Ron, he just gave up and accepted that Fred and George were going to do things their way. After all, as Ron pointed out, they had been the best Beaters in the school by far for quite a few years now, and that was without any training at all. When Harry guiltily approached the pair and apologised that he'd been acting too much like their brother Percy - who had always been pedantic in the extreme during his time at Hogwarts - they just laughed, slapped him on the back, and told him not to worry about it.

The first match of the season would be between Gryffindor and Ravenclaw. Harry usually enjoyed that match more than the others - the Ravenclaw team was not as dirty as Slytherin but were more skilful than Hufflepuff. He felt that this was a match that tested his skill rather than his ability to avoid the fouls that the Slytherins constantly tried to inflict on him and the lack of any credible opposition from the Hufflepuffs.

And so the match day arrived, and the stands around the Quidditch field were filled with students, excited that the season was finally starting. Ron, Hermione and Ginny found seats at the top of one of the stands where they had a great view of the action.

Harry led the Gryffindor team onto the field to the cheers of the rest of his house, and the boos of the Slytherins. He and Kristen were talking genially and smiling, both happy that they would soon be in their element.

Harry walked over and shook hands with Cho Chang, the Ravenclaw captain, who smiled and wished him luck - because he was going to need it, she said. Harry just grinned at her. Madam Hooch blew her whistle and the teams took to the air. She then released the four balls and the match started.

It turned out to be one of the better matches witnessed by the school. There was a lot of skill on show, not least from Kristen, who performed admirably in goal. The Chasers were fairly evenly matched, but after an hour, Gryffindor led 80 - 30, mainly as a result of the efforts of Fred and George who gave the Ravenclaw Chasers a torrid time.

Lee Jordan, who was commentating, attracted approving glances from Professor McGonagall for once. His commentary was almost unbiased - but after all, Slytherin weren't playing.

As usual, Cho followed Harry wherever he went - or tried to. Harry couldn't help teasing her, and at the same time drawing excited shouts from the watchers, when he pretended to see the snitch and went tearing to the other end of the field. Cho almost always fell for it.

When Harry finally did see the snitch, Cho thought that he was fainting again when he zoomed towards the ground and she didn't follow him. Unopposed, he clutched the wriggling snitch in his hand and held his arm above his head as he lapped the field. Gryffindor had won 270 - 50. After receiving the congratulations of his team mates, Harry and Kristen walked arm in arm towards the changing rooms, to the cheers of the Gryffindor students.

Late the following evening, Harry and Kristen sat in front of the common room fire with their three friends. They each had a book open in their lap, and it was quiet - they were absorbed in their revision for the Potions OWL. Hermione had bullied them into it at the evening meal earlier.

Hermione looked up and saw that Ron was grinning as he read his book. With narrowed eyes, she said, "Ron - what part are you reading?"

Ron jumped and replied, "Oh .. about the uses of Billywig stings." However, he made the mistake of slightly raising the book from his lap, and Hermione was able to see the title.

"And when did Billywig stings ever feature in Quidditch tactics?" She glared at Ron, who had been reading, 'Quidditch Through The Ages.' "You'll never pass your Potions OWL, Ron!"

The other three couldn't help but laugh when Ron, stung by Hermione's comments said, "Maybe not - but they should have an OWL for Quidditch and I'd fly through that one!"

"Honestly!" said an exasperated Hermione.

Just then Harry noticed a flicker out of the corner of his eye. He looked up at the window and saw a dull, reddish glow.

"What's that?" He said to the others, and went over to look out.

"Quick, come on, we've got to help him," he suddenly shouted. The other four rushed to the window and saw that there were flames shooting from the roof of Hagrid's hut. The bare trees of the Forbidden Forest were outlined eerily in silhouette behind the hut. In the light of the flames they could see Hagrid frantically trying to put the fire out by throwing what little snow remained on the ground, up onto the roof. Fang was a little way off, yelping with fright.

Harry dashed to the portrait hole, quickly followed by the others, and hurtled through. By the time they approached the hut, the fire had taken a firm grip. Hagrid was sitting in front of the hut, his arm around Fang, looking forlornly at the flames.

"Hagrid," shouted Harry, "Are you all right?"

Hagrid looked up, "Harry! Hey you lot stay away from those flames."

"Quick," shouted Hermione, "We can do the shrinking charm on the hut and when it's small enough we'll easily be able to put out the fire."

The five youngsters pointed their wands at the hut and shouted, "*REDUCIO*." The hut immediately began to shrink in size, and when they stopped the charm, it was the size of a doll's house.

"Stand back, everyone," shouted Hagrid and he ran over to pile more snow onto the flames.

Unknown to them all, six Death Eaters led by Avery, had quietly come out of the forest and were now standing behind them.

"Potter!" Shouted Avery, "I thought our little diversion would draw you out. *CRUCIO*" His wand, which was aimed at Harry, spouted a reddish light, which hit Harry in the chest.

Harry, although startled by the appearance of the Death Eaters, instinctively applied the blocking technique that Remus had taught him. He mentally drew shields over the nerve endings in his chest just as the light hit him. Harry just looked back at Avery with a smile on his face - silently thanking his professor. Avery was so astonished that Harry was not writhing on the ground in pain, that he lowered his wand and just stared, disbelieving.

"*EXPELLIARMUS*," shouted Harry, and Avery's wand flew out of his hand, and he was sent crashing to the ground onto his back.

While Harry and Avery duelled, there was a lot of frantic action going on around them.

"*STUPEFY*," shouted Hermione and one of the Death Eaters crumpled to the ground.

One of the Death Eaters, who had circled around towards the hut to try to get behind the teenagers, lifted his wand to hurl a curse at Harry's back. He never managed to utter the curse. He hadn't noticed Hagrid crouched over his tiny hut, nor did he stay conscious long enough to feel the almighty blow on the top of his head as Hagrid's clenched fist came crashing down on it.

"Get out of the light," shouted Hagrid, and Ron and Ginny dived for the cover of darkness, with curses thrown by the Death Eaters narrowly missing them.

Kristen was not so lucky. One of the Death Eaters yelled "*FLIPENDO*," and a ball of energy hit her in the stomach, flinging her backwards towards a tree. She crashed into it and fell to the ground, unmoving. Harry saw it happen as if in slow motion, and felt sickened as he ran over to where Kristen was lying. "Nooooo," he shouted.

Avery and the remaining four Death Eaters turned at the sound of shouting coming from the direction of the school, and saw three adults fast approaching them. Avery, his natural survival instinct now uppermost in his mind, and one of the Death Eaters managed to gain the cover of the forest and disappeared into the darkness. Each of the other three were hit with stunning spells sent by the three adults - Sirius, Ceri and Remus.

The whole action had lasted for only 2 minutes, at the end of which, five Death Eaters were captured, one with a fractured skull, and Kristen lay, still unmoving, cradled in Harry's arms.

"Kristen .. Kristen," he whispered as he rocked her, his head buried in her hair.

Sirius, Ceri and Remus ran over to him, and Ceri gently pulled Harry away as Remus lifted Kristen into his arms and rushed off towards the school. Sirius caught hold of Harry by his shoulders, "Are you all right, Harry. Have you been hurt?"

"I'm all right, Sirius, but I don't think Kristen is. She was very pale." Harry raised his hand to his cheek as if to wipe away a tear, and quickly followed the retreating figure of Remus Lupin.

Sirius and Ceri looked sadly at each other and then went to make sure that none of the other 3 had been hurt. By this time, the fire had been extinguished, and the scene was only dimly

illuminated by the lights coming from the school. Sirius saw that there were quite a few of the teachers standing by the front doors as Remus reached the castle. He saw several of them turn and follow Remus inside, quickly followed by Harry.

Ron, Hermione and Ginny were taken back up to the school by Hagrid, while Ceri and Sirius secured the Death Eaters ready for the arrival of ministry Aurors. Sirius transformed into Padfoot as he saw Dumbledore and several of the teachers walk towards the hut.

In the hospital wing Harry sat next to the bed on which Remus had placed Kristen. He was holding her limp hand while Madam Pomfrey quickly examined her. She shook her head sadly, and asked Harry to leave.

"Harry, she's still alive. But she must have hit the back of her head when she collided with that tree and I'm afraid she's very ill. I'm going to have to work quickly to try to save her, and it'll be more difficult if there's someone in the way. Please go and find the Headmaster and ask him to come here." She quickly turned back to Kristen as Harry walked out into the corridor.

It took a week for Kristen to recover from her injury. Madam Pomfrey had worked her usual miracle - much to the relief of Kristen's friends. It was the first time that she had been exposed to the sort of danger that had become almost commonplace to Harry, and it had left its mark.

The normally happy, effervescent girl was now quite nervous and subdued. Harry knew from experience that it would take a while before she was fully back to her normal self again.

Charlie Weasley was in his hut, which stood just outside the large, dark forest in a remote part of Romania. He finished packing his trunk, and sat on his bed, waiting for the time that the Portkey would be activated.

His research into the birthing cycle of the group of Romanian Longhorn dragons in the forest had now been completed, and he had written the paper that he'd be giving at the Dragon Convention in London later in the year.

His ministry boss, Mr Smoothy at the Dept. of Magical Creatures, had sent him details of his contact in France, and he was looking forward to the challenge of solving the problem in the Forbidden Forest in the south of the country.

He looked again at the name of his contact - Demont Blanc. He had come across that name a year or so ago at the ministry, and knew him to be the keeper of magical creatures at the forest.

He fingered the key ring, which was the Portkey that would take him to a remote part of the Langedoc region in southern France - close to the Forbidden Forest, and not far from the tiny principality of Andorra.

The time arrived and he quickly looked around the inside of the hut that had been his home for the last nine months, before he found himself standing next to a dark-haired man of roughly the same age as himself.

"Charlie Weasley?" asked the man with only a very slight French accent. He was staring intently at Charlie.

"Yes, and you must be Demont Blanc. Pleased to meet you," he said as he shook the Frenchman's hand, "I've heard a lot about you and your work back at the ministry in London."

"Thank you. Oh, forgive me for staring like that - it's just that I haven't seen anyone with hair that colour before."

Charlie laughed. "A family trait, Demont."

"I've heard about your work with the Romanian Longhorns, Charlie. Very impressive. And that's why I sent in the request for your help. We have a colony of the dragons here in the forest, and it was they that started all the panic."

"Yes, I'd heard. What's the situation now?"

"Well, things cooled down for a while but about three months ago it started up again at an even greater intensity - and the dragons seem to be the most affected. But we can talk in more comfortable conditions - come on, let's go to my cabin. It's not far away from here."

They walked along the rough ground until they came to a small valley surrounded by trees. Nestling at the bottom of the valley, alongside a sparkling mountain stream, stood Demont's cabin.

"It's a nice spot here," remarked Charlie.

"Yes, we love it here. Far better than the noise and fumes of the town."

"We?" Asked Charlie.

"Oh, yes. I was living on my own until about six weeks ago. Then my sister arrived out of the blue. Affairs of the heart, you know. She's just split up with her boyfriend. She'd been living with him for three years, and then he found out that she's a witch. I suppose he just didn't understand and he threw her out of the house with nowhere to go. She's still very fragile about it, but I can't think of any better place in the world for her to get over something like that. She loves the countryside and she didn't really settle down in Perpignan."

"I'm sorry to hear that. She won't mind, will she? A strange man staying in the same house?"

"Oh no - not at all. She's very friendly, but I'd better warn you that she goes very quiet from time to time. Thinking about the Muggle boyfriend, no doubt."

As they went in through the front door of the cabin, Demont's sister was sitting by the fire. She stood up and came over to the two men. "This is my sister, Nadine. Nadine, this is Charlie Weasley - the dragon expert from London."

Charlie shook hands with Nadine, and looked at her intently. He saw a pretty girl, with an elfin face surrounded by shiny black hair. She had a cute little nose and her eyes were a deep blue. He felt instantly attracted to her, but did his best to hide his obvious admiration.

"Would you like something to drink, Charlie? A glass of wine perhaps?" She spoke English with a flawless accent.

"Uh, yes, fine Nadine. Red if you've got it."

"Of course. Demont, can you get a fresh bottle of red from the storage shed please?"

"Oh don't go to any trouble," said Charlie

"No trouble at all, Charlie. We keep our wine in the shed down by the stream - I diverted part of it to run underneath the end of the shed. We keep the bottles in the running water - I swear it tastes much better when it's chilled that way. I'll only be a few minutes." Demont walked back out into the fresh mountain air.

Charlie and Nadine sat by the fire and smiled at each other, "So, Charlie, do you still play Quidditch?"

"Only rarely, I'm afraid, I've been pretty busy for the past ..." Charlie paused as if he'd had a sudden thought, "How do you know I play Quidditch?"

"The legendary Gryffindor Seeker and captain extraordinaire? Everyone at Hogwarts knows about you, Charlie"

"You were at Hogwarts, Nadine?"

"Yes, I transferred there from Beauxbatons for my seventh year - that was the year after you left the school. Everyone talked about you and the way you won the school cup."

Charlie looked a bit embarrassed, "What house were you in? Did you play?"

"I was in Ravenclaw, and I played Chaser for the house team. I don't think I was very good though. Have you been back to Hogwarts, Charlie? I loved the place, and it was a real privilege to have Professor Dumbledore as the headmaster. He's a great man."

"Yes, he certainly is. I spoke to him last year when I was there. I was asked to set up one of the tasks in the Triwizard Tournament - the one where the champions had to pluck an egg from a guarding dragon."

"Oh, so you must have met Fleur Delacour - she was the Beauxbatons champion."

"Yes, I met her and her little sister. Do you know them?"

"I met Fleur when I was teaching at Beauxbatons. That was about four years ago, before I left to be with ... well, lets just say I wanted to come back to the south of the country." She looked down at her hands, and Charlie guessed why she had left - the boyfriend.

She smiled and looked back up, "Did you meet Harry Potter last year?"

"Harry? Yes, I did. He's a friend of the family - my youngest brother Ron's best friend. He stays at our house sometimes at the end of the summer holidays."

"What's he like, Charlie? You hear so much about him, but you don't really know the person behind the stories."

"He's just a normal young boy, Nadine. Brave as a lion, but otherwise he's just like any other teenager. He always seems a bit shy of his fame. So, what did you teach at school?"

"With a background like mine, there was only one subject for me - Care of Magical Creatures - I really loved my two years teaching."

"What did you think of Snape, Nadine?" Charlie grinned.

"Oh, that insufferable, slimy ..." she was interrupted when Demont came back in carrying two bottles of wine.

"Well, you two look cosy," he said grinning, "What have you been talking about?"

"Well it turns out," said Nadine, "that we have quite a lot in common. We both went to Hogwarts and both played for our house Quidditch team. Charlie had left by the time I got to Hogwarts, but we still knew a lot of the same people."

"That's very interesting. So you'll have a lot to talk about over dinner, then."

That evening turned out to be one of the most enjoyable evenings Charlie had ever spent. The dinner served up by Nadine was delicious, as was the wine. The two former Hogwarts students talked incessantly, reminiscing about the school and its characters, and Demont was reduced to being a spectator, but still enjoying the conversation.

After three more bottles of wine, they were all ready for some sleep. "Charlie," said Demont smiling widely as he showed him to his bedroom, "We don't seem to have got around to talking about the problem in the forest - I wonder why? We'll have a talk in the morning before I take you up there. Goodnight."

Charlie closed the door and smiled as he reflected on the evening. "Nadine is one of the nicest girls I've met - and she's beautiful too. Now that, I think, is an irresistible combination. I wonder what she thinks about me?"

The next morning, Demont had to drag Charlie outside to go to the forest. He and Nadine just seemed to continue where they'd left off the night before.

As they walked up the hill and over towards the outskirts of the forest, Demont looked at Charlie quizzically. "That's the most I've heard my sister talk since she arrived six weeks ago. You seem to be a good influence on her Charlie, wouldn't you say?"

"She .. she's a nice girl, Demont," he stuttered, "And we do have a lot in common - that's probably why she talked a lot."

Demont grinned, "Do you think that's it? I'm thinking it may be something else - no?"

"What do you mean, Demont?" said Charlie flushing slightly, "We've only just met."

"Yes, I know. Funny isn't it?"

They walked on towards the edge of the forest, Demont wearing a slight grin the whole time. "Here it is, Charlie. The Forbidden Forest - shall we go in?"

They walked cautiously between the dark trees, Demont looking closely at the ground trying to find the path, which started about a hundred yards inside the forest perimeter. "Here it is," he said, "We need to follow this path for about a mile, and we'll come to a clearing where the dragons normally hang out at this time of the morning."

After twenty minutes walk, they came to the edge of the clearing. Charlie saw about twenty Romanian Longhorns milling about, and the two men knelt down beside a bush to observe them. Charlie could see immediately that their behaviour was unusual. It wasn't normal for them to mill about like that. He followed one of the dragons, a large male, with his eyes and tried to see if there was any pattern to its actions.

The dragon stamped furiously, then walked across the centre of the clearing with his head raised, as if sniffing the air. Then it would shake its head, and unfurl its wings before blowing out thick black smoke, in which flames could be seen, from its mouth. It would then repeat the pattern.

"This is very strange, Demont. I've never seen behaviour such as this. Something is making them very nervous. Are the other creatures like this?"

"Yes - but to a lesser extent. They're agitated, but not as much as these dragons."

Charlie thought for a moment, "I wonder ... Demont, dragons, and especially Romanian Longhorns, are very sensitive to psychic vibrations. I wonder if they've picked up on something? Have you detected anything like that?"

"No, I haven't. But if there is anything of that nature I'm surprised that Nadine hasn't picked it up - she's very sensitive, normally, to such things. That's what made her such a good student and teacher of Magical Creatures. She seems to be able to build up a rapport with them."

"Well she has had a lot on her mind, lately, hasn't she? She could easily miss something if she isn't focused on detecting magical vibrations."

"Yes, of course," said Demont, "Look, why don't we bring her up here? If she can see what the dragons are doing, it may help her to concentrate. What do you think?"

"I don't know Demont," said Charlie hastily, "It's pretty dangerous. Those Longhorns can get a bit nasty when they're riled up."

Demont smiled, "I'm supposed to be the protective one, Charlie. I'm her brother. But there's no need to worry. You know her Magical Creatures background now - she can look after herself."

Charlie reluctantly agreed, and they both went back to the hut to talk to Nadine. She jumped at the chance to get involved in the investigation - keeping busy would give her less time to think about her problems.

About 2 hours later, the three sat at the edge of the same clearing, observing the same actions being displayed by the dragons. Charlie had explained his theory to Nadine, and she now sat

with wrinkled brow and closed eyes trying to pick up anything unusual. Charlie watched her, somewhat distracted from the task in hand, thinking how lovely she looked. He shook himself and turned back to the dragons.

"Yes. Yes ... I feel something," breathed Nadine, her eyes still closed, "I feel strange emanations coming from somewhere - they're coming from a very powerful mind. It seems to be some sort of summons. But I can't read anything more - only an urgent summons." She opened her eyes and shook her head in frustration.

"Nadine," said Charlie, "Can you tell where the emanations are coming from?"

Again she closed her eyes and concentrated. After a few minutes, she turned back to Charlie, "No, Charlie. I can't tell where they're coming from. They seem to be all around me, as if they are reflecting or bouncing from various surfaces. More likely, the emanations are being reflected by the minds of the dragons, and perhaps other magical creatures. Unless I can get close to the source where there are no reflecting minds, I won't be able to pinpoint it. I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry, Nadine. You've already helped immensely. At least we now know what's causing the problem. Demont, we need to get our thinking caps on and work out what we can do about this. Unless we can find a way to block those vibrations, then those creatures are going to remain agitated. We really need to find out where they're coming from."

The three walked back to the cabin deep in thought.

Remus Lupin looked at his class of fifth year Gryffindors. They still looked a bit down following the Death Eater attack.

"Today," he said, "We'll concentrate on curse-deflecting. I know that the attack of two weeks ago upset you, and Kristen was hit by this very curse that flung her backward. Under certain circumstances, the Flipendus curse can be deflected. But before we start - Kristen, do you want to leave? I know this will be painful for you."

"No, Professor. I'd prefer to stay if you don't mind." Kristen, although still not fully recovered, was feeling much better with the help and support given her by Harry and her friends.

"As you wish, Kristen. But if you want me to stop, just say. Flipendus works by flinging a ball of energy from the wand and hitting a person. The force of that energy sends the person flying in the opposite direction. The force is also proportional to the power of the witch or wizard casting the curse. So the curse sent by, say, 'You Know Who' would be much more powerful than, say, me."

Hermione's hand shot up, "Professor. How can we practice that? You know what it did to Kristen."

"Don't worry, Hermione. We'll be doing it under very controlled conditions and I'll use minimum force - and only I will be using the curse. Harry, come on - let's see if you can do this."

Harry walked to the front of the class, where he stood alongside the professor. Remus waved his wand and muttered a few words, and a large, bulky mattress appeared at one end of the room, suspended from the ceiling. "This mattress will serve as a soft landing if you don't manage to deflect the curse."

Again, Hermione's hand shot into the air. Remus grinned and nodded to her. "Professor Lupin, if Harry manages to deflect the curse, won't it hit somebody who happens to be in the way?"

"Good question, Hermione. You can't see it, but there's an invisible shield just to the side of that mark on the floor there. So if the ball of energy is deflected in the direction of the class, it will be harmlessly absorbed. The only person who will have to watch out is me." The students laughed nervously.

"Harry, stand on the mark and face me. Then you have to hold your arm out towards me and concentrate. Visualise in your mind, a small metal dish - one that is small enough to fit into your hand - then move it from your mind into the palm of your hand. When the ball of energy is released, concentrate on attracting the ball into the dish. If all goes well it will bounce off with no harm done," he turned to address the rest of the students, "Again, I will warn you that very few people can do this. Today, I'm only going to try it with Harry. If it works, then speak to him - ask him to tell you how he does it. Then next week, if any of you feel confident enough, you can try it under the same controlled conditions."

Remus walked to the opposite end of the room and faced Harry. "Ready Harry?"

Harry concentrated for a few moments and then nodded.

"*FLIPENDO*," muttered Remus. A small, dim ball of energy shot from the end of his wand. The students watching Harry saw a dish-shaped concave glow coming from his outstretched hand. The ball of energy hit the glow, and then bounced away, harmlessly hitting the protective shield.

When the students finished clapping, Remus spoke. "Well done, Harry. But that was a pretty weak shot. Want to try a stronger one?" Harry nodded and again concentrated. The same thing happened as before, except this time the ball of energy looked brighter. This continued until Remus looked at Harry thoughtfully and said, "Harry, do you feel up to my strongest possible shot?" Harry again nodded.

Harry concentrated and tried to visualise the strongest metal dish he could. He then sent it down his outstretched arm, and held it in his hand. He watched as Remus shouted the curse, and saw a very bright ball of energy coming towards him. When it hit his hand, he felt a surge of power and the ball shot back past Remus' head and punched a large hole in the wall behind him.

Remus looked stunned, and quickly turned and peered through the hole. He was thankful to see daylight at the other end of the hole, and in the distance beyond he saw the Whomping Willow flailing its branches. He could see a round smouldering hole in the tree's trunk.

Not for the first time, Remus marvelled at Harry's power. He knew that when the energy ball left Harry's hand, it had somehow increased in strength as it was deflected. There was no way

Remus was powerful enough to punch a hole in the five feet thick castle wall, and also cause damage beyond that.

He turned to the class "I .. I ... I've got to see Professor Sprout straight away. I think the Whomping Willow needs some attention. Class dismissed."

The other students gathered around Harry, excitedly asking him how he'd managed to do it. "I don't know. I just did as Professor Lupin told me. I suppose the key to it all is concentration. Apart from that, I just don't know."

That night Harry and Kristen sat in front of the fire, talking about the next Quidditch game against Hufflepuff. His arm was around her shoulder as she snuggled up to him. They pulled apart as Ron, Hermione and Ginny came over to them and sat at the table by the side of their chair. They were staring at Harry nervously, as if they had something on their minds.

"What!" exclaimed Harry.

"We've been talking," said Ron, "And well ... Harry, why do you think you're getting so powerful? Do you think it's something to do with the message?"

Harry looked taken aback for a moment, "I .. I've been thinking about it too. And I just don't know how I can do it. It's not as if I feel very powerful - it just sort of happens." His eyes clouded and he said quietly, "Do you think that .. that .. you know, when Voldemort tried to kill me, some of his power was transferred to me? Or when he took some of my blood to make his new body some sort of link was forged? If that's the reason, then .. then is that why I'm so good with the Dark Arts? And does it mean that I'm going to turn out bad as well?" He looked pleadingly at his friends.

"Of course not, Harry," said Hermione indignantly, "Think about it logically. You're not good with the Dark Arts - you're good with defence *against* the Dark Arts. And anyway, those charms you repelled in Flitwick's class aren't Dark Arts. So don't even think of comparing yourself to `You Know Who.'"

Harry smiled, "Thanks, Hermi. It must be right when you put it like that. What would I do without you?" Hermione flushed slightly, a reaction that did not go unnoticed by Kristen.

Later, Hermione was lying on her bed in the dormitory, sightlessly staring out of the window. Her other roommates were still down in the common room. Suddenly, the door was flung open, and an angry-looking Ginny stormed in. Her face was flushed and she was literally hopping from foot to foot, clenching and unclenching her hands.

"Ginny! Calm down. What's the matter?" said Hermione.

"Oh that .. that ... that toffee-nosed PRAT," she mouthed with great feeling, "I never want to see him again as long as I live."

"Who, Ginny. What's happened?" Hermione put her arm around her friend and pulled her down to sit next to her on the bed.

Ginny started to calm down at last, and then a different reaction set in. Her face contorted and she started crying, hugging Hermione.

"It's all right Ginny. Please tell me what happened."

"I .. I was with Justin in the Astronomy tower - we've been there a few times before. Everything was all right. We .. we kissed a bit. Then he put his hand ... Oh Hermi, I feel so mad at him. What gives him the right to maul me like that? At least he'll only be seeing out of one eye for a bit!"

"Ginny! You didn't hit him did you?"

"Yes I bloody well did. Right in the eye. He won't try that again."

Hermione couldn't help but giggle, "Have you told Ron or Harry?"

"No way - I think Justin's a prat, but I don't want him dead. Don't say anything to them Hermi - please?"

"I won't Ginny. Come on. I'll take you back to your dorm."

That night, Harry again had his dream.

Everything was again dark although he could just make out the sides of the tunnel. He looked up ahead and again saw the shape and heard the low ghostly voice 'Hurry. I have waited long. Do not tarry.' He could just see some definition to the shape now - it looked like a human figure although he could see no detail. There was movement above the figure, like an arm beckoning him. The shape shimmered and then disappeared.

That Saturday, Hermione walked along the corridor from the common room on her way to the library, where she planned to spend a few hours with her revision. Most of the students were outside, where the sun had made a rare appearance.

She was startled when an arm reached out from behind a suit of armour and grabbed her around the throat. She immediately tried to reach for her wand, but a large, bulky boy - whom Hermione recognised as the seventh year Slytherin weirdo, Grimus Plonger, pushed her against the wall and pinned her arms to her side.

Hermione looked fearfully up at the boy holding her, "Wh .. what do you want?"

"Come on, Granger. You know you've been asking for it - strutting about like that. Now keep quiet and you won't get hurt."

Hermione stifled the scream that was building inside her and tried to struggle free. But she had no chance against the powerful Grimus, who pulled her towards a doorway leading into a classroom, ripping her robe from her shoulders.

She let out a long moan and closed her eyes, trying not to think about what was going to happen to her. Suddenly, she felt the weight leave her arms and she was free. She opened her eyes to see Grimus flying through the air and crash to the corridor floor with a loud thump. She also saw Harry, his Firebolt on the floor beside him, raise his wand and point it towards Grimus, who had struggled to his feet, and was charging back towards them.

"*STUPEFY*," shouted Harry and Grimus crumpled once again to the floor.

"Harry!" shouted Hermione as the tears started to roll down her cheeks.

"Hermi. Are you all right?" he shouted back, desperately looking at her tear-stained face.

"Oh, Harry. I was so frightened." Harry went to her and pulled her towards him, his hand pulling her head in towards his chest.

"It's all right now, Hermi. He can't hurt you," he said.

"Why did he do that to me, Harry?" She wailed, "He said I'd been asking for it. But I haven't, Harry. I haven't!"

Hermione continued to cry bitterly as Harry tried to soothe her hurt, rocking her gently. He felt very angry that something like that had happened to her. The feeling of protection towards his friend was almost overpowering, and he couldn't prevent a tear of his own from running down his cheek.

"Come on. Hermi, I'm going to take you to see Madam Pomfrey." She let herself be led towards the hospital wing, still clinging to Harry.

When Hermione was safely in the care of the nurse, Harry stormed into Professor McGonagall's office and told her what had happened. She looked shocked, and rushed out of the office towards the hospital wing. On the way they met Remus, who, when told of the event, rushed off to the place of the attack to take Grimus in charge and led him off to Dumbledore's office.

Remus told Harry later that Grimus Plonger had immediately been expelled by the Headmaster.

Hermione lay awake on the bed in the hospital wing. Although she was not hurt physically, she had suffered a great shock. Professor McGonagall and Madam Pomfrey had insisted that she spend the night there, so that the nurse could keep an eye on her.

Hermione kept playing the event over and over in her head, and she couldn't get to sleep. As the night wore on, the thoughts that were uppermost in her mind were those of Harry and the way he had held her after the attack. That night, gradually, her love for Harry grew more and more evident to her.

She hadn't wanted this to happen. Hadn't she told Ginny that any notion of romance would distract her from her schoolwork?

'I've always been in control of my mind,' she thought to herself, 'Why am I acting this way? For the first time in my life, I can't control what I'm thinking! He's my friend! I shouldn't have feelings like this for him. Not that it matters anyway. There's not a lot I can do about it - he's got Kristen now. What am I going to do?'

The trouble was - there were no books that she knew of that could tell her what to do, how to act, what the answer was. Hermione was in a whole new ballgame, and she found it very, very difficult.

Hermione walked into the Great Hall for breakfast the next day, and was immediately surrounded by all her friends. They all wanted to know how she was feeling, and there were many angry glances and comments directed towards the Slytherin table. Ginny, in particular, her eyes red from crying after she had heard what had happened, stayed very close to her. She pulled her to sit next to her at the table, and refused to leave her side for the rest of the day.

Hermione was overwhelmed at the show of concern and affection directed at her. She hadn't really known that she was held in such high regard by most of the students. That was one of two things that helped to ease the shock of what had happened. The other thing was the arrival of a large parcel from her parents. She opened it to reveal about fifteen books, all related to the mystery of Rennes-le-Chateau - Rhedae.

The next morning, Hedwig came swooping over the Gryffindor table at breakfast, and munched away at some bacon while Harry removed the letter from her leg. He opened it to see that it was from Lara. Harry had written to her the previous day, keeping his promise to let her know how he was getting on - but he hadn't told her about Kristen.

Dear Harry,

I was thrilled to see Hedwig at breakfast this morning - mum and dad weren't though! I had a job convincing them that there was nothing too strange about it.

Please be careful - I was horrified to hear that those terrible people are still after you. How are Hermione, Ron and Ginny? They seemed very nice, although I only met them for a short while.

Carol, Beth and Josie are fine now, and they don't remember anything about what happened last September. I had a very tough time from my parents after that - they wouldn't stop telling me how stupid we were to go off wandering through the woods - but things are back to normal now.

School is fine, and I'm doing really well in my classes. Mrs. Jennings, my form teacher, keeps telling me that if I keep doing as well, I'll have no trouble going to University after seventh year. My dad says that I should try for Bristol University - that's where he went, and it's one of the best for Maths and Physics.

I'm so sorry that things didn't work out between us. I've become even more convinced in the last few months that you wouldn't fit into my world, and I wouldn't really fit into yours. I can't help but feel sad, though - I keep saying to myself 'if only'

Have you got yourself a girlfriend yet? I still haven't found a boy that I like as much as I liked you.

Please don't stop writing to me. I sometimes think that it may have been better to have let your headmaster make me forget - but it is sort of exciting knowing that there's a whole new world out there that I'd never suspected could exist.

Please write when you get the time.

Love from your friend

Lara.

Harry was glad that Lara seemed to be doing so well, although not without feeling a touch of regret at the way things had worked out. He resolved to keep writing to her - it was the least he could do. He was roused from his thoughts when Ron poked him in the arm, "Come on, Harry. We'll be late for Potions."

That evening, Hermione seemed much better and did her homework with the others in the common room. They kept glancing at her, but although she looked a bit tired, she was concentrating on her books and parchments and didn't look distracted in any way.

When they'd finished, they sat around the fireplace chatting. "Hermi, have you read any of those books yet?" asked Ginny.

"No, Ginny, not yet. But I'll start looking at them tonight and let you know what I find tomorrow. Maybe we can both do some research tomorrow night."

"Hermi," said Harry, "Shouldn't you get some sleep tonight? You look a bit tired."

"No .. no, I'll do some reading first, then I'll try to get a bit of sleep."

At breakfast the following morning, Hermione spoke excitedly to the others.

"It's amazing! There are so many different aspects to the mystery, and I've only just glanced through the books. I wouldn't have believed it - it's a good thing I'm studying Arithmancy. But my first impressions seem to be right - there's so much stuff, and so many different theories - there's bound to be a cover-up going on here."

"So what have you found out?" asked Ron.

"Look there's no time to go through it now. And I want to do some more reading first - can you help me tonight Ginny?"

"Of course I can. Well, until I get too tired anyway."

That night, after their homework had been completed, Hermione and Ginny settled down in the common room with the fifteen books strewn around the table, and several blank pieces of parchment piled next to them.

"If we each take a book, we can make some notes of the main points and compare them afterwards," said Hermione, "Then we can decide which are the best items to research in the other books. What do you say?"

"Sounds good to me, Hermi," said Ginny as she picked up one of the books.

They spent the next three hours going through the two books, making notes from time to time. When they'd finished, they found themselves alone in the common room. Everyone else had gone to bed. Ginny yawned loudly, "Oh I'm so tired Hermi. I think I'll go to bed. You coming?"

"No, not yet. Give me your notes and I'll compare them to mine. We can decide tomorrow which will be the most likely things to follow up on."

"Ok. But don't be too long. You need to get some sleep. Goodnight, Hermi."

But Hermione didn't get much sleep that night. She did go to bed, after another hour of comparing their notes, but lay awake tossing and turning. She couldn't stop thinking about her problem with Harry, but she still couldn't work out what she could do about it. She found it increasingly difficult being so close to him all the time and seeing him with Kristen.

For the rest of the week, Hermione and Ginny spent as much time as they could reading the books, making notes, and researching the points that seemed the most likely to lead to the heart of the mystery. They were both caught up in the complex meanderings of the vast amount of information they uncovered. It was getting very complicated, but thanks to Hermione's brilliant powers of deduction, they were able to start to make some sense of it all.

By Saturday afternoon, they'd managed to compile a list of the places and facts that seemed relevant to Harry's message.

"I don't know," said Hermione, studying a photograph in one of the books, of the first parchment found by Sauniere, "There's something odd about this. Look at the bottom of the parchment. What do those letters mean - P.S. - it's like it was a signature or something. And just above it are the words 'Solis Sacerdotibus' - that means 'Only for the Initiated.' And look at the last letters of the last four lines of the text. Reading downwards, they spell out SION. Now I know that's another name for Jerusalem, but could it mean something else?"

Ginny leaned over and examined the photograph. Ginny had been looking at a photograph of the second parchment, and as she leant across, something caught Hermione's eye.

"Look at that!" She pointed to Ginny's book, "Pass it here, quick."

Hermione pointed to the curious symbols at the bottom of the second parchment.

"If you turn the parchment upside down," she did this as she spoke, "look what those symbols spell out - SION. So from the both parchments, we get P.S. and SION. I wonder if the S in P.S. stands for SION?"

"Let's look for any references to SION," said Ginny, and they grabbed some books and started to browse.

After a few minutes, Hermione let out a gasp, "I don't believe it. Here it is - P.S. - The Priory of Sion. The Priory! That old wizard in the shop where I bought Harry's amulet said it had just been sent to him by the Priory. I asked him about it, but he was pretty vague. He said it was 'everywhere'.... Of Course! I thought he was referring to an old church building. But look here at this entry - it says that it's some sort of secret society."

Hermione's eyes went wide, "Ginny! It's beginning to make sense now. The reason that shop was open when I passed it - it was obviously for me to get the amulet. There must have been a charm on it to make sure I bought it! The Priory of Sion sent the amulet, and made sure I got it for Harry. Lets look for more on it Ginny."

"But Hermi. Why would they go to such lengths to get the amulet to Harry? Why not send him an owl with the message?"

Hermione thought for a moment, "Well if they're a secret society, they wouldn't want to risk revealing themselves - owls can be traced. And perhaps they had to be sure that Harry was ready to receive the message - you know, when he became magically strong enough. If that's the case, what better way to do it than the amulet - it must have been waiting for the right time to give Harry those feelings of urgency. What more is there, Ginny?"

After a few more minutes, Ginny said, "Listen to this, Hermi. `The Priory Of Sion - believed to have been the secret founders of The Knights Templar..."

"The Knights Templar!" Hermione almost shouted, interrupting Ginny. Harry's amulet - the Knight with a cross on his cloak. Of course, the cross patè - the symbol of the Knights Templar. What else is there Ginny?"

She continued, "The Priory is one of the most secret of societies, and it showed itself only fairly recently, following the French government's edict that all secret societies had to be registered by law. Recently, however, since the resignation of the last known grand master, Pierre Plantard, they seem to have gone to ground, and no one knows who or where they are now. See appendix H for a list of declared grand masters of the order."

Ginny quickly turned to the appendix and looked at the list of the historic leaders of the society.

"Let's see," said Hermione, "the first recorded grand master was Jean de Gisors in the 11th century ... look at these names, Ginny, wow! Leonardo da Vinci, Sir Isaac Newton, Victor Hugo, Jean Cocteau ... Oh my God! Look at this, Ginny. From 1330 to 1418 the grand master was Nicholas Flamel - you know, he was the one who made the Philosopher's stone that Harry managed to keep from `You Know Who' 4 years ago. He's Dumbledore's friend!"

"What a coincidence - or is it!" Exclaimed Ginny, "There's a bit more here, Hermi. Listen to this. "The Priory of Sion are reputed to be the guardians of the secret of Rennes-le-Chateau, and their ancient charge was referred to in the long lost Aureus."

"The Aureus - I've heard of that," said Hermione, "I know! It's an ancient wizarding book mostly about alchemy. But it's not lost - it's in the restricted section of the library! I remember reading about it when we were researching the wizarding books before. We've got to look at it, Ginny. There might be something that refers to the magical aspects of the mystery."

"But Hermi. It's in the restricted section. We can't get it without a signed note from a professor - and we can't get that, can we."

"That's right. Hmmm ... I think we'll ask Harry if we can borrow his Invisibility Cloak - we could go down to the library tonight."

"YES!" gasped Ginny, her excitement making Hermione grin, "I'll go and find him - he's probably down at the Quidditch field." And she leapt up from her seat and dashed out through the portrait hole.

A little while later, Ginny appeared with Harry in tow, panting from their run up to the tower.

"So you've found something then, Hermi," he said, "Come on, tell me!"

"Not yet, Harry. Look, when we find what's in this old book, we'll have most of what we need, I think. We'll tell you and Ron about it all tomorrow morning."

"Oh, ok Hermi. I'll tell him when I get back to the field. See you at dinner."

"Harry! The cloak?" said Ginny.

"Oh, yes - sorry." Harry went up to fetch the cloak from the trunk under his bed.

That night, when everyone was in bed, Hermione and Ginny pulled the cloak over themselves and crept down to the library. Filch didn't seem to be about, but they had a scare when Peeves floated into view and hovered just over their heads, looking around as if he'd heard something. They breathed a sigh of relief when he cackled and zoomed off through the ceiling.

They opened the door slowly, trying to make sure that it didn't creak, and crept over towards the restricted section of the library. Ginny whispered "*LUMOS*" and held the wand up to the first bookcase. They peered down the shelves of books, until they came to the Alchemy section. "Here it is, the Aureus," whispered Hermione and lifted an ancient looking tome from the shelf.

They moved over to the nearest table and sat down, opening the book. They looked at the reference section at the back of the book, and there was an entry - 'Priory of Sion.' They turned to the page and started to read.

'When the age-old secret became untenable at ancient Sion, Jean de Gisors founded the secret society 'The Priory of Sion,' and a little later 'The Knights Templar,' in order to give it protection. Its sole purpose from that day to the present is to keep it preserved for the future Anima Summa. But beware. This must serve as a warning to those who seek - the Anima Summa must not know what he or she is until the secret is revealed.'

Both girls gasped as they read the final few words.

"That's it! That's the connection, Ginny. The mystery of Rhedae and the Anima Summa. But there's nothing more here! - We still don't know what the Anima Summa is, or what the secret is. But, Ginny - Harry's the Anima Summa, we know - but we can't tell him about this. We have to heed that warning."

"But Harry already knows he's the Anima Summa - the message amulet told him that."

"Yes, Ginny. But he doesn't know *what* it is. Come to that, we don't either. But there's one person who might - Dumbledore. He's Nicholas Flamel's friend - and he was the grand master of the Priory of Sion, the guardians of the secret. Dumbledore must know about it. But I think that the least Harry knows about the Anima Summa at this stage the better. Ginny - I think we have to talk to the Headmaster about this. I get the feeling that we might get in over our heads and Harry and Ron haven't exactly been cautious in the past. This is pretty heavy stuff - so much time and effort has gone into preserving the secret - we have to get some advice from Dumbledore."

"Yes, I agree. But come on - let's go back and get some sleep."

The next morning, Hermione woke Ginny early, and they went downstairs, intending to go to the Headmaster's office. But they didn't get far. Waiting in the common room were Harry and Ron, sitting by the fire.

"Harry, Ron. What are you doing up so early?" Said Ginny.

"Come on, you two," said Ron, "We want to know what you've found out. We've been up for ages waiting for you."

"Yes, come on," said Harry, "tell us what you've found."

The girls walked over and sat down, resigned that Harry and Ron wouldn't take no for an answer. Hermione pulled several sheets of parchment from her robes. "We've summarised the main points of the mystery. So are you ready for this?"

"Yes, get a move on Hermi. I want to know if you've found out where the treasure is," said Ron.

"Honestly, Ron! Right. First a little bit of history. Before it was known as Rhedae, the Romans occupied the site. They came when they heard that there was gold in the area. They stayed for a long time, tunnelling for gold - and those tunnels are still there. Rennes-le-Chateau and its surrounding area are honeycombed with old Roman mines. Since the mystery became known in recent times, treasure seekers have also been digging there looking for treasure - but they were stopped when a few of the houses began to subside. The ground beneath Rennes-le-Chateau must be riddled!"

Hermione paused for breath and then continued, "The mystery seems to have stemmed from the arrival of the Knights Templar. They had quite a few strongholds in the area. Now the reason they probably chose this site is to do with magic. Look at this." She brought out a map of Rennes-le-Chateau and the surrounding area and pointed to a number of known Templar sites marked on it. She then brought out a ruler and quill and began to draw lines. She connected the five main sites, with Rennes-le-Chateau roughly in the middle, and produced - a perfect five-pointed pentagram.

"The whole area is enclosed by a pentagram - it's a huge sacred pagan temple! And that's not all. The French painter, Nicholas Poussin, produced a famous painting - and Sauniere went to Paris especially to get a copy of it from the Louvre." Hermione pointed to a photograph of the painting - Les Bergers d'Arcadie II. "This painting, the Shepherds of Arcadia, was commissioned by someone connected to a secret society - The Priory of Sion - but more about them later. The painting was constructed using the golden section, or Phi as it's known - I know about it from Arithmancy. This is a fundamental mathematical constant - a bit like pi - and is so perfect that nature itself uses it. For instance, the spacing of buds on a stem and the spiral shells of sea snails grow in the perfect proportion of Phi. Now a perfect pentagram is also constructed in the proportion of Phi. Look at this painting - see where I've drawn the pentagram. And some of the background in the painting is of Rennes-Le-Chateau."

"Oh, Hermione. This is heavy. We don't all take Arithmancy you know. Can you keep it simple please?" asked Ron.

Hermione rolled her eyes and continued, "Berenger Sauniere, the priest at the centre of the mystery, must have found out something from the parchments and the painting. He spent a lot of time going on long hikes in the surrounding countryside, as if he was looking for something. Now Sauniere refurbished the church with the money he somehow had, and the statues and Stations of the Cross show some very bizarre things. It's as if he was trying to hide something in his design. There have also been several murders, one of Sauniere's colleagues, a priest of a nearby village, was murdered in his house. Many people think that this priest was the prime mover, and not Sauniere. He may well have been murdered, either to keep him quiet, or to try to get him to reveal the secret. Sauniere also had a lot of very famous and influential people visit him - strange for a simple parish priest, don't you think?"

"He also started digging in the churchyard, and he uncovered a tomb - and he then defaced the inscription on the tombstone, as if to hide something - possibly clues to the secret? When his bishop called him to account for his great wealth, Sauniere refused to tell him, and he was suspended from office. But interestingly, the Pope himself overruled the bishop and re-instated Sauniere. So did the Pope of that time know something?"

"Oh and yes, this will interest you Ron. The cipher contained in parchment 2 was quite complicated. It uses the knight's tour, from the game of chess, to reveal the secret message."

"The knight's tour?" said Ron, "Yes, the knight can be moved, using only it's own special movement of course, so that it lands on every square on the chess board. There's only one solution to that problem. Hmmm - interesting."

"Yes," said Hermione, "And the Knights Templar play a big part in the mystery. When they were formed, there were only nine knights, and the first grand master of the order, Hugues de Payens, and the other eight spent nine years excavating in Jerusalem - under the Temple Mount. They must have found something, because the digging suddenly stopped, and within a few short years, the size of the order swelled enormously, and they became very, very rich - even though they were known as 'The Poor Knights' - did you know they were the first bankers in the world? They had special privileges from the Pope, and were excluded from paying any taxes. Kings used them to transfer money, and also to raise loans."

"Yes, very interesting Hermi. But what did they find?" asked Harry.

"No one knows. But when the order was destroyed in 1307 - on 13th October - that's where unlucky thirteen comes from by the way, they were accused of unholy and blasphemous activities. Some of the Knights who were tortured, said that they worshiped 'Baphomet' - whoever that was, it was never revealed. But Baphomet has been said to be the goddess Sophia. Sophia, in Greek, means wisdom. So could they have been worshipers of wisdom? That doesn't seem so bad to me. Their last grand master - Jacques de Molay - was later burnt at the stake for refusing to denounce his beliefs. But not all the Templars were killed. Some escaped by sea - it's been said to Scotland, and even to America, and this is way before Columbus! But it's also been said that a group of them came to Rhedae. Could it be that these Knights brought the secret with them and hid it there?"

"And as for the Merovingian connection, it has been said that they were the descendants of the lost tribe of Israel - another connection with Jerusalem"

Hermione continued to tell Harry and Ron about the connection with the Templars and Priory of Sion, and about Nichols Flamel. But they left out what they found out about the Anima

Summa. At last, Hermione finished reading her notes and all four began to discuss some of the points.

"Hermione," said Ron, "You haven't said anything about the treasure."

"Ron, I don't think there's any treasure - at least not what you call treasure."

"But where did Sauniere get all that money - he was loaded!"

"I think he was paid to keep the secret to himself. Think about it. The Templars were involved, and the Priory of Sion founded the Templars. And the Priory of Sion is the guardian of the secret. When the Templars were destroyed by Philip the Fair, the king of France, he destroyed them to get his hands on all their vast wealth. But that wealth was never found. What if it still exists - but is held by the Priory of Sion, and used to preserve the secret? I think that the Priory paid Sauniere to keep quiet."

Harry pondered for a while, "Look, I've got to go there. There's nothing more we can find out from these books. The only way we'll get at the secret is if we visit the place and start looking around. I think it's time we went to see Dumbledore. We've got to tell him what we've found. There's no way he'll let us go there unless we explain all this to him - and he might tell us more about Nicholas Flamel's involvement."

As they all tramped off towards the Headmaster's office, Hermione hung back and whispered in Ginny's ear, "Don't say anything about what we found out on the Anima Summa. We'll try to go back to see Dumbledore later."

"What are you four doing here?" Professor McGonagall was just coming out from behind the gargoyle guarding the Headmaster's office as the four approached.

"Professor," said Harry, "We've got to see the Headmaster. It's about something important."

She looked at Harry, "Come on then, I'll take you up."

Dumbledore looked up from his desk as McGonagall led them inside, "Ah, Harry. I suppose you're ready to tell me about it then?"

Harry blinked, "Uh .. I.. "

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled, "There's not much that escapes me at Hogwarts, Harry. You should know that by now. Come on, then. Who's going to tell me?"

Hermione walked up to the desk and laid out her parchments, diagrams, maps and some of the books. "Now why am I not surprised it's you, Hermione?" he said, laughing.

Hermione flushed, and then took a deep breath before launching into the story. She told about the amulet, the message and their research. At last, after about an hour, she sat back down, slightly breathless.

"I must say I'm impressed. Very impressed," said Dumbledore. He looked at McGonagall, "I think 20 points to Gryffindor, Minerva?"

She smiled as she nodded.

"What about Nicholas Flamel, Professor?" Asked Hermione.

"Ah - Nicholas. You must understand, that although I knew him well, he had already lived quite a few lifetimes before I met him. I knew he was involved in some secret things, but he never once mentioned the Priory of Sion. I'm just as much in the dark about that as you are. But I do know something. Back last summer, we had a prophesy from the centaurs. It said that you had to uncover a secret, Harry. And thanks to all your efforts, we now know where that secret is hidden."

"But why have I got to find out the secret, Professor?"

Dumbledore's features took on a grim look, "Harry, there's no easy way to say this to you. It involves Voldemort."

Hermione, Ginny and Ron gasped.

"Yes I'm afraid so," he said, "It's to do with his rise back to power. It seems that Harry is the key to making sure he's not successful in taking over the world."

Harry sat stunned, "But .. but Professor. How am I going to do that?"

"I don't know, Harry. But I think you'll know when you uncover the secret."

"So you'll let me go to Rennes-le Chateau?"

Dumbledore smiled, "I don't think I could stop you, even if I wanted to, Harry. But I must give a word of caution. Voldemort knows something about this, too - Sirius and Ceri found out about it a little while ago during one of their spying missions. It's going to be very dangerous for you to go outside the protection of Hogwarts. I can't go with you - I need to protect the school, and I can't afford to be away for any length of time. So I need to give some thought about making it as safe as possible during your quest. I'll speak to Cornelius Fudge."

"But that could take ages," said Harry, "You know what he's like."

"I know, Harry. But I won't risk you going off without proper protection. Now promise me you won't do anything foolish until I've sorted something out."

"I promise, Professor," said Harry looking a bit dejected, "Oh, Professor, what do you know about Anima Summa? The message said that's what I am."

Dumbledore looked over his glasses, "Yes I've heard about it too, Harry. But there's not a lot that anybody knows about it. I'm still trying to find out things about it, but for the moment you'll have to bear with me. Right, I need to get in touch with the ministry. I suggest you go and get some lunch." The way he quickly changed the subject wasn't lost on Hermione and Ginny.

"Harry, just one more thing," said Dumbledore as they made to leave the room, "I understand that you and Kristen Davis are together, is that right?"

"Uh, yes Professor," said Harry looking puzzled.

"Does she know about any of this?"

"No. I haven't said anything to her."

"Good," said Dumbledore, "As an exchange student, all of us need to make sure that she doesn't come to any harm in our country. I think it would be best if she doesn't become involved in this. Do you agree?"

"Yes, Professor. I do. I don't want anything to happen to her."

As they made their way down to the Great Hall, Hermione nudged Ginny and made eyes at her, "Oh, I left some of my parchments in the Headmaster's office - I'll have to go back. You go on down and I'll catch up with you later."

"I'll come with you, Hermi," said Ginny.

As they walked back along the corridor, they were stopped by Professor McGonagall. "I thought you were going to lunch?"

"We need to speak to the headmaster about something, Professor," said Hermione.

She looked at the two girls appraisingly, "Come on then, follow me," and the three went up into the office.

"Professor Dumbledore, we didn't quite tell you everything earlier," said Hermione, "and please don't think me rude, but I don't think you told us everything either. It's about the Anima Summa."

"Go on," prompted Dumbledore.

"Well, we found something about it in the library. The book said that the secret has been preserved for the Anima Summa, and it warned against him finding out what he is. That's why we didn't say anything - we didn't want Harry to find out what we knew. Can you tell us any more about it?"

Dumbledore stared at the girls over his glasses for a few seconds. "I'm surprised at you - I suppose you sneaked into the restricted section to find that book?"

Hermione and Ginny flushed, "How did you ... I'm sorry Professor," said Hermione, knowing better than to try to lie.

Dumbledore grinned, "Don't worry, I won't take the twenty points back. I should have known you'd rip the place apart to try to solve this riddle. Go on, sit down - I'll tell you what I know. But be warned - what I'm going to tell you must not leave these four walls - only a few people know about it, and it is absolutely essential that Harry doesn't find out. Do I make myself clear?"

Hermione nodded.

"We promise, Professor," said Ginny.

The Headmaster told them what he had found out, and that Merlin and Morgana were the only recorded pair of Anima Summas.

"But how can you compare Harry to Merlin?" gasped Ginny.

"You've probably seen how strong, magically, Harry is getting. And he's still developing. So who knows?"

"Do you have any idea who Harry's mate is?" asked Hermione quietly.

Dumbledore looked at her, wondering whether to tell them the last bit of information. He sighed and then said, "The final thing we know about the female, is that she must be conceived exactly three months after Harry. In other words, her birthday must be on or near to 31st October 1980."

Hermione was stunned as she heard the date. She couldn't say anything. She knew, finally, that Harry was completely beyond her. Even though he was with Kristen, there was still some shred of hope in her mind that she'd someday get together with him. Now that hope was dashed and she struggled to stop the tears falling.

Ginny looked at her and saw the anguish in her eyes. Then she looked back at Dumbledore, "Professor, do you have any idea who the girl is?"

"There are just three possibilities that we know of, Ginny. Pansy Parkinson .."

"Hah! No way," she shouted, " .. Sorry, Professor"

"Hannah Abbot ..."

"She's been tied at the hip to Ernie McMillan for two years," said Ginny.

"And Kristen Davis. Her birthday is on 31st October 1980."

Both Ginny and Hermione stared.

"But Harry and Kristen are together already," said Ginny, "but I haven't noticed anything unusual between them - except, of course that Harry seems very protective towards her. Could there be some mistake?"

"There's no mistake, Ginny - at least not about the birth date. Don't forget they're both very young, and although Harry's powers are increasing, so far, Kristen's haven't. But there's plenty of time for them to develop. And the prophecy says that Harry must join with his Anima Summa *after* he uncovers the secret of Rhedae. So there's still time for her powers to develop.

"You must keep this to yourselves. Tell no one - not Harry, not Kristen, not Ron. Make sure that your attitudes to the girl remain exactly as they have been, otherwise you might invite unwanted questions from them. Now I'm trusting you both with this information - mainly to stop you digging any further. Now I suggest you get some lunch."

Outside in the corridor, Hermione told Ginny to go down to lunch without her, "I .. I'm not hungry. I think I'll go back to the common room and catch up on some reading." Ginny had a worried look on her face as she stared after her friend.

"How are we going to get near the source of these emanations?" asked Demont as he sat with Charlie and Nadine eating lunch, "Nadine, is there some way you can get a general direction - anything to help us?"

"I'm sorry, Demont, there's nothing I can think of that will help," she replied.

Charlie thought for a while, and asked Nadine, "If we were to go to various places, say within a twenty mile radius of the forest, and you felt the emanations at each of those spots, would it give you a better idea of the source - a sort of triangulation exercise?"

"It's possible, Charlie, but I really don't know."

"Well that's the best idea we've had so far," said Demont, "I suggest we look at a map of the general area and mark some prominent locations - hills, villages for example, and then tomorrow we can start to visit them and see what happens."

"That sounds ok, Demont," said Charlie, "but how are we going to get to each site? It'll be dangerous to Apparate - there's bound to be loads of Muggles about."

"We can use my Land Rover," said Nadine, "It'll be nice to drive it again, and the 4-wheel drive will be great in the rough terrain."

That afternoon, the three pored over a large-scale map of the district, and marked out ten sites. They used the middle of the forest as the starting point, and measured roughly twenty miles in ten different directions, to arrive at the chosen places. They then discussed where they'd start.

"It doesn't really matter, I suppose," said Demont, "Lets start to the south - say in Andorra, and then work around to the east before going north, and then back around to the west. Does that sound ok?"

"Yes, but that's a lot of miles to cover. It'll take us days and days!" exclaimed Nadine.

"We'll take the two tents," said Demont, "Charlie and I can share one, right Charlie?"

"Hey I'm used to the outdoors life - no problem. How about you, Nadine?"

"It'll take me back to when I was young. We always used to go camping, didn't we Demont?"

Demont smiled, "Our parents always took us camping, back then."

The following day, they started out early, driving over rough tracks to get to the tarmac road leading into the Pyrenees and Andorra. They arrived around lunchtime, and stopped at the top of a rugged pass, still covered with the winter snows. They got out of the Land Rover, and walked over to a slight rise, facing in the general direction of the Forbidden Forest.

"Right Nadine," said Demont, "See if you can still detect the vibrations."

Nadine closed her eyes and concentrated. After a little while, she opened them again, "It's the same. I can't get a direction - but I think it's just a little weaker than before."

Charlie made a note on the map, and they drove into a nearby village to have lunch, before turning back eastwards to their next point on the map.

After five days travelling, they had reached the northern-most point. It was here that Nadine detected a change. "I still can't get a direction," she said, "but it feels stronger, the strongest since we started."

"Great, we're getting somewhere," said Demont, "I think the best thing we can do now, is go straight to the most westerly point, and try there."

They arrived in the late evening, and Nadine tried once again. "It's weaker than the last time," she said.

"Well it certainly looks as if the source is somewhere north of the forest," said Charlie, "Let's camp here tonight, then go back to the cabin and decide which locations to search next."

After Demont went into the tent, conveniently feeling tired, Charlie and Nadine sat chatting around the campfire they'd made. Charlie's attraction for the pretty French girl had, if anything, grown stronger during their expedition. But he didn't really know how to proceed. He knew Nadine was probably still hurting after the split with her boyfriend and he didn't want to rush anything. The last thing he wanted was to frighten her away.

"So how are you feeling, Nadine? Demont told me that you hadn't been well, and you came up here to recuperate."

Nadine laughed sadly, "I'm sure Demont told you about me and my boyfriend, Charlie. Three years together is a long time - and to have it end like that wasn't very nice."

"Do you still have feelings for him?"

"Well I thought I did. But I'm not so sure now. I suppose the mountain air and beautiful countryside has made me think a bit more clearly about things."

"If ever you feel the need to talk .. well .. I want you to know that I'm a good listener."

She smiled, "Thank you Charlie, I may take you up on that sometime. Well, goodnight." And she rose from the campfire and went back to her tent, leaving Charlie to ponder on whether there was any hidden meaning in her last remarks.

The arrival of March saw the start of spring. The plants and flowers in the grounds at Hogwarts started to push their new shoots into the cool air, and the trees started to bud. It was the start of a beautiful time of the year, and held the promise of new beginnings - new life.

It seemed to be a bit lighter this time and Harry could make out the rough contours of the tunnel he was in. He moved along it cautiously, looking ahead for the shape. And there it was - more distinct now, but still not clear in the dim light. It was definitely the shape of a human, and there was a long tunic, over the chain mail it was wearing. He couldn't see the face, but an arm was raised - beckoning to him. He heard again the low voice, calling him - `Hurry. I have waited long. Come quickly.

Harry woke and leaned over to his bedside table for his glasses. The sun shone feebly through the window of his dorm, showing the sleeping forms of his room-mates. He lay back down and thought about the dream he'd just had. The dream was becoming more frequent now, and was getting clearer each time it happened. He knew that he had to do something - the note of urgency in that voice was plain.

He woke Ron, then dressed, and they both went down to the common room, where they saw Hermione sleeping in one of the chairs, a load of school books strewn around the table in front of her. Harry walked up and gently shook her shoulder, and she opened bleary eyes. "Harry - wh .. what?"

"How long have you been here, Hermi? You haven't been to bed, have you!" said Ron.

"Uh, no. I must have dropped off last night," she replied.

Harry and Ron sat down opposite her, and looked at her pale face. "Hermi, Ron," said Harry, "I've had that dream again - the one where I'm in the tunnel. It must be something to do with the secret, and it's getting urgent now. I feel I've got to do something - I've got to get to Rennes-le-Chateau as soon as possible."

"You can't go yet, Harry," said Hermione, "You know what the Headmaster said. Look, you wait here. I'll get showered and changed and wake Ginny. We can all go to see Professor Dumbledore before breakfast."

"So that's what they've been up to," muttered Sirius. He and Ceri were sitting in Dumbledore's office, together with McGonagall, Lupin and Snape. They had just heard the Headmaster's account of his meeting with Harry and his friends, and his efforts to arrange protection with the ministry.

"They're certainly a very resourceful bunch of kids," said Ceri.

"More nose-y, I'd say," chipped in Snape, "How they've found the time to do all that research is beyond me - they should be studying for their OWLS. Lord knows they need to for Potions!"

"Now, now Severus," said McGonagall, "All four of them have shown true Gryffindor qualities - and I'm proud of them."

"Just like his father .." chuckled Remus as he looked at Sirius.

Dumbledore turned his head as if he were listening, "Ah, I see the intrepid four want to see me, they're down by the gargoye trying to figure out my latest password." He waved his

wand, and they soon heard four pairs of feet walking towards the office. "You haven't met Harry's friends yet, have you Ceri?"

"No, Professor. I've seen them around the school, but I haven't spoken to them."

"Well now's your chance," he said as the door opened, to show four surprised faces as they saw the roomful of people.

"Oh, sorry Professor. We didn't know you were in a meeting. We can come back later," said Harry, turning to go back out.

"No, it's all right, Harry. Come on in. The more the merrier. As a matter of fact, we've just been discussing your exploits, and I suppose you want to see me concerning that?"

"Uh , I .. I ..." stuttered Harry, looking towards the sneering face of Snape.

"It's all right. Everyone here knows about Rennes-le-Chateau. This is my, uh, inner circle I suppose you'd call it. Come on, sit down all of you," he said as he raised an eyebrow enquiringly at them.

"It's Harry," said Ron, "he's been getting this dream."

"Yes, Professor," said Harry, "I've been getting it for over a month now. But last night it was more urgent." He told them all about his dream and that he thought it was connected with the mystery. "So you see, I really need to go to France as soon as I can."

"Yes, I see," said the Headmaster thoughtfully, "But we can't ignore the warnings of danger. And we know that Voldemort is waiting for you to leave the safety of Hogwarts. Look, Harry, I'll get back on to the minister this morning. I've been waiting for him to let me know what support he can provide."

"Do you think we'll have to wait long?" asked Hermione.

"I don't know. But I'll do my best to hurry him up. You know, of course, that you can't do anything until this has been sorted out?"

"Yes, Professor, I know," said Harry.

"Right. That's all for this morning. I think we all need our breakfast now. Oh, Sirius, Ceri, will you stay for a moment. And you four as well," he said looking at Harry and his friends, "I'll leave you to get acquainted," and he followed the other teachers out of the office.

"I know you've seen her around the school," said Sirius, "and she helped when those Death Eaters attacked you. But I'd like you three to officially meet Ceri Jones. She's from the United States and she's been working with me since last September. Ceri these are Harry's best friends - Ron, Ginny, and Hermione."

Each of the three shook Ceri's hand, first Ron, then Ginny and then Hermione. Ceri winced visibly when she looked into Hermione's eyes. She instinctively liked this girl but she felt her terrible anguish and confusion. She also felt her heartache - a love that was completely devoid of hope. She glanced at Sirius, who was looking intently at Hermione.

Sirius then looked at the others and said, "We'll probably be seeing quite a bit of you from now on. The Headmaster has asked us to keep an eye on you all."

They all chatted together for a while before the four friends went down to the Great Hall for breakfast.

"I'm worried about that girl, Sirius," said Ceri, "She's in mental torment. She has to be watched, or she'll become ill."

"I know, Ceri. I don't need to be an empath to see that something is very wrong with Hermione. I'll speak to Professor McGonagall, I think. Perhaps she can help."

Chapter 7 Hermione's Despair

Harry and Ron groaned as they entered through the trap door into Professor Trelawney's Divination classroom. On each of the tables they could see a crystal ball.

"Oh no," said Ron, "I thought we'd finished with those. I never could make out anything in that swirling mist."

"Today, class," said the professor when all the students had taken their seats, "we'll brush up on your crystal ball work. You can expect it to come up in your OWL later this year! Now tap your wands on the top of the crystal, and wait for the mists to reveal the future."

Ron tapped his crystal ball and looked into the swirling mist, humming 'A Foggy Day In London Town,' which drew fits of giggles from most of the students.

Harry tapped the surface with his wand, and saw the mist swirling about, and then something started to take shape within its depths. This was accompanied by a low moaning, which came from Harry's crystal ball and echoed around the room. Harry jumped and shouted in surprise.

Professor Trelawney swooped over to Harry and looked into the ball, quickly followed by the other students. "What can you see, Harry?" She asked.

"I .. I can see a shape," he replied, "It's like the shape in my dream. I think it's the figure of a man, and he's waving his arm, calling me." This was followed by a slight raise in the pitch of the sound - and words could clearly be heard by all in the room.

'Come .. Come .. Do not delay ... I am waiting ...'

All the students gasped, and the professor had a glassy look in her eyes. The mist in Harry's crystal then cleared and the voice stopped. The crystal was now inert.

"That is the first time I have ever heard sound coming from the crystal," said the professor, "This is very powerful magic. You are privileged, Harry. Very privileged."

When they left on their way to Transfiguration class, Harry was pounced upon by Parvati and Lavender.

"What was that, Harry?" said Parvati.

"Do you know who was saying those words?" asked Lavender.

"It was just like a dream I've been having," said Harry, "But I can't make out who the shape is."

The two girls walked on ahead, looking impressed and whispering to each other.

Hermione was already waiting in Professor McGonagall's classroom when the others arrived. Ron sat next to her, and Harry and Kristen sat behind. The professor came in and sat at her desk, looking at the students over the top of her glasses.

"I want each of you to come out to my desk and pick out a button from the pot in front of me. The buttons are different sizes, varying from very small to very large. I then want you to go back to your desk, and transform the button into a spider, and I want you to make it walk from one end of your desk to the other before transforming it back into a button. Clear?"

To everyone's surprise, Ron's arm shot into the air. "Yes, Weasley?"

"Uh, Professor. I.. I.. Can I have the smallest button in the pot please?"

All the students laughed - Ron's fear of spiders was well known.

"It all depends what you pick out of the pot Weasley. I can't control that. Come on, you come down and pick first."

Ron walked to the front and put his hand into the pot nervously. He looked at the button as he withdrew his hand and groaned as he saw a very large button. "Bad luck, Weasley," said the professor, "I think that's the largest button in the pot. Go back to your desk please - and don't swap with anyone!"

Ron looked terrified as he sat staring at his button, wondering how big the spider would be. Harry whispered in his ear from behind, "At least it won't be as big as Aragog, Ron." Ron shuddered at the memory of Aragog in the Forbidden Forest.

"Right," said McGonagall, "Hermione - show everyone how it's done please."

Hermione touched the button with her wand and concentrated. Her medium-sized button immediately changed into a medium-sized spider that scuttled over towards Ron. Ron let out a strangled moan as it run past him, and then Hermione changed it back into a button. "Excellent, Hermione. Now you have a go Ron."

Ron touched his large button with his wand, and closed his eyes. The spider was large - so large that the individual hairs on its legs could plainly be seen. As it moved quickly across the desk, Ron jumped out of his seat and ran to the front of the classroom, his eyes wide.

"Weasley!" Shouted McGonagall, "Go after that spider and change it back."

"I can't. I can't," he wailed.

The professor looked aghast at Ron, and then asked Hermione to change the spider back into a button, which she did.

"I.. I'm sorry, Professor," said Ron, "I just can't stand spiders."

"Oh go and sit back down, Weasley!" she said.

Throughout the rest of the class, McGonagall kept glancing over at Hermione. She could see that something was bothering the girl - although she did everything correctly in class. She looked quite down, not the bouncy, confident girl she usually was in her class. When she dismissed the students at the end of the lesson, McGonagall asked Hermione to stay behind.

"Hermione, is anything bothering you? You looked a bit distracted in class today."

"No, Professor. Everything's fine. It's just all this work for the OWLS."

Professor McGonagall watched Hermione as she left the room and shook her head. She knew that her favourite pupil would not be bothered at all by the study for her OWLS. 'Sirius was right,' she thought, 'I'll have to keep an eye on that girl.'

At lunch, Ginny noticed that Hermione just picked at her food. She hardly ate anything. "Aren't you hungry, Hermi?" She asked.

"Uh, no, Ginny. I had a large breakfast this morning."

Ginny knew that Hermione had no such thing. She knew that she had eaten only one piece of toast. She sighed worriedly, not knowing what to do.

The following Saturday saw the Quidditch match between Gryffindor and Hufflepuff. It went down as one of the shortest matches in the history of Hogwarts. The game was barely five minutes old, with Gryffindor leading 30 - 0, when Harry spotted the snitch and caught it easily. No one had broken into a sweat, and Lee Jordan had said no more than fifty words in his commentary.

Harry grinned ruefully at the dejected Hufflepuff captain, Ernie McMillan, as he shook his hand. "Sorry, Ernie. I guess it was luck that the snitch showed itself so soon in the game."

"It wasn't luck that you spotted it and caught it, Harry. Congratulations."

The celebrations were a bit muted in Gryffindor tower that day - everyone had looked forward to the game, but hadn't really seen one. They'd have to wait for the annual battle with Slytherin later in the year.

That afternoon, Harry, Kristen and the others went down to see Hagrid. He had sent Harry a note telling him that he had a new baby magical creature to look after, and invited him and his friends to come and see it. The five walked up to Hagrid's door nervously, wondering what sort of danger they'd be walking into - last time, it had been Norbert the baby dragon!

"Come in, you lot. Look what I've found," said an excited Hagrid.

Harry and the rest peered around the door, and saw a small shining white horse lying on Hagrid's rug, sleeping.

"A horse, Hagrid?" said Ginny disappointedly.

"No. No Ginny. It's not an `orse. It's a baby unicorn!"

All five youngsters gasped and went over to inspect the young creature. "Look," said Hermione, "you can just see the small bump on the front of his head, where the horn will grow."

"Where did you get it, Hagrid?" Asked Harry.

"I found it wandring over by the edge of the Forbidden Forest. I think he must have lost his mother."

"What are you going to do with him?" Asked Ginny.

"Well I can't let him go - he won't last five minutes in the forest. I'm going to keep him here until I can find his parents. I'll start looking tonight."

"Oh, I hope you find them, Hagrid. The poor little thing," sighed Kristen.

After a cup of tea, the five set off back up to the school. "Wait. What's that?" Said Ron, looking towards the edge of the Forbidden Forest.

"What. Where?" Said Harry

"There - look!"

"Oh yes - look - it's a Centaur. Hey it's Firenze!"

The five walked over to the Centaur, who nervously stayed inside the tree line.

"Greetings, Firenze," said Harry, "It's good to see you again."

"Harry Potter. Ronan warned me against coming here, but I had to tell you. The stars show great impatience. They say you must hurry. And you must watch out for great danger. I must go now."

"Thank you, Firenze. Goodbye," Harry called as he watched the galloping Centaur disappear among the trees.

"What was that about, Harry?" Asked Kristen.

"Uh, Kristen. It's best that you don't know about this. It's dangerous, and I don't want you getting mixed up in it."

Kristen looked hurt, and looked at the others who were staring fixedly at the ground, "Well it's obvious that you've told everybody else about it. If you can't tell me then that says a lot, doesn't it Harry?"

Tears welled up in her eyes and she turned and ran back up to the castle. "Go after her, Harry," said Hermione, "She's upset."

Harry looked at Hermione, "I can't tell her, Hermi. It's too dangerous. It's bad enough that you're all involved in my problems, without Kristen getting involved too."

"But she's your girlfriend, Harry. It's natural she'll want to be involved," said Ron.

"No, Ron. I won't risk it. I can't put her in any danger. And you all heard what Dumbledore said - I can't tell her," and Harry ran after Kristen as he saw her go in through the main doors.

Harry found Kristen in the common room, sitting by the window. She looked miserable as she stared out into the spring sunshine.

"Kristen, can I talk to you?" said Harry quietly as he went up to her.

She turned her head and sighed, "Ok, Harry. What's it all about?"

"I can't tell you that Kristen. It's not that I don't want you to know, but there's something that I have to do, and it's dangerous. I don't want to risk you getting hurt."

"And how does that make me feel? You're going to do something dangerous, and I don't know what it is and I can't do anything to help you. Please, Harry."

"I'm sorry, Kristen. I just can't. Please understand - Professor Dumbledore's involved in this, and he'll make sure I'm safe. And he's told me not to involve you - he doesn't want to risk you getting hurt while you're under his care. He's made me promise not to tell you about it." Harry looked pleadingly at Kristen.

"Well I'm not happy about this Harry. I was placed in Gryffindor after all, and I'm not afraid of a bit of danger. But I guess if Dumbledore's made you promise him, I won't press you about it any more. But please promise me, Harry, that you'll take care. Please promise."

"Yes, of course I'll take care Kristen"

Ron, Hermione and Ginny walked into the common room as Kristen reached out to Harry and held him close, fiercely gripping his shoulders as they kissed.

"Awwwwww," said Ginny and Ron looking at them. Hermione, meanwhile, trotted upstairs and ran into her dorm.

She was lying outside a dark cave. The air was still and there wasn't a sound coming from the animals in the forest. She saw movement inside the cave, and she recoiled in horror as something tall and horrible ran towards her from its depths.

'You will be the first Mudblood I kill on my new path to glory,' hissed the Dark Lord, his wand raised in front of him and his red eyes flashing cruelly, 'You will pay for helping Potter on his quest - you've been asking for it. Prepare to die'

'Please, no,' she wailed, hoping that it was all a dream.

Then she heard a loud rushing noise - the beating of powerful wings. She looked up to see a huge golden eagle swooping towards her. Astride the eagle was Harry; his arm upraised holding a golden sword.

The Dark Lord looked up and she could see terror in his eyes. He turned and ran back into the cave, looking over his shoulder in fright. The eagle landed in front of her, and Harry jumped off, grinning. She was filled with longing and love as he approached her, smiling.

She reached out to Harry, aching to hold him close.

Harry's expression changed from a smile to a look of horror, and she saw him pulled backwards into the cave, as if into a vortex.

She screamed.

"Hermi .. Hermi.. ," Hermione woke up and felt tears running down her face. She was crying bitterly.

"What's wrong, Hermi?" Said Kristen. She, Parvati and Lavender were bent over Hermione's bed looking worriedly at her.

"It .. it was only a bad dream," she sobbed, "I'll be ok in a minute."

The three girls looked at each other and frowned with worry. This was the third time that Hermione had woken them with her crying.

At breakfast that morning, Hermione had not appeared. "Where's Hermi, Kristen?" asked Ginny.

Kristen looked at Ginny, then beckoned for Harry and Ron to lean close to her. "I'm getting really worried about her. She woke the rest of us in the dorm this morning, sobbing her heart out. She said it was just a nightmare, but I'm not so sure."

"Oh, no," said Ginny, "This is getting worse. I've noticed that she's not eating properly, she just sits and picks at her food. I .. look out, here she comes."

The four leaned back in their seats and watched Hermione as she slowly walked over and sat down, as if in a daze, next to Lavender at the top end of the table. There was not a hint of a smile on her face, and she looked very pale. Her hair was not as smooth and shining as it had been before - it had started to bush out again, with strands sticking out here and there.

"There's something very wrong, here," Harry whispered to his friends, "I've never seen her like this before. Do you think it's still the shock of being attacked by that Slytherin, or is it that .. that boy she likes?"

"I think she got over Grimus Plonger's attack, Harry," said Ginny, "I think it's that boy!"

They looked up the table at Hermione, who was just picking at the scrambled eggs on her plate. "I can't stand seeing her like this," said Harry, standing up, "I've got to talk to her."

Harry walked up to Hermione and sat down next to her. "Hermi?"

She looked up, and Harry was shocked to see that her eyes were dull - there was no longer that special sparkle in them. Something tugged at Harry, deep inside. It was like that time he'd held her after the incident in the corridor, and he felt an overwhelming sense of protectiveness towards her.

"What's wrong, Hermi? You don't look well."

"I .. I .. didn't get much sleep last night, Harry. That's all."

Harry put his hand on her shoulder and looked deep into her eyes. "It's that boy isn't it, Hermi?" he said gently.

A look of panic showed in her eyes and she suddenly jumped up from her seat, "Leave me alone Harry. I'll be all right," and she ran from the Great Hall, her breakfast left untouched.

"Hermi .." Harry called after her. He had a haunted look in his eyes as he went back to sit with his friends. Kristen looked at him quizzically, but didn't say anything. 'Was Harry's reaction just natural concern for a friend?' she thought to herself.

Ron suddenly threw his fork onto his plate and stood up, "I've had enough of this. I'm going to talk to her - find out who this .. this .. bloody git is!" And he walked purposefully from the table. The others got up and followed close behind him.

They found Hermione sitting in the common room, looking at one of her books. The four sat down around her, and she looked at them. "Hermi," said Ron quietly, "We know there's something wrong, and we're all very .. concerned. Please tell us what it is."

"Look, Ron. It's nothing but overwork and a bit of stress. After all that research I did, and all the homework we've been getting - and studying for the OWLS. It .. it's just getting to me a bit, that's all. There's nothing to worry about. Now come on, we'll be late for Charms."

The others looked at each other helplessly, but followed Hermione out through the portrait hole and walked with her towards Professor Flitwick's class. Ginny, however, was thinking furiously. She hadn't bought Hermione's explanation for the state she was in. She knew that Hermione would never get stressed with research and schoolwork - she positively thrived on that sort of thing. 'No, it's definitely that boy,' she thought, 'and for her to be reacting this way, she must be desperately in love with him. And after the last few weeks, I think I've got an idea who it is. I'll talk to her tonight.'

Ginny was still deep in thought as she left the others to go to her Transfiguration class.

That night, Ginny waited until Hermione went up to her dorm. She had noticed, lately, that she went up much earlier than usual. And she thought she knew why. Hermione's roommates were still in the common room, busy with their homework, so she went up the spiral staircase and opened the door slightly, "Can I come in, Hermi?"

"Yes .. come in Ginny," said Hermione. She was sitting on her bed, looking up at the window. Ginny sat next to her, and took one of Hermione's hands in hers.

"Hermi, it's that boy isn't it? That's what's making you so unhappy."

Hermione looked at her friend, "No .. no Ginny. It's the work ..."

"Hermi. I think I know who he is. It's Harry, isn't it?" She whispered. "I've noticed lately that you don't sit with us so often - you find it difficult to be close to him don't you? And I saw your reaction when Professor Dumbledore told us about the Anima Summa's birth date."

Hermione stared as if she'd been struck. Then her eyes filled, and she reached out and clung to Ginny desperately, the tears flowing unchecked.

"Oh, Hermi," she whispered into her ear, upset at her friend's pain.

"Please don't tell anybody," sobbed Hermione, "Especially not Harry"

She calmed down after a few minutes and sat back, looking at Ginny. "I .. I've been in love with him for a while, now. I don't know when exactly, but it just sort of crept up on me. I tried to ignore the feelings I'd been getting, but they just got stronger. It's horrible, Ginny, when you're not in charge of what you think and feel. And what makes it worse is that it's so futile - I know I can never be anything more than a friend to Harry. Not after what Dumbledore told us."

"I'm so sorry, Hermi. If there was only something I could do."

"But there's nothing, Ginny. I've just got to try to live with it. But it's so difficult. I think that I'm going crazy, sometimes. I've even been getting these nightmares - about 'You Know Who' - and Harry coming to rescue me - then he's pulled away from me just as I think he ...," she broke down again, crying pitifully, with Ginny doing her best to comfort her.

She pulled away from Ginny again, "I didn't tell you what happened last year. I kissed him when we were alone in the common room - I just couldn't help it. You remember you told me what Parvati said about her first kiss? Well it was like that - and more. The feeling of excitement was incredible. And he responded, Ginny. Then Ron came in and it was all over. We both had time to think about it. I told Harry afterwards that I shouldn't have done it - that I didn't want it to spoil our friendship. He agreed with me - he said he didn't want to lose a best friend either. And that's how it's been ever since. I suppose I had my chance back then, and like a fool I ignored it. But after what Dumbledore said, it was probably the best thing to do - it couldn't have worked out, and I'd have ended up getting hurt even more."

"I've been there, Hermi. I think I know something about what you're feeling. As you know, I had a crush on Harry for years, and it's only now that I'm getting over it. It's only now that I can stand seeing him with somebody else. But at least I know he loves me - even if it *is* only as his honorary sister. I know there's nothing I can say that will ease the pain, Hermi. Only time will do that. But you know that I'm here for you if you want to talk."

"I know, Ginny. And thanks - thanks for getting me to share the burden. It's helped, you know."

In the following days, Hermione didn't get any better. In fact, she got worse. She still found it difficult to get to sleep, and when she did, she was disturbed by her recurring nightmare. She wasn't eating properly, either. She just didn't seem to have the appetite.

Harry and Ron were increasingly worried about her, and Harry noticed that she didn't spend as much time with him as she used to.

"It must be because I've been pressing her to tell me about that boy," he told Ron. "I'm going to have to ease off on her, I think - I might be making things worse for her."

"Yes, but I'm going to talk to Ginny. There must be something she can do to help," and he walked off to find his sister, leaving Harry and Kristen sitting by the fire in the common room.

Harry pushed a hand through his hair, and got up from the chair and started pacing around in front of the fire. "I don't know what to do, Kristen. I can't bare to see her like this."

Kristen just looked at her boyfriend ... and wondered.

Ron found Ginny in the library, and went to sit next to her. "Ginny, we can't ignore what's happening to Hermi. Harry and I are worried sick about her. Isn't there something you can do? Talk to her or something? Perhaps we should ask Madam Pomfrey to take a look at her."

"No, Ron," said Ginny hurriedly, "I don't think that would help."

Ron eyed his sister suspiciously, "Why not, Ginny? Come on - you know something don't you? I know you too well and I can tell when you're hiding something"

"I'm not, Ron. Now leave it!"

"I will not leave it, Ginny! Now why don't you think Madam Pomfrey can help?"

Ginny looked at Ron, and knew her brother well enough to see that he wouldn't let go. "Be .. because she can't mend a broken heart, Ron," she whispered.

"A brok .. so it *is* that boy! She's told you, hasn't she? She told you who he is."

"Ron, please .. I can't say anything to you," Ginny wailed, thinking desperately how to get out of the hole she was in.

"Ginny Weasley," Ron whispered dangerously, "She's my best friend too. You know I won't let go until I find out what you're hiding. If you don't tell me, I'll go and tackle Hermi about it - tell her I know something. Now come on!"

Ginny felt terrible. She knew that she had to tell Ron. There was no way out for her. She knew that she couldn't let him tackle Hermione like that.

"It .. it's Harry," she whispered almost inaudibly.

"WHAT!" Ron shouted, attracting the stares of Madam Pince, who tutted at him. "That .. that GIT. That stupid GIT. Well I'm going to put him straight right now!" and he got up to dash out of the library.

Ginny caught hold of his robes and pulled him roughly back into the chair, which almost toppled over. Madam Pince looked up in annoyance "If you two can't keep quiet, I'll throw you both out. Now please!"

"Ron. You can't say anything to Harry. He doesn't know about this. He's as worried as any of us. And if he knew he was the cause of Hermi's pain, how do you think he'd feel? He wouldn't be able to cope, Ron. You know how protective he is. And he's our best friend too."

Ron sat back, taking in what his sister had said. "But he's got to be told that Hermi's got a crush on him. Maybe he can talk to her."

"It's not a crush, Ron - Hermi's desperately in love with him. What she's feeling is far worse than the crush I used to have on Harry. Ron - you can't say anything to anybody about this. Please understand - it's very important. There's a lot more to this than you know, but I can't tell you anything about it yet. I've been sworn to secrecy, so don't even try to get me to say any more, because I won't."

Ron sighed deeply, "All right, Ginny. But I want to know as soon as you can say about it," he paused and looked closely at his sister, "This is a mess, Ginny. I just can't let Hermi suffer alone with this."

"She's not alone with it, Ron. She knows she can talk to me, now. All we can do is to watch her and at least try to get her to eat properly. I'm really worried that she's going to get ill over this. And Ron - promise me you won't say a thing to Harry. You've got to act normally around him. Promise me Ron - it's very important."

"I promise Ginny. Don't worry, I won't say anything."

Towards the middle of March, Hermione didn't get any better. Despite all the efforts of her friends, she still wasn't eating as she should. And it was starting to show - her robes started to hang loosely on her shoulders, and it was obvious that she was starting to lose weight. In desperation, Ginny went to see Professor McGonagall.

"Professor," she said as she sat in her office, "It's about Hermione. I'm getting very worried about her."

McGonagall nodded, "Yes, Ginny. I've noticed how she's been acting and looking over the last few weeks. And frankly, I'm worried too - as is the Headmaster and most of the teachers. Is there anything you can tell me about it?"

Ginny took a deep breath and told McGonagall about Hermione's feelings for Harry.

"Oh, no," breathed the professor, "The poor girl. And she knows that nothing can come of it, too. She must be feeling terrible."

"But what can we do, Professor. Is there anything you can think of?"

"If things get too bad, then I'll take her to the hospital wing for Madam Pomfrey to make sure that she gets the vitamins she's lacking. But what do you do about a broken heart, Ginny? Not even Madam Pomfrey can do anything about that."

"There has to be something, Professor!"

McGonagall thought for a few moments, then, "I wonder if her mother can help? I know that Hermione's very close to her."

Ginny brightened, "Yes, I think that would help. Can you bring her here, Professor? I'm sure Hermione would love to see her and talk to her at a time like this."

"I'll see what I can arrange, Ginny. Look, when she gets here, I think it will be best if you speak to her first - before she sees Hermione. You know more than anybody about this."

"Of course I'll speak to her, Professor. And thanks. I feel a lot better now. I'll go and tell the others."

The following evening, Ginny had a message to go to see Professor McGonagall. She walked up to her office and knocked on the door. "Come in, Ginny," shouted McGonagall.

Ginny entered and saw Mrs. Granger sitting at the professor's desk, looking very worried. "Hello, Mrs. Granger. It's nice to see you."

"It's nice to see you again, too, Ginny. Come and tell me what's wrong with Hermione."

"I'll leave you two together," said McGonagall, "Feel free to use this office for as long as you want. I'll see you both later." She smiled reassuringly at them as she left her office.

"Ginny - what's happened? Is anything gone wrong with her .. uh .. magic?"

"No, Mrs Granger, if only that was it. We could do something about that. But this - well let me start at the beginning ..."

Mrs. Granger wiped a tear from her eye as Ginny finished, "But if Harry doesn't know that Hermione loves him, shouldn't he be told? Perhaps there's a chance that they can get together."

"I'm afraid not. There's this very powerful prophecy at work - and Harry's future mate is someone else, and Hermione knows this, I'm afraid. I can't tell you any more about it, though."

"Oh my poor girl. She must be in a terrible state. Can I see her now please, Ginny?"

"Yes, I'll fetch her from the common room now - and Mrs. Granger - be prepared for a shock - she's not looking at all well."

Ginny saw her friend sitting alone in the common room. She went up to her, "Hermi. There's someone to see you in Professor McGonagall's office. Come on."

"Who is it, Ginny?" asked Hermione as they walked along the corridor.

"You'll soon see. But I think you're in for a nice surprise."

Ginny opened the door and followed Hermione into the office.

Hermione stopped suddenly, looking at her mother. "Mum!" she cried and flung herself into her mother's waiting arms. They were both crying as Ginny went back out into the corridor, "I'll just be outside. Take as long as you like."

Ginny paced backwards and forwards outside the professor's office, hoping against hope that Mrs. Granger could ease her daughter's torment. She didn't care how long she waited, just as

long as something good would come of it. After about an hour, Mrs. Granger came out of the office, wiping a tear from her eye.

"Oh, Ginny. I haven't seen her this ill since she was a little baby. Look, can I see you before I leave? You're her best friend and I'd like to talk to you before I go. Can you come back in about an hour?"

"Yes, Mrs. Granger. No problem. See you later. Uh, how is she now?"

"It's going to take a lot of time before she's over this. But I think I'm getting through to her - I'm trying to get her to understand that she has to look after herself. And she's agreed to come to France with us over Easter. I think the break will do her good."

Ginny walked back to the common room to tell her friends. She was smiling for the first time in a quite a while, full of hope for her friend now.

Later, Ron walked with Ginny back to the professor's office, and they waited outside. After a few minutes the door opened, and Hermione and her mother walked out. Hermione seemed a lot better - her eyes no longer had that dull and empty look.

"It's been so good to see you mum," she said, "You don't know how much it's meant to me."

"I think I do, Hermione. Ginny, will you come with me to find Professor McGonagall?"

"Goodbye, mum. I'll see you in two weeks," and Hermione walked back to the common room with Ron, after kissing her mother goodbye.

"Are you feeling any better now, Hermione?" Ron asked as they made their way to Gryffindor tower.

"Yes, I think so, Ron. It was lovely to talk to my mother about things, and I'm really looking forward to seeing my dad in France for Easter."

"Hermi. Er .. I know how you feel about Harry. I know he's the one you've been so upset over."

Hermione stopped and looked stricken, "How did you ..? Ginny told you didn't she? Look Ron, I don't want Harry or anybody else to know about this."

"Don't worry, Hermi. I won't say anything - Ginny made me promise. And don't blame Ginny, I forced it out of her - we're all worried about you, you know - especially Harry. He's beside himself with worry."

Hermione looked wistfully at Ron, "Yes - I suppose I've been a bit silly. I can't help how I feel about Harry, but my mother made a lot of sense in what she said. I've just got to accept things as they are and get on with it."

"I know it's going to be difficult for you, Hermi, but don't shut Harry out. I don't think he could handle it if he thought you weren't his best friend any more."

"Oh I'll try, Ron. It's hard being around him, but I'll try"

As they entered the portrait hole, Hermione saw Harry sitting with Kristen, talking. When he saw her, Harry jumped up and rushed over, looking a bit apprehensive. "How was your mother, Hermi? Did you have - you know - a good chat about things?"

"Yes, Harry," she replied, "I can see things a bit differently now. Talking to her has helped a lot."

Harry grinned with relief, "So we'll get the real Hermione back then?"

She smiled, "Yes, I think so. But give me a bit of time and space to get my head around things," she looked back at Ron, who was standing behind, "Ohhh - I'm starving."

"No problem, Hermi. Wait here and I'll go down to the kitchen and get something for you. I won't be long."

As Ron opened the portrait hole, Ginny came in, grinning. "What are you so happy about, Ginny?" he asked.

"Oh, nothing Ron," she said airily, "I'm just glad that things seem to be working out at last." She walked over to Harry and Hermione, still grinning. "So! She's looking better already don't you think Harry?"

"Yes she is. And I'm glad you've got your appetite back Hermi." Harry went back to sit with Kristen and talked incessantly about the relief he felt now that Hermione was on the mend. Kristen smiled, delighted with the news, but she couldn't help but wonder as she looked at Hermione and Ginny talking together at the other end of the room.

"My mother knows me inside out, Ginny. She knew instinctively what my problem is. Oh, she can't do anything about the way I feel about Harry - the way I'll always feel about him. But she made me realise what it was I was doing. I've always got to find the answer to everything, Ginny. If there's a problem, then I've got to solve it. I've been trying to find the answer to what I can do about Harry - the solution that would put everything right. But as my mother said, there's no answer to this problem, and that's why I've made myself ill - searching for something that's not there. Now I realise that, I can focus on other things - stop trying to search for the impossible. I'll always love him, you know," she looked into her friend's eyes, "I love him so much that I want him to be happy - even if it's not with me. So I'm still going to help him with the secret and the Anima Summa - there's no way I can abandon it, even though I know I'll be doing something that will push him away from me for ever. Can you understand that, Ginny?"

Ginny reached over and squeezed her friend's hand, "Yes, I think I can, but I don't know if I could do that. You're very brave, Hermi."

"Well I am a Gryffindor!" They both laughed briefly, and then Hermione looked quizzically at Ginny. "Why did you tell Ron about Harry?"

Ginny looked guiltily at her, "He told you, did he? Oh I'm sorry, Hermi - you know what he's like. He wouldn't leave me alone until I told him. Don't be angry with me .. please."

Hermione smiled at her friend, "How can I be angry with you, Ginny? And I don't mind that Ron knows, really. And he's promised not to tell Harry."

Ginny sighed with relief, "Of course, I didn't tell him about the Anima Summa, but he knows there's something I was holding back from him. I told him I'd tell him about it when I was able to."

"You know, Ginny, I've never had friends like you before I came to Hogwarts. My mother made me see how lucky I am to have you and Ron to help me through this. I won't forget what you've done for me."

"Look, Hermi, Ron and I will always be there when you need us - you know that. And .. and Harry will too. You do know that don't you?"

"Yes, I do. But I don't know if that'll make things easier or worse"

"So, what's happening at Easter?" said Harry. He was sitting with Ron, Ginny and Hermione in the common room the week before the holiday. Kristen had gone to her student-exchange review meeting with Professor McGonagall and the other Americans and Europeans who were at Hogwarts. "Kristen's going to spend the holiday with her family back in America."

"I thought she'd be staying here with you, Harry, " said Ron, "Anything wrong? You don't seem to be as 'lovey-dovey' as you used to be."

"No, I don't think anything's wrong, Ron. But lately, she's seemed to be a little bit distant, as if something's on her mind. Maybe she's still a bit off with me for not telling her about the Rhedae mystery."

"Ron and I'll be staying here with you, Harry," said Ginny.

"As you all know, I'm going to France with my parents. They're going before the end of term, but I'll follow them on the 30th - I'm catching a plane from Glasgow airport," said Hermione.

"Where in France are they staying, Hermi?" asked Ron.

"They've hired a gite in the South of France."

"What the hell is a gite?" asked Ron.

"It's a holiday cottage for rent, there's a lot of them in France. This one's near Carcassonne."

"Carcassonne... Carcassonne..." muttered Harry, "Where have I heard that before?"

"It's a mediaeval walled city, not far from Toulouse," answered Hermione.

"I've got it!" exclaimed Harry, "It was mentioned in one of those books we were researching about Rhedae. How far is it from Rennes-le-Chateau?"

"Yes, of course! I remember now. I'll go and get my atlas," said Hermione and rushed up to her dorm. Almost immediately, she came back down and laid the atlas on one of the tables. She searched through the pages until she came to the map of France.

The four leaned over the table, looking for Carcassonne. "Here it is," said Hermione, pointing towards the bottom of the map, "It's in the Languedoc region, so Rennes-le-Chateau can't be that far away."

They all pored over the Languedoc region of the map, "There it is," said Ginny, pointing to a small dot underneath Carcassonne, "It's about 25 miles due south of Carcassonne."

Harry was deep in thought, then looked up at Hermione, "Hermi? How big is this gite you're staying in?"

"On no, Harry," she said, "You know what Dumbledore said. You can't think about leaving before he says it's ok."

"But this is perfect, Hermi. Don't you think it's a bit of a coincidence that you're going to be staying right on the doorstep of the mystery? It'll be a perfect base to investigate the secret."

"Do you think your parents will mind if they had another two guests, Hermi?" said Ron, "If there's not much room, Harry and I can take a wizarding tent and stay in the garden, or something."

"I'm sure they'd love you to come. But there's no way you can come if Dumbledore hasn't managed to get those aurors to protect us," said Hermione.

"So let's go and see him, then," said Harry, jumping up from his chair.

As she listened to all this, Ginny had a very odd expression on her face, and her brow was creased in furrows. "Just one minute!" she said testily, "What do you mean *two* extra guests? Don't you mean *three*?"

"Now don't get any ideas Ginny," said Ron, "You know it's dangerous, and what would mum and dad do to me if anything happened to you?"

"No way, Ron. I'm coming!"

"Listen, Ginny," said Harry, "Ron's right. It's too dangerous, and I won't risk you getting hurt. You'll have to stay here."

Ginny's face took on the colour of her flaming red hair, and her eyes flashed dangerously, "Sod off, Harry! Haven't you noticed I've grown up now? I'll be 15 in a few days - the same age as you! I'm not a shy little girl any more - the one that changed colour every time I spoke to you. I've been involved in this right from the start, and .. and what's more, Harry Potter, I'm a Gryffindor. So there's no way you're stopping me coming with you. Right?"

Harry and Ron just stood looking with their mouths open as the little firebrand swept out of the portrait hole. They couldn't believe that Ginny had just stood up to Harry at last. Hermione just grinned with a twinkle in her eye as Ron let out his breath and said, "So now you know, Harry. I'm not the only Weasley with a temper."

"There's no way you'll stop her coming, you know. I'd better go and try to cool her down," giggled Hermione as she followed her friend out of the common room.

"Oh well, I'd better start thinking up some explanations for mum and dad," said Ron resignedly.

"That makes two of us, Ron," said Harry, grinning.

"Ginny .. Ginny, wait up," Hermione called to the furious form of her friend. "It's ok, you can come with us. I think you made your point."

Ginny stopped and turned, the fury still showing in her pretty face. "I should bloody well think so, too. The cheek of those two gits!"

"Ginny! Honestly, your language."

Ginny's expression softened, "Do you think Harry will ever speak to me again, Hermi? I just told him to sod off!"

"It'll do him good, Ginny. Don't think twice about it."

"Ron's right, though. When mum and dad find out I'm going with you for Easter they'll go bananas - I know it's going to be dangerous in Rennes-le-Chateau."

"I think Professor Dumbledore will explain things to them, Ginny. Don't worry"

"Speaking of the Headmaster, shouldn't we go and see him about this?"

"Yes, and the sooner the better."

The two girls turned around and went back to the common room. They hadn't been able to see Draco Malfoy, who was on one of his frequent sneaking forays. He'd heard everything they'd said.

'At last - I've got something to report,' thought Draco as he walked towards the owlery, still hidden under the Invisibility Cloak.

When they got back into the common room, Ginny glanced sheepishly at Harry, "Sorry I swore at you Harry."

Harry grinned at her, "That's ok - I shouldn't have treated you like a little kid. I won't be doing that again in a hurry! Come on, let's go and see Dumbledore"

"So why won't Fudge help us with this, Headmaster?" asked Sirius. He sat around the table with the other inner group members, with Harry and his friends looking on.

"He says he can't release anybody at the moment. All his operatives are out in the field, up to their eyes in it. They're fully stretched trying to slow down Voldemort's recruitment drive."

"But Professor, the warnings I'm getting are more urgent," said Harry, "I can't wait any longer. I know I've got to go very soon now."

Dumbledore sighed, "I know, Harry. I agree with you - it can't be delayed any longer. I only wish I could risk leaving Hogwarts for a few days. But I can't. So it's down to you three," he nodded at Sirius, Ceri and Remus, "to give these four as much protection as you can. It's far from ideal, I know, but it's the best we can do under the circumstances. I'll speak to Olympe Maxine, the headmistress of Beauxbatons - she'll be able to arrange for these four to use magic in France. They're not so strict there."

"How are we all going to get there?" said Ceri

"I'll ask Madame Maxine to arrange a Portkey to Carcassonne. When are your parents expecting you, Hermione?" asked Dumbledore.

"On the 30th, Professor. I owled them just before coming to your office, so they'll be expecting Harry, Ron and Ginny as well."

"Sirius - you, Ceri and Remus will have to keep watch on them all the time, but you won't be able to interfere or help with what they have to do."

"Why is that, Headmaster?" asked Sirius.

"I don't know why. I just know that it has to be only these four who must solve the mystery - call it magical instinct if you will. Harry, I suppose you've got a plan in mind?"

"Yes, Professor. Hermione's the one who drew it up."

"Now why am I not surprised at that? Care to tell us about it, Hermione?" said Dumbledore.

"We'll use Carcassonne as our base," explained Hermione, "Ginny and I will use the second bedroom in the gite, but Harry and Ron will have to share a tent in the garden. We'll travel to Rennes-le-Chateau on our broomsticks," she pulled a face before continuing, "We'll go in the mornings, just before dawn so that we won't be seen, and we'll fly back after dark each night. I've made a list of the buildings and sites to investigate," she pulled a parchment from her robes, "and these are the ones that seem to be the most likely places to look at. They seemed to crop up all the time in the books we researched. We're hoping that we'll find magical clues as well - but that's something we won't know about until we get there."

"That seems pretty comprehensive, Hermione. I'm proud of you," said Professor McGonagall as she looked at the parchment, "How many points to Gryffindor do you think, Headmaster?"

"They're not on school work," snarled Snape, "House points are highly inappropriate, Minerva!"

"Hmmpf," said McGonagall, "Now you four be very careful. I want to see you back here after the holidays all in one piece."

"We need to talk about your plan in more detail," said Sirius, "We can meet on the 29th - the day before we leave. Oh and Harry - don't forget your 'find-me' stone!"

"Wormtail," hissed Voldemort, "I want you to take ten of our best Death Eaters to Rennes-le-Chateau. The school holiday starts on 30th March, so I want you there by then."

Voldemort had just listened to Lucius Malfoy's report, and he rubbed his hands together in anticipation. "Once this little distraction is out of the way we can concentrate on our plans for the big take-over. Don't let me down, Wormtail, or you'll be sorry!"

"But master, wouldn't it be better if you led the Death Eaters yourself? No one can stand up to your power."

"That's true, Wormtail, but for once in your miserable life - think! I have to remain hidden until we are ready with my great plan - otherwise, the Magical Ministries of the world will be forced to tell their magical communities that I'm back in power, despite the panic it will cause. Then they'd be able to recruit their aurors in far greater numbers in readiness for my assault. So it suits me to stay hidden for the moment. Do you understand?"

"Yes my Lord - but master, if Lucius failed to get Potter what makes you think I will?"

"Because, Wormtail, Albus Dumbledore won't be there. You'll only have a few young kids and maybe one or two aurors to deal with. And you'll be taking my best Death Eaters. So don't even think of failing!"

"I won't let you down master," said Wormtail, cringing.

"And Wormtail - before you kill them, find out what they're looking for. I want to know exactly what it is, and if it's anything to do with this Anima Summa we heard about. Do you understand?"

"Yes my Lord. You can rely on me."

"And don't use Cruciatius on him. Avery told me that he can block it - although he wouldn't be able to block my power. I'm far too strong for him or anybody else."

"So, how are you getting on with my sister, Charlie?"

"We're getting on fine, Demont." Charlie waited for Demont's next try to find out his intentions towards his sister.

"Just getting on? Nothing else?"

Charlie grinned, "No, Demont. Nothing else."

Charlie had become amused at Demont's obvious attempts to get him together with his sister and he was sure that Nadine was getting the same treatment as well. He just hoped that she wouldn't be scared off by it.

"Anything?" asked Demont as Nadine walked over to the two men.

"No - but the vibrations are definitely stronger. North seems to be the right direction to follow."

They had parked the Land Rover near the little village of Luzenac, about 10 miles north of the northern edge of the Forbidden Forest.

Demont looked at their map, "Right, the next place to try is Les Cabannes - it's not too far north of here. We should get there by nightfall." They all piled back into the Land Rover and drove off along the rough track.

They drove into the quiet little village of Les Cabannes just before dusk, and made their way up to a promontory about half a mile away. They pitched the two tents at a slight depression in the ground, underneath a rocky outcrop, and then walked up to the highest point about a hundred yards away. Nadine closed her eyes and concentrated.

"Slightly stronger, I think," she said, "but there's not much difference from the last site."

They walked back down to the tents, and lit a camp fire to cook their usual evening fare of beans on toast. While Charlie and Nadine prepared the food, Demont studied the map by wand-light. "The next place on our list is Quillan," he said, "but it may be an idea to go a bit further west first. Montsegur is not far away and it may be a good place to try - it's got a pretty gruesome history, and it's perched high on a sheer crag. What do you think, Nadine?"

"Yes, it might be a good idea to try it. We should be there by lunchtime tomorrow if we start out early."

"Right, that's settled then. Oh, I forgot to tell you earlier - I've got to be in some meetings at the ministry for the next few days. But first I'll have to Apparate back to the cabin in the morning to collect a few things. You don't mind, do you? Being on your own for four or five days?"

Charlie could see through his ploy immediately, "You didn't mention it before, Demont?"

"Uh, no. As I said - I forgot. But you don't really need me with you anyway. You two can do just as well, if not better, without me," he smiled and looked at them with his eyebrows raised.

"Demont!" said Nadine, "You can be so obvious, sometimes. Sorry, Charlie - you'll have to excuse my brother."

Charlie thought he noticed, in the firelight, a crimson tinge on Nadine's face as she turned and walked over to her tent. He smiled at Demont and shook his head in exasperation.

The next morning, Charlie and Nadine drove through the wild and desolate countryside toward Montsegur. They were a little nervous following the events of the previous evening, but soon relaxed and chatted companionably as they drove along. It was nearing lunchtime when they spotted the ruined castle of Montsegur, perched perilously in the distance on top of the huge rocky crag.

"So what's special about this place, Nadine?"

"Oh, it was a terrible thing that happened there," said Nadine, "it was the end of the Albigensian crusade in 1244, and the castle lay under siege for ten months."

"What's the Albigensian crusade?"

"That was one of the darkest times in the middle ages. The Catholic Church was determined to eradicate all the Cathars from France - the Cathars were a Gnostic Christian sect, whose beliefs were different from those of mainstream Christianity. One of the things that Rome didn't like about them was their belief that each individual could achieve enlightenment on their own, without the need for a priest. You can imagine what they felt about that! Anyway, the Inquisition was at its height and many Cathars were tortured and forced to renounce their beliefs. The last of the Cathars made their final stand at Montsegur - and you can see how difficult it would have been to attack."

"It would be bad enough to climb all the way up there - they wouldn't have had much breath or energy left to fight," Charlie commented.

"The siege ended when a surrender was agreed, with the promise that the Cathars would go free if they confessed their supposed sins. The crusaders killed over 200 Cathars that day - they burnt them to death."

Charlie shuddered, "How could Christians do that to other Christians? It doesn't bear thinking about!"

"The interesting part, though, is that before the siege ended, a group of Cathars managed to escape, carrying a great treasure. Many believe that the treasure was the Holy Grail itself. Catharism didn't entirely die out at that time. Small groups escaped to Rennes-le-Chateau, a little village to the north east of here, where they hid in the caves dug by the Romans."

As they approached the base of the mountain, Charlie groaned, "Oh no. Have we got to climb all the way up there?"

"Yes I'm afraid so, Charlie. It's the best place to check for the emanations. Are you afraid of a little exercise?"

"What me? Come on, I'll race you to the top!" and he jumped out of the car and started to run up the rugged and very steep path that led to the summit.

Nadine followed more slowly, and after 10 minutes came upon the prone figure of Charlie, his chest heaving and his face flushed. "A bit out of condition are we?" she said as she passed him.

After several hours of climbing, they eventually reached the top, both of them the worse for wear. They just collapsed beside each other on a flat rock, trying to get their breath back. Nadine lifted herself up, resting on her elbow, and looked down at Charlie, "I didn't think you'd make it all the way."

Charlie opened his pained eyes and peered up at her, shading the sun with his hand, "I couldn't leave you to come up here on your own now could I?"

"Hmmm," she replied.

After a few minutes, Charlie got to his feet and held his hand out to help Nadine stand. She caught hold of his hand, and Charlie pulled. Now whether he misjudged her weight or not is mere conjecture - but the result of his help was Nadine colliding with Charlie's chest as he supported her. They looked into each other's eyes for a few moments, their faces very close, before Nadine dropped her eyes and moved away.

"I .. I'm sorry, Nadine. Don't know my own strength!" muttered Charlie.

Nadine just smiled weakly and turned to walk up towards the ruined castle. Charlie followed closely behind, taking in the majesty of the ruins.

"It's so silent up here," Nadine whispered, "There's an air of desolation and sadness about it." She walked further along the crag and began to test for the vibrations.

After a few moments, she turned back to Charlie, "It's a bit weaker," she said, "Not quite as strong as in Les Cabannes. We must have come too far west."

"Where next then?"

"We'd better go east to Quillan, then north to Rennes-les-Bains."

"What about Rennes-le-Chateau? You mentioned that place earlier."

Nadine looked at the map, "Yes we can try there too. It's only a short way from Rennes-les-Bains - a bit further north-west. And that place is even more mysterious than Montsegur. I'll tell you about the mystery later. It'll make a good campfire story."

Charlie smiled and then groaned, "Oh no. We've got to get back down. But at least it won't be as bad as coming up!"

Nadine laughed at his pained expression, "Yes. And I think we'd better make camp at the bottom of the mountain. I don't think we'll feel much like driving after climbing back down."

"Come on, then. Lets go. I'll help you." Charlie held out his hand towards her. She looked at it momentarily, then up at Charlie. She smiled, then, and took the proffered hand gratefully as they started their way down the steep and perilous path.

"I should have guessed you'd do something like this - especially since I helped with Hermi's surprise!"

Ginny looked at her friends sitting, ginning at her, at the table behind Hagrid's hut. It was Ginny's birthday - the day before they were due to leave for Rennes-le-Chateau. Her friends had pulled the same surprise as they had done for Hermione, and she hadn't suspected anything when Hermione asked her to go with her to see Hagrid.

"Go on, Ginny. Sit down with the rest of `em. There's plenty to eat," said a smiling Hagrid.

Ginny sat between Hermione and Ron, with Harry and Kristen and Hagrid opposite. After they'd stuffed themselves full, Ginny looked at her pile of presents, squealing with delight as

she opened each parcel. The last one was from Harry, and she looked at him as she impatiently ripped open the packaging.

"I hope you like it," he said a little apprehensively.

Ginny gasped as she lifted out a gold chain that held a gold locket.

"Open it," said Harry.

Ginny struggled a bit with the clasp, but when she got it open, Harry saw a little tear in the corner of her eye as she read the inscription ..

`To My Adopted Sister

With Love and Respect

From Harry`

"Oh Harry, thank you," she said breathlessly, "Look everybody," and she passed it around so that they could all read the inscription. She went over to Harry and kissed him on the cheek. "Thanks, brother," she whispered to him.

Harry smiled down at her and then looked up and caught Hermione's eye. He moved his head, slightly, beckoning her over to the side of the hut. She walked over wondering what he wanted.

"That was a nice thing you did, Harry. Ginny will treasure that locket," she said.

"I hope so, Hermi. Look, I wanted to say something to you - before we go tomorrow. I .. I want you to know now .. just in case, you know .. anything .. well .. happens to us in France .. I really appreciate everything you've done for me. All the work you've done - finding out about Rhedae and everything. I'd be lost without you, Hermi - you know that don't you?"

Hermi struggled with her inner feelings, trying to hold in the tears. 'Oh Harry,' she thought to herself as she looked up at him, 'I've been doing all right coping over the last few days. Then you have to say something like that.'

"Thanks, Harry," she finally said, "But don't even think anything bad is going to happen in France. I can't think of anybody better to protect us than Sirius, Remus and Ceri."

Against all her sense of reason, she stretched up and kissed Harry on the cheek. "Thanks," she said again, blushing, before going back to sit next to the excited Ginny.

"What was that all about?" asked Kristen as Harry sat back down. She had watched as the two friends talked, and looked closely at the way they had looked at each other.

"Oh - just thanking Hermi for something she did for me a little while ago," he replied.

A little while later, Kristen spoke quietly to Ginny as the others went in to see the baby unicorn - Hagrid had still not found its parents.

"Ginny, I wanted to ask you - Um - oh this is so difficult"

"What's wrong, Kristen? Is it about Harry?"

Kristen looked pleadingly at Ginny. "No - well yes. Oh, Ginny, is there anything going on between Harry and Hermione? I know they're great friends and everything, but - well - do you know if there's anything more than just friendship between them?"

Ginny sucked in her breath and thought hard. "Well no - at least not that I know of. What makes you think that, Kristen?"

"It's just the way he looks at her sometimes - the way he's always so protective towards her. Don't get me wrong, Ginny. I think Hermione's great and I don't for one minute think that she'd do anything behind my back. It's just that I get this strange feeling when I see him looking at her sometimes. I think, on times, that it's more than just friendship. Oh .. am I making any sense, Ginny? Am I just being stupid?"

"Kristen - look, I think that Hermi would tell me if she were seeing Harry secretly. I'm sure that nothing like that is going on. Are you sure you're not just imagining it?"

"Oh, I don't know. Perhaps I am. But you know what Harry's like - he can be so deep sometimes, and it's difficult to know what he's thinking. Look, forget what I just said. I'm just being silly."

Kristen walked into the hut to see the unicorn, thinking that she wasn't being silly. She thought that perhaps Harry might just have feelings for Hermione, but didn't realise it.

Ginny remained sitting outside, also thinking furiously. Kristen had set off a chain reaction in Ginny's head, and a grin slowly spread over her face as she worked through the possibilities.

Later that evening, the five friends walked back up to the school together. As they approached the main doors, Harry and Kristen stopped. The other three waved goodbye to her and went inside.

"Have you got the Portkey?" Harry asked. Kristen showed him the key ring that would transport her back home to America.

"Have a nice time in France, Harry. It was nice of the Grangers to invite you all. It's a wonder that Dumbledore's allowing you to go though."

"Well he's not too happy about it, but he's sending a few people to watch out for us."

Kristen sighed and looked at Harry searchingly, "I've got to go now. Look after yourself Harry. I'll see you after the holidays."

'I think I've got a lot of thinking to do over Easter,' she thought. Then she kissed Harry lightly on the lips before clutching the key ring and disappearing with a slight 'pop.'

Harry stared at the space where Kristen had been, thinking that her farewell kiss had been a little on the cool side. 'I wonder if she's going off me?' he thought.

He was still deep in thought as he walked inside the school to join his friends. They had a lot of packing to do before leaving for Carcassonne in the morning, and they also needed to go over Hermione's plan once more - this time with Sirius, Ceri and Remus.

They made their way up to the History of Magic classroom, where they'd arranged to meet Sirius, Remus and Ceri, and went in to see the three adults waiting for them.

"Did Kristen get away all right, Harry?" asked Sirius.

"Yes - she just left, Sirius," said Harry looking a bit distracted.

"Right," said Remus, "We've had a good look through your research, Hermione. You did a good job."

"Thanks, Professor," said Hermione, looking pleased.

"I think it's best if we stay in our Animagus forms for most of the time, Sirius," said Ceri.

The six others looked as Sirius replied, "Yes, three people would attract more attention than just one. And we can hide more easily as animals. You don't mind a dog and a wolf for company do you Moony?"

Remus laughed and shook his head, "No. I should be used to that by now, Padfoot. We need to stay close to the kids, but not too close," said Remus, "If there are to be any Death Eaters about we don't want them to see us. We want the element of surprise on our side."

"What we need to do is to look at the street map of Rennes-le-Chateau that Hermione found in one of her books," said Ceri, "We need to work out the order in which you'll be looking at each site, and then the best hiding place for us three at each of them. We can do it in such a way that there'll be the minimum risk of being spotted as we move between each location."

They all looked at the map, thinking of the best order in which to proceed.

"And shouldn't we contact the Priory of Sion?" said Ron, "After all, they were the ones that started this off - sending the amulet to Harry."

Hermione rolled her eyes and looked askance at Ron, "Ron! They're a *secret* society. They're not going to have an office at Rennes-le-Chateau! No one knows who or where they are. No, if contact is going to be made, they're the ones who'll contact us."

"Oh yes - sorry Hermi. I wasn't thinking," said Ron looking abashed.

"Right," said Hermione looking back at the map, "I think we can start at the Villa Bethania, then go into the garden to the Magdala tower. Then the Calvary, the churchyard, and leave the church until last. That'll do for starters before we look at the surrounding area. What do you think?"

Ceri looked at the map, thinking. "I think it'll be better if you start at the Magdala Tower - us three can climb up that ridge and hide in the bank of trees there. Then go to the garden and on to villa. We can follow you from inside the trees. Then go to the Calvary, the churchyard and

finally the church. We can stay hidden all the time - we won't have to come out into the open at all. Yes?"

"Yes, you're right," said Hermione, "I can see you're good at this Ceri. And we can land our broomsticks on the far side of the Magdala Tower, hidden from the rest of the village."

"Right, that's settled. And you four," said Sirius looking at the teenagers, "I know you're going to be wrapped up in solving the mystery, but for goodness sake keep a look out for the Death Eaters. They're bound to turn up at some point. I suggest that two of you concentrate on the problem while the other two keep a sharp look out. You can do it in turns if you feel left out of things. And I want you all to stay close together at all times. Do you all understand?" He looked at the four with piercing eyes as he waited for an answer.

"Yes, Sirius. We understand," said Harry smiling, and the other three nodded gravely.

Sirius seemed satisfied with the response, "Right then. Any questions anyone?"

He looked around the table and everyone shook their heads.

"I suggest we meet in the Great Hall for breakfast at 9.00 am tomorrow. The Portkey is timed for 10.00am. You can take the rest of tomorrow settling in and spending some time with Mr. and Mrs. Granger. We'll be camped close by - hidden from the Muggles, of course. Do your parents know anything about what you're up to Hermione?"

"No Sirius. They think we're on a project for our OWLS - writing a thesis on the mystery of Rennes-le-Chateau."

"Fine, see you in the morning then. Goodnight all."

Chapter 8 Rhedae

"Here they are at last," said Sirius as he looked up from his second helping of a full English breakfast. He was sitting next to Remus with Ceri opposite, and they all looked over as the four friends walked over to the Gryffindor table.

"Good morning kids," said Ceri cheerfully, "What kept you?"

"Oh you know what girls are like, Ceri. We've been waiting for them to get ready for ages!" Said Ron.

"Yes and look at you," said Hermione, "You can't go to Carcassonne dressed like that!" Ron and Ginny were dressed in wizarding robes, unlike the others who were dressed in ordinary Muggle clothes.

"What do you mean, Hermi? These are my second best robes - there's nothing wrong with them!" Said Ron, looking aggrieved.

"Ron - you've got to dress in Muggle clothes. You'll stand out like a beacon if you go like that. You too, Ginny."

"But I haven't got any Muggle clothes," said Ginny with a look of horror on her face.

"You'll have to borrow some of mine, then," said Hermione.

"And I've got some spare ones for you, Ron," said Harry.

Ceri laughed, "We'll get some new ones for you when we get to Carcassonne. You can help me pick them, Hermi."

As they all started to tuck into their breakfast, Ceri looked up at Sirius, "It's nice to see you eating so well, Sirius. You've put on a bit of weight since I met you last summer - you weren't much more than skin and bones back then."

"If you think that's eating well, Ceri, just keep an eye on Ron for the next twenty minutes - now *that's* eating well," Harry grinned at his friend.

Ron looked up and mumbled through a mouthful of bacon and egg, "What?"

Everybody laughed as Ron refused to be deflected from his favourite pastime.

After a while, Remus looked at his watch, "Come on, we've only got fifteen minutes. If you two want to get changed, you'd better get a move on."

Hermione rushed out of the hall with Ginny as Harry grabbed hold of Ron's robes and dragged him from the table. "Hang on a sec," said an indignant Ron as he stretched over to grab another piece of toast.

Dumbledore and McGonagall were waiting when all seven went out through the front doors onto the drive outside. "I won't tell you to be careful, because I know you will. But let me

know how things progress. I want a daily report please, Sirius - you can use Hedwig." The Headmaster handed the cage to Harry, with Hedwig sleeping inside on her perch.

"See you in ten days, Professor," said Remus as they reached out and held the cricket bat. Seconds later, they had left Hogwarts.

The seven looked around as they materialised in a small clearing on the edge of a wood. Through the trees they could just see the beautiful mediaeval walled city of Carcassonne perched impressively on a hill. As they walked towards the city, Hermione launched into the history of the place, reeling off a multitude of facts.

.. And it's the only fortified town in Europe that's still inhabited. It has 52 towers, two concentric surrounding walls and nearly two miles of ramparts."

"Have you finished now, Hermi? My head's spinning," said Ron as the others grinned at him.

"Oh, there's plenty more I can tell you if you're interested Ron." She looked down at the piece of parchment in her hand and then scanned around the countryside, looking for the site where her parents were staying. She pointed to a small wooded area off to the right of the city, "It's over there, about a mile away," she said.

They walked for another twenty minutes before they spotted a small cabin in front of a copse of trees. She saw the Granger's car parked in front of the cabin, and the large garden behind, leading towards the trees.

"That looks like a good place to erect the tents - in the trees behind the cabin," said Ceri, "We can put up wards to hide them from any passing Muggles. Harry and Ron can put their tent in the garden - there's plenty of room. We'll see you later, after we've checked out the surrounding area - and you'd better not tell your parents we're here, Hermione. It might be difficult to explain why you need protection. Oh and Harry - you'd better let me take Hedwig."

Hermione ran up to the front of the cabin with the other three following closely behind. As she started to climb the short flight of steps at the front, the door opened and Mr. & Mrs. Granger stepped out. They were grinning broadly as Hermione first hugged her mother, then her father.

"Ginny, Ron, Harry - it's nice to see you all again," smiled Mrs. Granger as she came down the steps, "come on in - we've got the kettle on."

"Thanks for letting us stay, Mrs Granger. It's very kind of you," said Harry.

"The pleasure's all ours, Harry," said Mr. Granger, still holding his daughter around the waist, "It's nice to see that Hermione has such good friends."

They sat in the cabin chatting as they drank their tea, and then Mrs. Granger got up, "Hermione, Ginny, come on, let me show you your bedroom. Arbuthnot, go and show the boys where they can put up their tent."

Ron looked at Harry, trying not to laugh. "*ARBUTHNOT?*" He mouthed silently. Harry bent down and pretended to pull up a sock, trying to think of something nasty to stop the fit of giggles that was threatening to erupt.

"Ok, Millie. Come on you two. Let's go out into the garden - I'll show you a good place to pitch your tent."

In the middle of erecting the tent, Hermione and Ginny came out to check on their progress. "Hermi," said Ron, a grin slowly spreading over his face, "Why didn't you warn us about your father's name? Do you know how hard it was for us to stop bursting out laughing?"

"What's the matter with his name! There's nothing wrong with it. It's a very old and distinguished name."

"What do they call him, Hermi?" asked Ron, "Is it Arby, Buty, or Noty?" Both he and Harry fell to the floor, finally letting out the uncontrollable fits of giggles that had been lurking just beneath the surface.

"Oh you! Honestly," exclaimed Hermione indignantly as she turned, put her nose in the air, and marched back to the cabin with a smirking Ginny in tow.

For the rest of the holiday, Harry and Ron were hard pressed not to tease Hermione about her father's unusual name. Ginny had warned them to stay off the subject, and by and large they coped very well.

Hermione had calmed down by the time Millie served a delightful lunch in the garden. She sat between Harry and Ginny, and talked about what they would be seeing the following day in Rennes-le-Chateau.

"I think it'll be great, Harry. We've been researching the place in books for ages, and to finally see all the places we've read about is exciting, isn't it?"

"Yes, Hermi. But I hope all the excitement'll be about solving the mystery," he leaned close to Hermione and spoke quietly, not wishing the Grangers to hear his next comment, "and not fighting Death Eaters."

Hermione leaned close as well and whispered in Harry's ear, "But there's no reason to believe that 'You Know Who' knows we're here. How could he know we're coming now? How could he find out about it? Only us, Dumbledore and his most trusted professors know."

Harry turned and whispered, "Dumbledore seemed pretty sure there'd be Death Eaters here, Hermi. Perhaps there's a spy at Hogwarts?"

Hermi turned quickly towards Harry, and breathed, "No!" Their heads were close together, their eyes locked as they thought about the possibility. Hermione had to turn away then, her face going slightly pink, as she felt the familiar jolt deep inside her.

Millie Granger was watching them from the other end of the table, deep in thought, 'They look so good together and they seem to be getting on so well. I wonder if Ginny could be wrong? Oh, I do hope so.'

She was jerked from her musings by her husband's voice, "We thought we'd take you on a tour of the city this afternoon, didn't we Millie? What do you think, kids?"

"Yes, dear. It should be very educational for them," said Millie looking expectantly at her daughter and the others.

"Oh that sounds great, Dad. There are so many places I'd like to see," Hermione looked towards her friends, "there's a few Templar fortifications there - it will look good if we include it in our assignments, won't it?"

Ginny grinned at Hermi's infectious enthusiasm for anything educational, "It should be good, Hermi. And we can see how the Muggles live - the shops, ice cream parlours, how they get about. Don't you think Ron?"

Ron grinned at his sister, "Sounds very interesting. Yes - I'm looking forward to that." He had his father's appetite for learning about anything to do with Muggles, and the 'ice cream parlour' reference didn't sound bad, either.

"Right," said Arbuthnot, rising from the table, "We'll clear these things away and then we can go. We should all be able to squeeze into the car."

"This reminds me of Hogwarts," said Harry as he stood looking at the ramparts of the old town, "there's so many circular towers here."

Ron stood, looking fascinated, as the cars and buses passed by, and then he let out a gasp, "What's that?" A strange-looking vehicle was passing, carrying what were obviously tourists. The vehicle made very little sound at all, unlike the other forms of transport.

"It's an electric bus, Ron," said Arbuthnot, "They use them to take tourists around the main attractions in the old town."

"Eklectric!" exclaimed Ron, "Dad would love to see this, wouldn't he Ginny?"

"He certainly would, Ron. Hey, look at those!" gasped Ginny. She had spotted a group of teenagers wearing the most outlandish clothes she had ever seen. And their hairstyles!

Harry and Hermione stood closely together, grinning at their two friends. They never failed to marvel at how little they knew about the everyday Muggle world. Harry put his hand on Hermione's shoulder, "They're having a good time, aren't they?"

"Yes. It's really great to see them like that - and we've seen hardly anything yet"

As they walked through the town centre, several very large hawks circled above the buildings. "Do they use them for delivering the mail, Mr. Granger?" asked Ginny pointing up at them.

Arbuthnot laughed, "Oh no, Ginny. They use postmen for that. Hawks have lived in the old town for a long time. They're not owned by anybody and they come and go as they please. Right Ron, what do you say we try out some of that ice cream you were on about? There's a café just along the main street."

"Great, Mr. Granger - lead on," answered Ron, a broad grin on his face.

As they neared the café, Arbuthnot looked around and found that there were two people missing. "Where's Ron and Ginny?"

They all turned around and looked back up the street. Ron and Ginny were slowly walking around a tall, circular structure, looking at it intently. It was about fifteen feet high, eight feet across, and was very ornate at the top.

"What is it, Ginny? It's made of metal and it's very strange."

"I don't know Ron. I've never seen anything like this before," she reached out her hand to touch the side of the structure.

Ron grabbed her hand and pulled it back quickly, "Don't touch it, Ginny. It might be something to do with eklectric - and dad says it's very dangerous!"

The two siblings continued to walk around the enigmatic building; "Is there a way in?" said Ginny, "there doesn't seem to be a normal door anywhere. And what are these buttons? What happens if you press them?"

The two were starting to attract some very odd glances from passing Muggles, and Arbuthnot walked over to them, grinning all over his face, "Come on, you two. Don't you want any ice cream?"

"What's this tower, Mr. Granger? Is it something to do with eklectric?" asked Ron.

"Uh, no Ron," said Arbuthnot, stifling a laugh, "It's a pissoir."

"What's a pissoir?" asked Ginny.

"Well, uh, it's a public toilet," replied Arbuthnot, "they do these things differently in France, you know."

Ginny went a bright shade of red and walked, her head held low, over towards Hermione, who was laughing so hard she had to hold on to Harry to stop herself collapsing to the ground. Ron, however, wasn't a bit embarrassed - he just kept repeating, "fascinating, really fascinating," as he walked over to the group.

Later that evening, the four friends walked into the copse of trees behind the garden.

"Hello kids," said Ceri as she saw them approach, "What have you been up to today?"

"Oh, mum and dad took us to see the city," said Hermione and looked over at Ron, smirking, "fascinating, wasn't it Ron?"

"Yeah, yeah," he replied smiling.

"What time to you want to leave in the morning?" Harry asked Sirius.

"Well it should only take us about forty minutes to get to Rennes-le-Chateau on our brooms. So if you four come over here at about 5.30, you can have breakfast with us. If we leave at about 6.00 we should arrive just about dawn. Is that ok?"

"Yes," said Hermione, "I'll tell mum and dad not to get up with us. They'll be glad of a lie-in."

Ron just groaned "5.30 - that's terrible. Will you wake me Harry?"

It was dark the next morning as the girls finished clearing away the breakfast things. Remus came out of his tent carrying their broomsticks. "Are we ready then?" he asked.

Hermione took her broom from Remus rather reluctantly, and looked down at the ground as she said, looking quite miserable, "I'm sorry. I don't know if I can do this."

"Hermi," said a bleary-eyed Ron, "It's not that far - we'll be there in no time."

"Ron - you know that for me, the length of the Quidditch field is a long way to fly. I've never flown this far before, and it's dark. And you know I don't like flying."

Ginny grinned at her, "Then why don't you ask Harry for a lift? It's far more comfortable sitting on his back than on a broomstick." She looked at Harry and raised her eyes questioningly.

"Yes, come on Hermi. I don't mind - and I won't do any aerobatics or anything."

Hermione looked at Harry doubtfully but said, "Well as long as you're careful and don't go too fast."

"Of course I'll be careful. You can navigate for us," Harry handed the map and compass to her.

"I'll be too busy hanging on to you to check compass bearings, Harry. Will you navigate, Professor Lupin?"

"Of course I will, Hermione. Now don't worry. Everything will be ok. I saw Harry fly over the Christmas holidays, and he's very good at it. Now everybody stick close together - you don't want to get lost."

Harry transformed into his golden eagle form, and looked at Hermione. She climbed up onto his back, just in front of his wings, and held on to his head feathers, her eyes tightly closed. Harry unfurled his wings and pushed off from the ground. He soared up and hovered, waiting for the others to mount their broomsticks and join him.

They flew through the darkness, with Remus in the lead checking the compass every so often to make sure that their heading was due south. After about thirty-five minutes, the sky started to lighten and they could just make out the ground below. Remus called a halt and they hovered while he checked the map and scanned the countryside ahead.

"Over there!" he pointed ahead and slightly to his right, "I can just make out buildings on the top of that hill. It must be Rennes-le-Chateau. Come on, let's go more slowly - and look for the tower. It should be quite prominent - it's perched just on the edge of the hill."

They slowly flew over to the hill and started to circle around its edge. "There it is!" shouted Sirius, "Land over by the right-hand side of it. There's a patch of clear ground there."

The sky had brightened considerably as they landed at the side of the tower. They hid their broomsticks under some bushes as Hermione stepped down from Harry's back. Harry transformed and rubbed his head, "I thought you were going to pull my hair out, Hermi," he said screwing his face up in pain.

"Sorry," whispered Hermione, who looked quite pleased that she was back on the ground.

They looked up at the tower, which was square with battlements at the top. Perched on the side nearest to them was a much thinner circular tower starting half way up and then rising above the larger tower. It looked as if it had been stuck on as an after-thought.

"Can you feel it?" Harry said to the others.

"Yes," answered Ceri, "There's magic all around here. The feeling is very strong."

The others nodded their agreement, looking around as if to spot the source of the magical emanations.

"Sauniere built it to house his library," said Hermione looking up at the tower, "and a cave has been found beneath it. Come on, let's go up and see if we can get in."

"Now take care all of you," said Sirius, "Us three will be just inside the trees. And don't forget about what I said about two of you keeping a close watch."

The four teens nodded and started up the bank towards the walkway leading to the tower. Sirius and Ceri transformed and padded after Remus into the trees at the side of the building.

As they approached the tower, they could see that the door was slightly ajar. Harry opened it and peered inside. There were piles of rubble on the floor, and each of the floor's four corners disappeared down into empty space, obviously the result of fairly recent excavations. They peered into the cavity below but could see nothing. Apart from the rubble, the room was empty apart from several ornate bookcases that stood against the walls. Obviously, they once held Sauniere's library but they now stood empty.

Harry walked over to a door in the far corner. He opened it to reveal a spiral staircase, obviously going to the top of the narrow circular tower. "Come on," he said, "let's see if there's anything up here."

They walked cautiously up the staircase, Harry in the lead, until they came to another door. Harry turned the handle and pushed. The door opened and he walked out onto the top of the larger square tower. The others quickly followed and they looked out over the battlements. Below, they had a panoramic view of the small sleepy village of Rennes-le-Chateau and they could easily pick out the places they would be visiting later. To the south-west was a magnificent view over the countryside and the Pyrenees beyond.

They looked around the tower and up at the smaller one just above them. "There's nothing here that can help us," said Hermione, "Let's go back down and look at those excavations again."

They went back down the spiral staircase and into the library. "What do you think, Harry. Can we go down there and have a look around?" said Ron doubtfully. Ron was obviously equating dark enclosed spaces with the eight-legged denizens that normally lurked there.

"Keep a look out by the door, Ginny," said Harry, "Ron, you and Hermione help me get down there."

Ron and Hermione took each of Harry's hands and helped lower him to the floor of the dark cavity below. Harry could just feel the floor as he stretched his feet out below him. "All right, let me go," he shouted up to the two.

When he stood on the floor, Harry took out his wand, "*LUMOS*," he whispered and the cavity was instantly illuminated. He saw that he was standing in a small cave with piles of rubble strewn around. He could feel the magical vibrations stronger here. He looked around, and in the middle of the cave he saw a circular hole in the floor. He walked over and peered inside, extending his wand into the depths below. He could see that the hole was empty, and it was just big enough to accommodate one man. It ended about seven feet below, where there were obvious signs of an unfinished excavation.

Harry sighed, knowing that the answer to the mystery was not there. It only raised more questions and just added to the mystery. He turned and went back towards the hole in the ceiling of the cave, but as he started to shout to the others to help him up, he spotted some writing on the cave wall opposite him. It was obviously in French so he quickly scribbled it down on the back of his hand. He noticed that there was a small drawing beneath the inscription and he copied that onto his hand as well.

"Ok," Harry shouted, "Help me up." He jumped up and caught the hands that suddenly appeared through the hole, braced his feet against the wall, and scrambled back up to join the others.

"What did you find?" asked Ron eagerly.

"Nothing - just another empty hole in the floor. The vibrations are stronger down there though. Oh yes, there was an inscription and a drawing or symbol on one of the walls down there. It's in French - can you make out what it means, Hermi?"

Ron and Ginny gathered round eagerly as Hermione lifted Harry's hand and peered closely at it. The small drawing consisted of a straight line with a semi-circle sitting above it, like a half moon. Protruding from the bottom of the half moon was a shape like a finger. "Well! Is it a clue to the treasure? And is that some sort of map?" asked Ron.

"No Ron," Hermione was laughing as she translated the inscription, "It's the French equivalent of '*Kilroy was here*' and the 'map' is the standard drawing of Kilroy looking over a wall!"

Harry doubled up laughing, but Ron and Ginny looked puzzled, "Who's Kilroy?" asked Ron, "Is he the same one I saw written on one of the passages inside the Great Pyramid of Egypt when we went there a few years ago?"

This caused Harry and Hermione to go into further fits of laughter. "It's a sort of Muggle joke, Ron," gasped Hermione, "It crops up in the most unlikely places."

"Oh," said Ginny, "it sounds like something Fred and George would do."

"Exactly," said Harry, "Well - the only thing we've found here raises more questions and adds to the mystery. What were they trying to find down there?"

"That's anybody's guess," said Hermione as she looked at her notes. "Come on, let's go to the garden next. Ron - you and Ginny keep a look out while Harry and I look for clues."

The four went back through the tower door and climbed down into the main garden.

Charlie and Nadine drove into the quiet little town of Rennes-les-Bains, and parked near the main square. They had left Quillan earlier that morning, where the vibrations were once again stronger.

They walked over towards the little church and into the graveyard behind, where it was very quiet and peaceful. Nadine closed her eyes and concentrated, and after a few moments she let out a gasp, "It's strong, Charlie - very strong. And I can feel that it's coming from that direction." She pointed over to the north-west, to a hill on which Charlie could see perched a small village.

"What's that place?" he asked, pointing.

Nadine opened her eyes and looked up at the village, "That's Rennes-le-Chateau," she whispered quietly.

"So it looks as if there's some truth in the mystery you told me about the other night."

"Yes, I think so. It must be coming from there. It's so strong now."

"Well come on - let's go. We might be nearing the end of our search, Nadine. Is there a road up from here?"

"No, Charlie. We have to go further north, then west to Couiza. From there, there's a narrow road up to the village. Sauniere built it using some of his vast wealth, you know."

They walked back to the Land Rover and drove out of Rennes-les-Bains. After a few miles, Nadine pointed out some of the places she'd told Charlie about, "Over there on the right is Mount Cardou, where some researchers say the body of Jesus is hidden. And up on the hill on the left is the Chateau de Blanchefort - the Blancheforts had very strong links with the Knights Templar and it was Marie de Negre's gravestone - she was one of that family - that Sauniere defaced after reading the inscription."

After turning west onto a main road, they drove along until they entered the town of Couiza, and spotted a road sign for Rennes-le-Chateau. Nadine drove slowly as they started to climb the narrow road which wound its way up the side of the steep hill. When they were almost at the top, Nadine suddenly stopped the Land Rover.

"Mon Dieu!" she exclaimed, "I can feel the vibrations without even trying. This is the place."

She drove on up into the little village and parked near the main square. "It's coming from somewhere below," said Nadine as they walked over to a little bench.

"What - further down the hill?" asked Charlie.

"No, no. Below the ground - it's right underneath our feet!"

Charlie scratched his head in consternation, "Now what do we do? Let's sit on this bench and do some thinking, Nadine. There's got to be a way to get at it somehow"

Ron walked in front of Harry and Hermione as they strolled through the gardens fronting the villa Bethania. Ginny was behind, constantly looking around for any signs of movement.

"In 1956, some researchers found three corpses in these gardens," commented Hermione, "They were all shot."

"I can't see anything that could help us here," said Harry after a while, "Let's go over to the villa."

As they approached the large house, which was built using some of Saunier's vast wealth, Ron stopped and held up his hand, "There's somebody still living here," and he pointed to the obvious signs of habitation, not least the small tabby cat mewing outside the door, wanting to get in. "They must still be in bed," said Ron, "the curtains are still drawn upstairs."

"Well we can't do much here, then," said Hermione, "And if someone's living here I can't see that there'd still be many clues to find - the new owners would have got rid of a lot of Saunier's things. Come on - let's go to the Calvary"

The four walked through a gate into the Calvary, which stood in front of the church and close to the church cemetery. They looked up at the cross that stood upon a stone base. On the base was carved the inscription 'A.O.M.P.S.'

"There's P.S. again," said Hermione, "I wonder if that refers to the Priory of Sion?"

To the right of the cross was a strange little grotto, inside which was a stone bench. They looked inside and Hermione noticed another strange carved inscription 'K.X.L.S.X.' "I wonder what that means?" she muttered.

Ron, keeping an eye out for anything suspicious, had moved over to the side of the church and he called to the others, "Hey. Look at this!"

They went over to see what he was looking at. It was a pillar that bore a cross, similar to the cross on Harry's knight amulet. They looked at it closely and saw an inscription on the base 'MISSION 1891.'

"This is one of the Visigothic pillars that supported the original alter in the church," said Hermione, "It may have been the one that hid the scrolls Sauniere found."

"But why has it been erected upside down?" asked Harry.

"Yes, you're right," said Hermione as she bent her head over to look at it. Suddenly she let out a gasp, "Look!" she exclaimed, "When you look at it upside down, the date 1891 becomes 1681 - 1.618 is the ratio for the golden section - phi - I told you about. It's not exact but it contains the same numbers - I think we're on to something here."

They looked closely at the pillar and around its sides but could find nothing else that would help them.

"This is standing outside the church," said Hermione, "This is telling me that we'll find something *inside* the church - I just know it!"

"You could be right, Hermi," said Harry, "But we'd better stick to our original plan and look at the church graveyard first. Sirius and the others will be expecting us to go there next."

"Ok, Harry. Let's go," said Hermione with a hint of impatience in her voice.

"Nadine, what if we use the same principle as before? Let's walk around the village and see if any one spot gives stronger readings."

"Ok, Charlie. Let's try"

They walked towards the castle that was once the chateau of Elizabeth de Rennes and looked to be in a fairly poor state of repair. Nadine couldn't detect any change in the strength of the vibrations anywhere around the castle.

Charlie looked around and said, "Let's try over there, towards the church and the cemetery."

As they neared the cemetery, Charlie suddenly stopped and let out a loud exclamation, "Bloody hell! Look who's over there - it's my little brother and sister. I don't believe it!"

Nadine looked and saw four teenagers walking cautiously inside the church graveyard. Two of them had the same colour hair as Charlie so it was obvious who they were. "Do you know who the other two are?" she asked.

"Yes - it's their friends, Harry Potter and Hermione Granger."

"Harry Potter? What's he doing here?" exclaimed Nadine. "Come on, let's find out"

Harry and Hermione looked at the gravestones of Berenger Saunier and his housekeeper Marie Denard, each deep in thought about these two people who were the centre of the mystery they were investigating. Ron and Ginny looked around intently at the trees and bushes, looking for any sign of movement or danger. All four jumped as they heard someone shout.

"Ron. Ginny. What the hell are you doing here?"

They looked over to see Charlie Weasley, closely followed by a very pretty dark-haired girl, striding in their direction. Ginny was the first to recover, "Charlie," she squealed and ran over and threw herself into his waiting arms. Ron and the other two ran over and they all started talking at the same time.

"What are you ...?"

"Why are you ...?"

"Where have you ...?"

Again Ginny was the first to recover her composure. She disentangled her arms from around her brother and looked at Nadine with a sly grin on her pretty face. "We can swap stories later, Charlie. But first, why don't you introduce us to your girlfriend?"

"My girlfriend?" he said uncomfortably, "Uh, this isn't my girlfriend, Ginny. This is Nadine Blanc. She's the sister of a colleague of mine."

"Oh yes," said Ginny with a smirk, "So where's your colleague then?" She reached over and held her hand out to Nadine, "Pleased to meet you, Nadine. I'm Ginny - Charlie's sister."

Nadine smiled at Ginny as she shook her hand. She saw her as one of those people you instinctively liked.

Ron and Ginny had been so surprised with the sudden appearance of their brother that they had dropped their vigilance. They hadn't noticed the rat with a silver paw running out of the cemetery towards the edge of the hill.

"I'm sorry," said Charlie, "let me introduce you to the others, Nadine. This is my youngest brother, Ron. This is his friend Hermione. And this is Harry Potter."

Nadine shook their hands in turn and asked, "Well I know who Harry Potter is, but what I don't know is what you're doing here in Rennes-le-Chateau. Shall we all go somewhere more comfortable to talk?"

"Uh, we can't yet, Nadine," said Harry, "We've got some people watching us from the trees over there. In fact, you're lucky you weren't overpowered when you ran up to us - it must have been Charlie's red hair that told them he's a Weasley. You see - we're on this sort of quest. And it's very dangerous. Come on, if you come over to that line of trees I'll introduce you to our protectors."

As they walked over to the trees, Harry explained to Charlie and Nadine about his godfather, and his innocence. He didn't want them reacting badly when they met Sirius.

They went into the trees and bushes at the edge of the graveyard and looked around. "Hello," said Remus.

They turned and saw Remus Lupin, a large dog and a wolf approach. "I'm Remus Lupin, Hogwarts professor and protector to these four." He shook hands with Charlie and Nadine who were introduced by Ron. "And these are Ceri Jones, an American auror on special assignment to the U.K. and Sirius Black, special agent to Albus Dumbledore."

The two Animagi transformed and shook hands with Charlie and Nadine. "This comes as a bit of a shock," said Charlie, "The last time I saw you was on the front page of the Daily Prophet. Why weren't we told you were innocent?"

"It's a long story, Charlie. Look, there're some fallen trees over there. We can sit down and fill each other in about our presence here. But first, these four kids have to finish their investigation. They have to go into the church to look for something. We can cover them from here, and when they finish we can talk."

"Why do you need to cover them?" asked Nadine.

"Uh, look. It may be dangerous here," said Sirius, "We know that 'You Know Who' expects Harry and his friends to come here. He or some of his Death Eaters may be laying in wait."

Nadine gasped and covered her mouth with her hand, "Then we must get them away quickly. We can't risk them getting hurt."

"They have to do this, Nadine. It's very important. I'll tell you all about it later." Sirius looked at the waiting teens, "Go on and be as quick as you can - and be careful!"

Harry led the other three out of the cover of the trees, and they walked through the graveyard towards the front entrance of the church, all of them looking about them warily.

As they approached the church doorway, Ron suddenly shouted and pushed Ginny to the ground, "Look out! Get down!"

Hermione turned and saw a line of eleven Death Eaters, dressed in black cloaks, approaching from the direction of the Calvary. She looked in horror, rooted to the spot, as she saw a ball of energy coming towards her.

"No!" shouted Harry as he stepped in front of her. He raised his arm and concentrated, forming a concave dish in the centre of his hand. The ball of energy hit the dish and was repelled back at the Death Eaters with increased power. Harry grabbed Hermione and dragged her to the ground alongside the two redheads.

It was now the Death Eaters' turn to look in horror as the powerful energy bolt sped back towards them. They scattered and flung themselves to the ground, but quickly raised their wands and started to fling curses. The four quickly took cover behind some large tombstones and waited as the beams of light and energy exploded around them.

The Death Eaters were thrown into confusion as the five adults emerged from the trees at the back of the graveyard, wands outstretched firing spells.

A look of fear appeared on Wormtail's face as he recognised Sirius Black and Remus Lupin. "Let's get out of here!" he yelled, and all eleven Death Eaters Apparated away.

Harry stood up and helped Hermione to her feet. She was shaking with delayed reaction. She flung herself at him and put her arms around his neck, "Oh Harry! I thought I was going to die when I saw that bolt coming at me. Thank god you were close. I couldn't have reacted as fast as you did."

Ginny went over and rubbed Hermione's shoulder, "It's ok now, Hermi. They've gone."

"Is everybody all right?" shouted Remus as he came up to them. He turned to Sirius, "Did you see who that was, Sirius?"

"Yes I did - Wormtail! No wonder he bolted when he saw us - he knows what I'll do if I get hold of him."

Charlie went over to make sure that Ron and Ginny weren't hurt, "Well done, Ron," he said to his brother, "If you hadn't given that warning it could have been nasty. Harry, how did you deflect that Flipendous curse? It looked pretty powerful to me."

Harry grinned, "You've got to thank Professor Lupin for that - he told me how to do it."

Charlie looked at Remus with a look of respect. Remus held up his hands and said "It's one thing to talk through the procedure, but quite another to actually be able to do it. I'm proud of you Harry."

"I don't think that's the last we'll see of the Death Eaters, somehow," said Sirius, "They'll be back when they get over their initial shock of seeing us adults. I think we'd better leave the church investigation for another day. It'll be best if we get back to Carcassonne straight away."

"But Sirius," said Harry, "It's still light and it won't get dark for hours yet. We can't use our broomsticks."

Sirius rubbed his chin, thinking how to get back without being seen.

"Look, that's no problem," said Nadine, "I can take you all in my Land Rover. Well - I can if you all squeeze up a bit, anyway." She looked enquiringly at Sirius.

"And we can stop for something to eat on the way," said Ceri, "You must all be starving - I certainly am."

"Amen to that," said Ron, making the others laugh.

"We can't fail," Wormtail addressed the group of ten Death Eaters. "You know what will happen to us if we go back and tell the Dark Lord that they're still alive."

They had Apparated back to the cave they were using at the foot of the hill below Rennes-le-Chateau.

"You were the one who called the attack off, Wormtail," growled Travis, one of the Death Eaters, "We could have taken them back there."

"I .. I .. I was surprised that Sirius Black turned up - he's crazy, you know, and he's after my blood. But I won't be surprised a second time."

"So what do you propose we do now?" asked Travis.

"They won't hang about the village now they know we're here," said Wormtail. "They'll re-group and come back another time. You lot stay here in the cave, and I'll hide out in the village in my Animagus form. When they come back, I'll come and fetch you. Then we can wait until the kids get far enough away from Black. Then we strike. And we'd better make sure of it next time."

"But what are we going to do about Potter?" asked another of the Death Eaters, "You saw the way he blocked my curse back there. He's getting too powerful for us."

"Don't be stupid, Brackton," said Travis, "He was lucky, that's all. And there's no one that can stop the Avada Kedavra curse."

"What about Black then?" said Brackton, "If he's that crazy he's going to be a bit of a handful, isn't he?"

"Look," said Wormtail, "When the kids get far enough away from the adults, six of us can block off the adults and pin them down while the other five go after the kids. How does that sound?"

"That's a bit better Wormtail," said Travis, "But we'll have to pick the right place to do it."

"Leave that to me, Travis," said Wormtail, "I'm going back up to the village now. Wait here until I fetch you. I don't think it'll be until tomorrow, though."

"That was so good," breathed Ron as he loosened his belt a notch and patted his stomach, "I could settle down in this country quite easily."

"Well thank you, Ron," said Nadine, smiling, "It's nice to hear someone praising my country."

They were sitting underneath three sun umbrellas outside a small restaurant on the outskirts of Alet-les-Bains, a small town on the road to Carcassonne. They had just polished off a rather large and tasty meal, and were sitting in the warm late afternoon sunshine.

"So - it looks like our searches are linked," said Charlie. He had listened to Remus' account of Harry's quest, which had started with the amulet picking up the magical emanations.

"Yes, I think so," said Ceri, "Could you feel the magic all around in the village?"

"Yes, we could," said Charlie, "and none more so than Nadine - she's psychically tuned to that type of magical vibration."

"Could you pinpoint the source of it, Nadine?" asked Harry.

"Not exactly, Harry. But I know that it's coming from below Rennes-le-Chateau. I was trying to find the point where it is strongest when we came across you and your friends."

"So what are you going to do now?" asked Sirius, "We're probably looking for the same thing - do you want to join us in our quest? But be warned - it's dangerous, as you saw earlier."

"We've got to see it through now, Sirius," said Charlie, "Look, Nadine, you go back to the cabin and wait for Demont. I'll stay with these."

"No way, Charlie. I can be useful to you here. Demont won't be back from the ministry for a few days yet."

"But it's dangerous, Nadine," said Charlie.

"If it's dangerous for me, it is for you all, too. Stop trying to be so protective, Charlie - I get enough of that from my brother!"

Ginny laughed, "Come on, Charlie, there's no answer to that. If Nadine wants to come then you can't stop her."

"That's right, Charlie. Listen to your sister," said Ceri.

"Yes, and I agree that she should join us too," said Hermione

Charlie threw up his arms in defeat, "Why do women always stick together?"

The three girls all grinned at each other, "Nadine," said Ceri, "why don't you and Charlie stay with us at Carcassonne? You can stay in my tent and Charlie can stay in Sirius and Remus' tent. We can always make them a bit bigger if we need to."

"Yes," said Hermione, "And we can travel between there and Rennes-le-Chateau in Nadine's Land Rover - oh, as long as you don't mind Nadine?"

"Of course I don't mind."

"Yes!" Shouted Hermione, happy that she wouldn't have to do any more flying.

"When we go there next, we'll have to remember to collect the brooms," said Ron.

"We'll go tomorrow and collect them. But you kids can take a day off. I want to make sure that those Death Eaters are not lying in wait. And Nadine can try to pinpoint the source of the vibrations - it might make your task easier."

"Hermi - perhaps we can go into the city to get some Muggle clothes," said Ginny, "Do you think your parents will take us?"

"Well I'm sure my mother will jump at the chance to look around the shops. I don't know about dad, though"

"Well he can stay with us," said Ron, "I don't fancy going round the shops. Do you, Harry?"

"No way, Ron. We can just spend a nice leisurely day lying in the sun."

"Talking about parents - do mum and dad know you're here Ron? And more to the point, do they know you've brought Ginny with you?" Charlie looked pointedly at his brother.

"Uh, I think so Charlie"

"YOU THINK SO?" shouted Charlie, "Do you know what they'll do to you when they find out? And now that I know you're here, do you know what they'll do to me too?"

"Calm down, Charlie," said Remus putting a reassuring hand on his shoulder, "Professor Dumbledore was going to see them personally right after we left for France. He said he'd explain everything to them, including the need for Ron and Ginny to be here."

"Why have they got to be here, Remus - Ginny, especially?"

"I don't really know why. But if Albus Dumbledore thinks they have to be here, then who are we to argue?"

"Professor Dumbledore is very wise, Charlie," said Nadine, "I never knew him to do something without a very good reason."

Charlie looked at her and smiled, "No - I suppose you're right." He turned to his brother and sister, "And you'd better be careful - very careful. I don't want to have to tell mum and dad that you've been hurt at all. Right?"

Ron nodded. Ginny walked over, winking slyly at Nadine, and kissed her brother on the cheek. She looked up at him, smiling, "You're so strong and protective, Charlie. I know you won't let anything happen to us." Her expression then turned from sweetness to fury, and she slapped him hard on the shoulder, "Of course we'll be careful, you dirty great git. What do you take us for?"

Everyone laughed, except Charlie who had a pained expression as he rubbed his shoulder.

The next day, Sirius stealthily went over to the boys' tent and woke Harry. "Harry," he whispered, not wanting to wake Ron, "we'll be going in a little while. Keep a look out for Hedwig. I sent her with a note to Professor Dumbledore last night so she should be back around lunch time. I'll see you later."

"Be careful, Sirius," said Harry as his godfather backed out of the tent.

Harry went back to sleep and about an hour later was again shaken awake - this time by Ginny. "Come on, you two, get up. Breakfast's ready."

Over breakfast the girls and Millie chatted happily about their shopping trip. "Ron," said Millie, "I'd better take your measurements if you're not coming with us. How about you, Harry? Do you need any new clothes?"

"No thank you, Mrs. Granger. I've got plenty in the tent."

"Right, well we'll leave the clearing up to you three. Ron - come and be measured, and you two girls get ready, I want to leave in ten minutes."

"What would you boys like to do today?" Arbuthnot asked as they did the washing up. "We can't go far because Millie's got the car. But we can take a walk in the countryside if you like?"

"Is there a Quidditch pitch near here, Mr. Granger?" asked Ron.

"No, Ron," Arbuthnot laughed, "There is a soccer pitch, but I doubt there'll be any game at this time of the day."

"I think a walk will be fine," said Harry, "It'll give us a good appetite for lunch."

"Ok, Harry. But we'll have to make it ourselves. Don't expect the girls back before dinner - Millie's acting as if she's been let loose - she loves company when she's shopping."

"I'll get the brooms Sirius, I won't be long," said Remus as they climbed out of the Land Rover in the square at Rennes-le-Chateau.

"No, hang on. We'll all go together. It'll be safer," said Sirius.

They looked around warily as they walked over to the Magdala Tower, and retrieved the brooms from the bushes where they'd hidden them the previous morning. There were very few people about as they walked back and put the brooms in the Land Rover.

"I want to check all around the church," said Sirius, "That's where the kids'll be when we come back tomorrow, and it's probably where any Death Eaters will be hiding."

They walked over to the graveyard and checked all the likely hiding places but found nothing. They then went into the Calvary and around the back of the church, but there was no sign of anyone hiding. They then hid inside the trees on the edge of the graveyard and waited for two hours, keeping watch on the church and the surrounding area, but they spotted no one - only the parish priest who went into the church at midday to say Mass. He didn't appear to have a congregation, because they didn't see any of the locals going inside.

By mid-afternoon, Sirius was satisfied that the area was clear of any unwanted guests, "Nadine. Would you like to check out the village now to see if you can pinpoint the vibrations?"

"Right," said Nadine, "We covered most of the village yesterday, and I checked over by the Tower when we went to get the brooms. The only places I haven't checked are the church and the Calvary"

"Let's check the Calvary first," said Charlie and they walked over and stood by the little grotto. "Anything?" he asked Nadine.

"It's still the same, Charlie. It's no stronger than yesterday. Let's try inside the church - the priest's gone now."

When they entered the church, everyone felt an increase in the magical vibrations. Nadine gasped, "It's definitely here. But still coming from below. It's much stronger in here."

"Yes, I can feel it too," said Remus. "If Harry and the others are going to find anything, it's going to be here."

"Come on, there's nothing more we can do now," said Sirius, "Let's make our way back to Carcassonne - I fancy stopping at that restaurant again. What do you say?"

"Fine - I'm starving," said Charlie.

"So, Charlie," said Remus over yet another delicious lunch at the restaurant outside Alet-les-Bains, "Harry seems to be following in your footsteps - Gryffindor Seeker and captain."

"Yes, Remus, Ron's been telling me all about his exploits. I'd have loved to have seen that game against Salem."

"It was amazing, Charlie. Both Seekers had their hands on the snitch but Harry won out. Salem's Seeker - Kristen Davis - is at Hogwarts until the end of this year. She's the Gryffindor Keeper - and very good at it as well. She also happens to be Harry's girl friend."

"Yes, Ron told me. I rather thought Harry'd end up with either Ginny or Hermione, but there you go, you never can tell"

"Talking about that, Charlie," said Sirius, "you and Nadine seem to be getting on well?"

"We are, Sirius - but as friends. She used to be at Hogwarts too - she transferred there the year after I left. How's old Flitwick these days, Remus? He was a happy old bird when I was there."

The men continued to talk about Hogwarts and old acquaintances, while the girls held a conversation of their own, talking quietly so they couldn't be heard.

"I've seen the way Charlie looks at you, Nadine. I think he really likes you," said Ceri.

"I don't know, Ceri. I came to stay with my brother to get over one relationship, and I'm a bit reluctant to start another one."

"But you do like him too don't you? I can tell by the way you look at him - and I'm an empath. I know you like each other- I can't help picking up on these things when I'm close."

Nadine smiled at Ceri, "I thought you were looking at me a bit strangely in the Land Rover today. That's what it was all about?"

"Yes - and I'm sorry, but I didn't mean to intrude. I just can't help feeling these things, especially if they're strong feelings."

"That's all right, Ceri. I'm not upset by it. And I suppose you only confirmed what I know already anyway. I do like him a lot. And you say he likes me?"

"Yes, Nadine. I'm sure of it."

Nadine looked across at Charlie, who was deep in conversation with Remus. She saw Sirius quickly look away, but she had spotted him staring at Ceri. "I think you have an admirer too, Ceri," she said nodding towards Sirius.

"Oh I don't think so, Nadine. Our relationship is strictly professional - well perhaps not strictly - we *have* become very good friends. But he knows that there can't be anything else - since I lost my husband and little daughter ..."

Ceri told the French girl about her past, and how afraid she was of forming another relationship. "We're both in very dangerous situations. One slip and either or both of us could be badly injured or even killed - and it could happen at any time, especially now. I can't risk getting hurt like that again."

"Oh Ceri, I'm so sorry. It must have been so terrible for you. And I can see how you must feel about starting anything. But please, don't deny yourself the chance to be happy again. I know we live in dangerous times and there are going to be hard times ahead for you both, but surely, if you can share danger, why can't you share love as well?"

Ceri looked at Nadine, thinking about what she had just said. She was jerked from her thoughts by Sirius, "Come on, you two, it's time we got back - we need to speak to the kids about tomorrow."

When they arrived back at the copse of trees behind the gite, Nadine's Land Rover parked close by with wards set up around it, they could see Harry and Ron lying in the late afternoon sun, apparently sleeping. Hedwig was also sleeping on her perch in the men's tent, and a scroll of parchment was lying on the table.

Sirius picked up the letter and saw that it was addressed to himself. He opened it and read quietly, then called as he walked outside the tent, "Hey, Charlie. Come and listen to this."

They all gathered round as Sirius read ..

'Dear Sirius, Remus and Ceri,

Thank you for your update today. Be very careful when you go back to the village. You probably won't see Voldemort there, but be wary that whomever he sends will be very reluctant to leave without accomplishing their grisly task, so they are bound to try again.

I spoke to Arthur and Molly Weasley yesterday and explained everything to them. They are worried, obviously, but they accept that Ron and Ginny have a role to play in the solution of the mystery.

They also gave me an interesting piece of information. It seems that their second eldest son, Charlie, is in your neck of the woods. He's there on ministry business concerning magical vibrations that are upsetting the creatures in their Forbidden Forest. Now it seems to me that these vibrations, and the ones Harry and I've been detecting could well be one and the same.

I would suggest that you try to contact Charlie - he could be of great help to you all, and it would give Arthur and Molly some piece of mind knowing that he's with you to look out for the kids. You can trust him with your life - I knew him well when he was at Hogwarts. Let me know if you manage to get hold of him.

Give my regards to the youngsters.

Albus Dumbledore'

"I'll send him a note with Hedwig later tonight," said Sirius, "Your parents will be glad to hear you're on the team, Charlie."

"Yes, thanks Sirius. That's a weight off my mind, I can tell you"

They all looked up when they heard a lot of high-pitched giggling and squealing coming from the garden. They saw two angry-looking boys, dripping wet, and two laughing girls, each holding an empty water bucket, a pile of shopping bags resting on the floor beside them.

"Oh, you're all wet," said Ginny solemnly, "You'll have to try your new clothes on now."

"Come on," said Hermione handing two carrier bags to the boys, "You can dry off and change in our bedroom. Harry, we got you something new as well. We didn't want you to feel left out. We'll wait here till you get back. Dad's helping mum cook dinner."

"Pssst. Hermione, Ginny. Over here," Sirius whispered from the trees.

The girls ran over and immediately grabbed Ceri and Nadine, and marched them over to the girls' tent. "You have just got to see what we've bought," said Hermione excitedly as they disappeared from view.

Sirius shrugged his shoulders in defeat, "I wanted to tell Hermione about the church - but who am I to try to compete with a fashion show!"

Later, Ron and Harry wearing their new clothes, joined the group. Nadine told them about the strong emanations in the church. "I just know the secret's in there somewhere," said Hermione, "I've had a feeling all along."

"We should leave early in the morning," said Sirius, "You need to spend as much time as you can looking for clues, and the priest comes to the church at midday to say Mass. So if you haven't finished by then you'll have to wait inside until the priest goes - I don't want you wandering outside for any length of time."

"Shall we meet at say 6.30 by the Land Rover?" Nadine raised her eyes at the teens.

"Ok. See you in the morning," said Ron as he led the three others back into the garden, eager to see what was for dinner.

It was almost 7.30 by the time Nadine parked the Land Rover as close as she could to the church.

"Wait here," Sirius said as he, Ceri, Remus and Charlie got out and started to look all around the area outside the church, leaving Nadine to curb the impatience of the four teens.

After about fifteen minutes, Ceri came out of the church and opened the tail door of the Land Rover, "Come on. It's all clear. Go straight to the church - and good luck."

Harry led the other three down the narrow lane to the front of the church, and they paused and looked at the porch, which was covered by a small roof. Above the door was an ornate carving, protected by the roof. At the very apex of the carving was a ribbon-like motif draped over a cross. It bore the inscription *'In Hoc Signo Vincet'*

"What does that mean, Hermione?" asked Harry pointing to it.

"Under this sign you win," she replied, but she was more interested in another inscription, on the central stone supporting the main arch. "Phew. Look at that," she breathed pointing up at it, *'Terribilis est locus iste,'* she read aloud.

"What's that?" asked Ron.

Hermione gulped loudly and translated, "It says 'This place is terrible.'"

The four looked nervously at each other, "I don't think I'm going to like this," squeaked Ginny.

"Come on, let's go in," said Harry. As they entered, they all felt a strong magical presence. "Something's definitely here," he said.

Ron, Harry and Hermione nearly jumped out of their skins when Ginny let out a loud shriek. They looked at her and saw that she had her eyes fixed on something to her left.

"Bloody hell," breathed Ron as he saw what Ginny was looking at.

Just to the left of the doorway was the most hideous statue they had ever seen. It was a crouching devil, supporting the holy water stoop. Above that there was a carving of what looked like two lizards, and above that were four winged angels. Underneath the angels was an inscription in French *'Par ce signe tu le vaincras.'*

"Why would Sauniere put something like this in his church?" said Ginny, now recovered from her shock. They all shook their heads. "And what does that inscription mean, Hermi?"

"*'Par ce signe tu le vaincras'* - It means, 'With this sign you will conquer him,'" Hermione thought for a moment, then said "Those words are almost the same as the ones the Emperor Constantine saw written in the sky, together with a glowing cross, just before he won a decisive and important battle - that's what converted him to Christianity. And being the emperor of Rome, he ensured that Christianity survived those terrible times and beyond. You could say that those words made Christianity what it is today - the religion of half the people in the world. But the words he saw were *'Par ce signe, tu vaincras'* - *With this sign you will conquer*. Two letters have been added - L and E - le which means him." She started counting the letters from the left hand side of the inscription and said, "L is the thirteenth letter and E is the fourteenth. 1314 - that's the date that Jacques de Molay, the last Grand Master of the

Knights Templar, was burnt to death by the inquisition - Curious." She muttered the last word very quietly as the others looked at her intently.

Her brow creased as she thought hard for a few moments, then, "This is a holy water stoop, so the words mean that by dipping your fingers in the water and making the sign of the cross, you will overcome Satan. But I .. don't .. know ..."

"It could also mean something else, though, couldn't it Hermi. What are you thinking?" asked Harry curiously.

"Yes, of course. Look at it - the devil is Asmodeus, the limping devil that guarded King Solomon's temple in Jerusalem. He's also known as Rex Mundi - the Lord of the Earth - Earth! The receptacle he's holding is a water stoop - Water! The lizards are salamanders - beings of fire - Fire! And the angels are beings of the air - Air!" She looked at the other three expectantly.

When they looked blankly at her, she said, exasperatedly, "Don't you see? Earth - Water - Fire - Air. The four ancient mystical symbols of alchemy - Magic. So the inscription could mean, 'You will conquer him by magic'"

"Conquer who, Hermi - Satan?" asked Ron.

"I think I can answer that, Ron," said Harry quietly. "The devil - Lord Voldemort. It all fits - why else have we been called here? There's magic in this place, and we have to use it, somehow, to be able to defeat him."

Four very subdued teens stepped into the main body of the church, the confessional to the left and the main aisle to the right, leading up to the altar.

Hermione looked to her left, "Look," she whispered, "There's that tombstone that Sauniere uncovered. There's Prince Sigisbert being ridden to safety on a horse." She looked at the inscription below the tombstone carving and gasped, "Look - it says here that he was saved by his uncle on 17th January 681 AD. 681 - 0.618 is the reciprocal of the Golden Section 1.618 - again it's not exact, but it contains the same numbers. And January 17th seems to crop up a lot in this mystery. That priest was murdered on 17th January, Sauniere had a heart attack on 17th January, and quite a few other things have happened on that day - Marie de Negre died on 17th January, Nicolas Flamel created the philosophers stone on 17th January. What does it all mean?"

Ron's eyes were drawn to the floor of the aisle, which led up to the altar. It was laid out like a chessboard. He counted the squares, "Sixty-Four," he said looking at the others, "There's sixty four squares in that floor pattern, just like a chessboard."

"All those statues around the sides of the church are looking at the ground," commented Ginny, "Are they always supposed to do that in a church?"

They walked nervously down the aisle, looking around them at the paintings and statues. Hermione looked up at the ornate altar, which featured a statue of Jesus with one hand raised to the sky and one hand lowered to the ground. "This is the traditional gesture of the Tarot magician," she told the others, "It means 'As Above So Below' - heaven recreated on earth. I wonder if it has another deeper meaning?"

The others looked at her expectantly, but Hermione merely shrugged and they continued to walk forward. Just behind the altar they saw two statues, one on either side. "That's interesting," said Hermione, "The statue on the right is of the Virgin Mary holding the baby Jesus. And the one on the left is her husband, Joseph, and he's also holding a baby. Some bible scholars have postulated that Jesus had a brother. I wonder if Sauniere knew something more?"

Harry, Ron and Ginny walked up to the altar and started examining it in detail. Hermione, meanwhile, started looking at the Stations of the Cross - paintings and bas-reliefs that were placed around the church in the order of the story of the crucifixion. "The Stations of the Cross are the wrong way round," she said, "They're reversed compared to other churches." She went up and started looking at them closely. When she came to the fourth station, she gasped, "I think I've found something. Come and look here."

The three gathered around Hermione and looked at the painting. It was placed on the left hand wall, just before the entrance to the church tower. Like the others, the painting's frame was an arch of golden circles, each one about the size of a Golden Snitch. It showed Jesus carrying the cross with one man and two women helping him. The man was looking to the centre of the painting, but his hand was pointing in the opposite direction - to the frame on the left hand side - directly at the fifth golden circle from the bottom.

"The symbolism is obvious," said Hermione, "Don't you see? This is the fourth station of the cross, and there are four of us. There are four people in this painting - Jesus - the main player, helped by one man and two women. Harry's the main player - the Anima Summa - Ron's the man whose hand is pointing at the circle on the frame, and Ginny and I are the two women." She looked at the others, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

"I think you're right, Hermi," said Ginny, but didn't comment about another symbolism she could see in the painting. The older of the two women - the symbolic Hermione - was holding Jesus' hand and crying in despair!

"You're on to something, Hermi," said Harry, "Ron, point your wand at the fifth circle and see what happens."

Ron took out his wand from his pocket and touched the fifth circle. Nothing happened.

"Say Alohomora, Ron," breathed Hermione suddenly, "The man's hand is balled into a fist as if he's grasping something. It looks like he's trying to open a door."

They all looked on with baited breath as Ron again touched the fifth circle with his wand and whispered, "*ALOHOMORA*." All of a sudden, things started to happen.

The painting shimmered and then disappeared, showing a blank wall. Then a small square hole appeared at the centre and quickly spread to form an arch, leading into a darkened chamber beyond. Ron looked back at the others nervously. He took a deep breath, "Oh well, we've come this far," and stepped into the chamber, quickly followed by Harry and then the two girls.

As they entered, a blue light sprang from the back wall. They found themselves in a small chamber, and in the middle was a small table with five chairs. A man, his head and shoulders

in silhouette against the blue light, occupied the chair at the furthest end of the table. The occupant spoke with a soft voice, and no discernable accent.

"Yes, you are most certainly the ones. Only the Anima Summa and his helpers could have found this secret chamber. Welcome - I've been waiting for your arrival."

They looked at the man, who was in his sixties, as he beckoned them to sit in the other four seats around the table. He smiled at their nervousness. "So young," he sighed.

When the four sat down, the man continued, "I am the Grand Master of the Priory of Sion. My name is not important, but the society I represent is. Over millennia, we have been charged to keep the secret from those who would corrupt it. The secret is only for the Anima Summa and his helpers - no one else. Not even I! You see, although we keep the secret, we don't know what it is. We only know that we must help the Anima Summa when the time is right. And that time is now."

He paused as he looked at the four youngsters sitting around him, letting what he had said be fully absorbed by them.

"It is thought that Jean de Gisors founded our ancient order and was the first of our Grand Masters, but we existed long before that - so far back in time that our roots have long been forgotten. Jean de Gisors created the Knights Templar as the physical protectors of the secret, because it was feared that the Saracens would soon discover it. With the help of that Holy Order, it was removed from beneath the Temple Mount in Jerusalem and taken to Rhedae, where it still resides. We - the Priory of Sion - remain the spiritual guardians of the secret, as it has always been."

The four teens listened with rapt attention - Hermione in particular was enthralled. She knew that what was being told to them was very privileged information, and only a very few people throughout history had known it.

The Grand Master continued, "In more recent times, the priest of this parish found out that a very great secret was hidden here. We gave the Abbe Saunier a very large sum of money to refurbish his church and surrounding area with two things in mind. Firstly, he was charged with creating as many diversions as possible to deflect prying eyes away from the true nature of the secret. And secondly, to show the way to the true seekers of the secret - the Anima Summa and his helpers. Saunier, though, was not a wizard - so one of our number, the witch Marie Denard, became his housekeeper to help with the magical aspects of the refurbishment and to keep watch over the church."

"What about the mysterious deaths and the date 17th January always cropping up?" asked Hermione.

"Part of the diversion, my child. It is true that there have been deaths, but they were natural deaths made to look suspicious to further the deception and add to the mystery."

Hermione nodded, "How did you know that I'd be in Diagon Alley last July, when you made sure I bought the amulet for Harry?"

"Ah - so you've worked out that it came from us - such great intelligence in one so young." He smiled at Hermione, "In ancient times, we the guardians were given special magical powers to enable us to do such things."

"Have there been many true seekers in the past?" asked Hermione.

"No - very few. Only a pre-ordained chosen few have been privileged to know the secret. The last to know it was Merlin, when the world of his time came into great peril. He, too, had three helpers - it has always been so since the beginning of time. There must always be three. And they must all be brave and true - as are you. They were King Arthur Pendragon, Morgana and the lady Guinevere and they helped the Anima Summa - Merlin - find his way to the secret. One of their number was strong of mind and intellect - that was Guinevere. And again it must also be so now - all of you are brave and true, or you wouldn't have come this far in your search, and one of you has a very fine mind - able to unravel the clues to the secret," he looked directly at Hermione and smiled, "It is very obvious that you are that one."

Hermione blushed and looked down at her hands.

"And also blessed with humility," said the grand master. He then looked at Harry.

"You, Anima Summa, have been charged by ancient prophecy to protect the world from great evil, and it is the nature of the secret that I guard to help you in this task."

"So where is the secret? Can you tell us where to go?" asked Ginny.

"I only know that the secret resides in Rhedae - but not exactly where. What I do have is a guide that will show you the way. This was handed down by my predecessor, and he received it from his predecessor, as it has been since the secret was brought to this place. The guide is in the form of two riddles," he looked at the four, in turn, "which you must solve both before and during your journey to the place you seek. The way is difficult and tortuous and you must use all your qualities and talents if you are to prevail - your bravery, your compassion, your intellect, and the special powers of the Anima Summa himself. Be warned that one false move and you could all be lost forever - be very careful. Be true to yourselves and each other and I am sure that you will find what you seek."

The teens nodded gravely, waiting to hear the riddles. Ron, however, voiced some of the concerns that the others had, "But Grand Master, we're still very young - we haven't even sat our OWLS yet. And we've still got a lot to learn - we don't know nearly as much as Merlin and his helpers did, so how are we going to cope?"

The man smiled, "The things that you need you already have. You don't have to be old to be brave and true. One of you already has great knowledge, despite her tender years. It is true that you gain more knowledge as you get older, but intelligence is with you from the day you are born - it matters not whether you know everything there is to know - you're intellect will always see you through."

He looked at Hermione, "I suggest you write these down and guard them closely. And remember, they are for your eyes only. First," said the Grand Master, "Start your quest in the terrible place. Look to the fruit and their joining with the sign of the teacher, who will cast 3 on the 4th."

Hermione finished writing the first riddle onto a piece of parchment, and then looked up in anticipation of the second.

"Second," he continued, "Let the rule of gold be your guide and when it is hidden, follow the Light of the Righteous."

"What do they mean?" asked Ron looking puzzled, as did all of them.

"That I cannot tell. Even if I knew, I could not tell you. It is for you four to solve the riddles. You must do this to prove that you are worthy to know the secret. It has always been so in the past. Now you must go and I wish you well in your task."

The blue light went out, suddenly, and the room fell into darkness. Then the entry archway, which had closed after they had entered, opened once more to let in the light from the church. The four saw that the Grand Master was no longer there.

"Come on," said Harry, "Let's get back to the others. We've got a lot of thinking to do. I hope you're on form, Hermi, 'cause I haven't got a clue what those riddles mean."

As they left the chamber, they looked behind to see the archway disappear, and the painting of the fourth Station of the Cross took its place. Everything was as it was earlier. As they left the church, Ceri ran over to them, "Where have you been? We couldn't find you inside. The priest finished saying Mass ages ago!"

"What!" they all gasped at the same time, and Harry voiced their puzzlement, "But I thought the priest started his service at midday - that's hours away!"

"Harry," said Ceri in disbelief, "It's nearly four in the afternoon!"

"But .. but we've only been inside for two hours at the most. It's only about 10 o'clock, surely." They all looked at their watches and were surprised to see the time was 3.55 pm.

Hermione looked as puzzled as the rest of them, "We heard a lot of strange and very privileged things in there. I know we were all wrapped up in it, but eight hours? No way!"

"There you are!" Sirius shouted as he ran up to them, closely followed by the other adults, "Where the hell have you been? Do you know how frantic we've been out here? Where did you get to and how did you manage to leave the church without us seeing you?"

"Slow down, Sirius," said Ceri, "something very strange has happened here today. I think we need to leave as soon as we can - we can talk on the way back to Carcassonne."

"But I need to do some research in the church, Ceri," said Hermione.

Sirius looked at her fondly, "We can come back another day, Hermione. Right now, we need to try to work out what's happened."

Wormtail, who had been hiding inside a bush close to the church entrance, heard what was said. He now knew he would have another, and hopefully better, chance to attack. As the Land Rover drove out of the village and down the narrow road, Wormtail transformed and Apparated back to the cave to update the Death Eaters on the events of the day.

After dinner that evening, the four teens sat outside the boys' tent and talked about their experiences in the church. It was only now that they started to realise the full seriousness of the task that faced them. Harry, in particular, kept hearing the words of the Grand Master over and over again.

'You, Anima Summa, have been charged by ancient prophecy to protect the world from great evil.'

They looked at the riddles once more, and tried to fathom their meaning. Hermione mentally shook herself, and tried to concentrate. It had been very difficult for her since leaving the church - the other three had made it plain that they placed great reliance on her ability to make sense of the riddles. She knew the great importance of solving the clues and for almost the first time in her life, she began to have doubts - doubts that she would be able to cope with the awesome responsibility being placed on her young shoulders.

She looked miserably at her feet and her eyes were wet. "I .. I .. don't know if I can do this. I don't know if I'm smart enough to do it," she wailed.

The others looked at her helplessly. Then Harry moved over to her and put his hands on her cheeks. He lifted her head up and he looked into the tortured eyes of his friend, "Hermione, I know how you feel - we all do. All four of us have got to complete this task, and we've got to do it together - you're not alone in this - we've all got to help each other. And there's no one I know who's smarter than you. Just try to relax a bit - treat it as one of those complicated Arithmancy problems you always manage to solve. Come on, we'll try to help as much as we can."

She looked gratefully at Harry, and then took a deep breath. "Come on," she said with determination, "Let's try again. Ginny, will you read the first riddle - slowly please?"

Ginny picked up the parchment and read '*Start your quest in the terrible place. Look to the fruit and their joining with the sign of the teacher, who will cast 3 on the 4th.*'

"Right," said Hermione, "The first bit is easy. The terrible place must be the church, itself. Remember the inscription we read over the doorway? '*This place is terrible*'"

The others nodded, grinning. This was the old Hermione - no more doubts showed in her sparkling eyes. "So we have to start in the church," said Ron, "What next?"

"Ginny," said Hermione, "Can you read the rest of the riddle again please?"

After Ginny finished reading, Hermione put her head in her hands and groaned with frustration, "That doesn't make any sense at all! Look to the fruit - what fruit? And what's the sign of the teacher?"

Hermione continued to rack her brains, shaking her head from side to side, trying to think of the books she'd read on the mystery, hoping that there was something - anything - that could help. Suddenly she stopped moving.

"What?" said Ginny. Hermione didn't answer - she shot to her feet and ran into the gite without saying a word.

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

"I hope she's ok," said Harry looking worried, "she's under a lot of pressure with these riddles. She knows we expect her to solve them. And we're not helping much!"

Harry needn't have worried, however. Hermione came bounding back out of the gite clutching several books in her arms. She sat back down and opened one of the books to the page that showed a copy of the second scroll that Sauniere had uncovered and the English translation of the coded message. Hermione read the message aloud to the rest of them.

*SHEPHERDESS NO TEMPTATION THAT POUSSIN TENIERS HOLD THE KEY PEACE
681 BY THE CROSS AND THIS HORSE OF GOD I COMPLETE THIS DAEMON
GUARDIAN AT MIDDAY BLUE APPLES.*

"It starts to make more sense now," she said, "Notice 681 - 0.618 the reciprocal of the golden section - again the same numbers. By this horse of God - the horse is the Knight in chess, and the floor of the church is covered with a chessboard. Daemon Guardian - that's Asmodeus, the devil inside the entrance of the church. But look at the last bit - 'At Midday Blue Apples' - that could be the fruit in the riddle. It says 'Look to the Fruit' - 'Look to the Blue Apples' - that still doesn't make sense."

Hermione frowned, then brightened, "Wait a minute. I've seen something about blue apples in one of the books. Hang on!" Hermione picked up another book and turned to a page, which showed the stained glass windows inside the church, and some comments made by the author.

"Yes!" She hissed, "Listen to this, '*At certain times of the year, an apple tree that bears 3 blue apples is cast through the southern stained-glass windows.*' And the message in the scroll says 'At Midday Blue Apples.' So the light is reflected through the window at midday, but what time of the year?"

Hermione continued to look through the book, but couldn't find any further reference to the time of year the phenomenon happened. As she looked, she saw something that gave her yet another insight.

"The Teacher! Look - look at this photo of one of the stained glass windows in the church - it shows Jesus teaching his disciples. Jesus is the teacher. The riddle says about the sign of the teacher who will cast 3 on the 4th. Yes - I don't know what the 3 is, but the 4th - That's tomorrow, Good Friday."

"So whatever's going to happen will occur at midday tomorrow!" said Harry.

"Yes," said Hermione, "we've got to be inside the church then. Whatever happens then is going to show us where we start our journey to the secret."

"That's brilliant, Hermione. I'm proud of you. I knew you'd be able to figure it out," said a smiling Harry.

"What about the second riddle?" Said Ron, "Read it out, Ginny."

Ginny read, "Let the rule of gold be your guide and when it is hidden, follow the Light of the Righteous," she looked up blankly at the others, who looked hopefully at Hermione.

"HMMMMM," she said, "The rule of gold must be the Golden Section - 1.618 - there's so many references to it in the church. It must be that!"

"But how the hell do we follow 1.618?" asked Ron, "That doesn't make much sense to me."

"I don't know, Ron," said Hermione, "But I know one thing. I've got to start reading up everything I can about the golden section. And I've got to do it by midday tomorrow. It's a good thing I brought my Arithmancy books with me."

"What about the Light of the Righteous?" Said Harry, "It says when the golden rule is hidden, follow the Light of the Righteous. Could that mean there will be some magical light to guide us?"

"I don't know Harry," said Hermione, "I can't see how we can work that one out until we actually start on our journey. We're just going to have to work it out when the time comes. Right," she said brightly, "I'm going to go and do some reading," and she picked up her books and trotted back into the cabin.

"She's absolutely amazing," said Ron. The other two nodded their agreement.

"I told her not so long ago," said Harry, "that I didn't know what I'd do without her. This is one of those times that brings the truth of it right home to me."

Ginny smiled as she looked at Harry, nodding her agreement. "Let's go and see Sirius and the others," she said, "We've got to tell them about tomorrow."

They found the others sitting outside their tents. Sirius, Ceri and Remus were talking together about what to say in their report to Professor Dumbledore. Nadine and Charlie were sitting quite close together, laughing at something one of them had said. When he saw the kids, Charlie got up and walked over to them.

"Hermione's cracked the first riddle," Harry said as he went over to Sirius, closely followed by Ron and Charlie. Ginny looked at Nadine and went over and sat by her. "So - what were you two laughing at?" She asked.

"Oh - Charlie was telling me about one of his run-ins with Snape."

Ginny grinned slyly, "You two seem to be getting on, don't you? There's nothing you want to tell me, is there?"

"Ginny!" said Nadine with mock indignation, "Now what should I be telling you?"

"Oh you know - that you and Charlie have finally seen the light and got together?"

"Ginny Weasley! What gives you that idea?"

"It's plain to see, Nadine. It's written all over both your faces when you're together. You like him don't you?"

Nadine sighed, "It's that obvious is it? Yes, I like your brother, Ginny. He makes me laugh and I didn't think I could ever laugh again after .. Well, that's another story. But I don't think

Charlie's ready to make any commitment yet. At least, he hasn't said anything to me - that, well, he likes me or anything."

Ginny beamed at the French girl, "It's obvious he likes you, Nadine. He just needs a little nudge in the right direction. And I'm pretty good at nudging my brothers when the need arises. Oh I'm so glad, Nadine. This is great!"

"Ginny - now don't do anything rash. If and when Charlie wants to say something, he will, I'm sure. Let's not rush things, please?"

"Come on, Nadine. Let's go and join the others. We've got some news about the riddles." Ginny couldn't stop grinning as they walked over to the other tent.

"So," Sirius said, "We have to be at the church just before midday, when you expect something to happen?"

"That's right, Sirius," said Harry, "And you may have a long wait. Hermione thinks that we'll have to go on a journey to get to the secret. We know it's somewhere in the village and we think that the starting point is the church. But if today's events are anything to go by, don't expect to see us till we come back out of the church. Anything might happen, and when it does it'll probably be magical."

"We'll stick to the same plan as today then," said Ceri, "We'll spread out outside the church and wait. If the Death Eaters turn up I'll come inside to warn you, but just in case, don't rush out of the church without checking that the coast is clear."

"Is there anything else we can do to help?" asked Remus.

"I don't think so, Professor," said Harry, "We've got to do this on our own - the Grand Master told us that. All we can do is be guided by whatever comes our way. I know one thing, though. We've got to have clear heads tomorrow. Come on, let's get back and get an early night."

The three kids walked towards the garden. As they left the copse of trees, Ginny turned and called, "Goodnight Charlie. Have a nice night."

"Now what did she mean by that?" he asked Nadine.

Nadine just grinned and shook her head.

Chapter 9 Labyrinth

The morning of the 4th April dawned with a mainly clear sky. As the sun pushed its way above the horizon, the few wispy clouds vanished and a glorious spring day was in prospect. Only Harry witnessed the beauty as he poked his head out of the tent. He breathed deeply; feeling refreshed from his restful sleep, and walked out into the garden to start his exercises.

After an hour, Harry saw a smudge of red poke its way out of the tent and Ron, with bleary eyes, groaned, "What's all this noise? Is there something wrong with you, Harry? Look at the time - it's only 7 o'clock - it's still the middle of the night!"

Harry laughed at his friend, "Why don't you come and join me, Ron? You could do with a bit of exercise."

"No way. Just call me when breakfast's ready," and the unruly mop of red disappeared back into the tent.

Just then, Harry caught another flash of red out of the corner of his eye and turned to see a smiling Ginny approach. "Morning Harry. How long have you been up? Quite a while by the look of you," she drew her finger down Harry's shoulder and showed him the perspiration that dripped from it.

"Got to keep up the training, Ginny. Mustn't let it lapse now - we've still got the Slytherins to play you know."

Ginny flopped onto the grass and beckoned Harry to join her, "Hermione's still sleeping. I heard her come to bed at about 3 o'clock this morning. She'd been reading and making notes for about 7 hours non stop! I got up at midnight and made her a sandwich and a cup of tea - she hardly knew I was there! I thought it'd be best to let her sleep - if there's one of us who needs to be alert today, it's her!"

"Yes, I think you're right. We can call her at 10.30 - that should give her enough time to get ready and we can travel down to Rennes at about 11 o'clock. We've got to be there by midday, but we don't want to arrive too early in case Wormtail shows up."

Ginny frowned at Harry's reminder of the ever-present dangers surrounding their quest, then she brightened, "Uh, what do you think about Sirius and Ceri, Harry? They'd make a nice couple, don't you think?" She raised her eyebrows questioningly.

"Oh no, Ginny. Don't go there. I know what you're like - I've seen you trying to get Charlie and Nadine to connect," he paused and then grinned, "But I think you're absolutely right - they'd make a great couple. But there's a lot of painful history there, Ginny. I wouldn't push things if I were you. If anything's meant to happen - it'll happen on its own."

Ginny frowned, "Ok Harry. It's your call. But the Charlie and Nadine project is mine," she was smiling again, "so watch this space!" Harry rolled his eyes but couldn't help laughing at the infectious optimism of his young friend.

"What the bloody hell is all this noise!" Ron emerged from the tent, dressed only in his boxers, running his hands through his hair, "Can't a guy get some sleep in this place?"

"Oh come on Ron," said Ginny, "You've had about 10 hours already. Get dressed - and come on, Harry, help me make breakfast. Oh and Ron, we're letting Hermi sleep in until half past ten - she's going to need all the rest she can get before we leave."

Millie and Arbuthnot were pleasantly surprised to see breakfast waiting for them when they came into the kitchen. "This is nice," said a smiling Millie, "We'll have to invite you on our little jaunts more often I think," she looked around the kitchen, "Where's Hermione?"

"She's still sleeping Mrs. Granger," said Ginny, "She was up most of the night doing some research. We're going to Rennes-le-Chateau at about 11 o'clock so we thought we'd leave her in bed for as long as we could."

"How long do intend to be there, today?"

"Oh, I'm not really sure Mrs. Granger," said Harry, "but we could be quite a while. We've got a lot to investigate so don't expect us back before some time this evening. So don't worry if we're late."

"Umm," said Millie frowning, "And if I know my daughter, she won't want to be interrupted by anything as mundane as finding a nice restaurant to have a decent meal. I'll have a nice little picnic ready to take with you. I think I've got just enough time to cook you one of my specialities."

Ron's ears pricked up, "What's that, Mrs. Granger?"

"Pizza Margherita. I picked up this gorgeous recipe in Italy a few years ago. Until you've tried pizza the way the Italians make it, you haven't lived!"

"Ron!" Whispered Ginny, "close your mouth. You're slobbering!"

Everyone laughed as Ron quickly and noisily slapped his lips together, "I can't wait, Mrs. Granger."

"What's all this, Mum?" Asked Hermione as she finally made an appearance later that morning. "And where is everybody?"

"They're out in the garden getting things ready for your little trip today. And since you're likely to be late home, I've made you all a little something to make sure you eat properly."

"Little! Mum, how are we going to carry all that food?"

"Easy, Hermi," said Ron as he came into the kitchen from the garden. He stopped suddenly and put his nose in the air and closed his eyes as a look of pure ecstasy dawned on his face. "What is that gorgeous smell?"

"That's my pizza, Ron," said Millie, looking pleased. Ron opened his eyes and surveyed a huge mound of packages on the kitchen table, "There's sandwiches, some chicken drumsticks, a few pies and pasties, potato crisps, some salad and, of course, the pizza."

"Thank you, Mrs. Granger. That's very kind of you. Now where have you put the food for the others?"

"Ron!" Breathed Hermione, laughing. "Tell the others I'll have a cup of tea and a piece of toast and I'll be out in about fifteen minutes."

"Right, Hermi. Take your time - we won't be leaving for another half hour," and he piled the packages into his arms and walked gingerly out into the garden, balancing them precariously, to pack them into the four rucksacks stored in the tent.

A little later, the three greeted Hermione as she walked over to the tent. "How are you feeling, Hermi? And what have you got there?" asked Harry.

"Fine, Harry. Thanks for letting me sleep in. I found out quite a lot about the golden section last night, and I think we'll need these things to work out anything we come across relating to phi." She showed them a calculator, some parchments, a measuring tape and several other instruments taken from her Arithmancy set.

"Uh, I think YOU'LL be the one needing them Hermi," said Ron. "I'll just protect you while you do the calculations."

The four teens grinned and then checked that they had everything before walking into the copse of trees behind the garden.

"Mum made a huge mound of food for us," Hermione told the adults, "Much too much for us four."

"Speak for yourself, Hermi," said Ron with a pained expression as she gave two of the rucksacks to Ceri and Nadine.

"Come on, Ron. Even you couldn't eat all that," said Harry.

"I'd have had a good go, Harry. Uh, Hermione, you've kept the rucksack with the pizzas in I hope?"

"I've split them up, Ron - some for us and some for the others. Ok?"

"Thanks, Hermi," said Sirius, "If we can't finish it all, we'll keep what's left for Ron." He looked at his watch, "11 o'clock. Time to get moving, I think."

They all piled into the Land Rover and Nadine slowly pulled onto the track that led to the main road. As they neared Rennes-le-Chateau, they all had serious expressions on their faces as they thought of what lay ahead.

"What are we going to do about the priest?" Said Remus, "It's Good Friday and he's bound to have a service planned for midday today."

Nadine glanced at the others, "I think I know what to do. While you kids are in the church, I'll wait on the path to the church door and intercept him. I'll pretend that I'm in a bit of pain or something and keep him talking. If you, Ceri, go into the church with them, you can come out and signal when they've found the way to the secret and I can then let the priest go."

"That sounds ok, Nadine," said Ceri, "Sirius, Remus and Charlie can keep a look out around the church until we all come out, then the five of us can take up our defensive positions around the kids, as we agreed earlier, as they start on their journey to the secret."

The Land Rover pulled into the main square of Rennes-le-Chateau at 11.50 precisely, and everyone cautiously got out and made their way towards the church. The teens went inside with Ceri while Nadine waited outside, looking up the lane for the priest's arrival. Sirius, Remus and Charlie spread out around the front of the church and started looking for any sign of activity.

From his hiding place behind a large rock, Wormtail was dismayed at the close protection given to the youngsters, but he had a grim expression on his face, if a rat could have such an expression. He silently made his way behind the church to Apparate to the cave where the Death Eaters were waiting.

Just then, Nadine spotted the priest approaching the church. Again, there was no congregation in sight. As he came near, she flopped onto the ground, holding her stomach, and held her hand out, imploringly, "Father, please help me. I just felt a sudden stabbing pain in my stomach. It hurts so much."

The priest rushed over and bent beside her, "Easy, my child, let me help you over to the bench outside the church."

He gently helped Nadine get to her feet and they slowly walked over to the bench and they both sat down, "Now tell me - exactly where is the pain?"

Inside the church, Ceri watched as the teens spread out around the main aisle, and looked up at the stained glass windows. It was 3 minutes to midday, and they looked expectantly towards the window that showed Jesus instructing his disciples.

"Look there!" exclaimed Ginny pointing to the middle of the aisle. They all looked and saw the image of 3 blue apples slowly moving down the aisle towards the centre.

"What now?" said Ron.

"We have to look for the sign of the teacher. You keep looking at the floor, Ginny. The rest of us will look at the Jesus window."

It was now 2 minutes to midday and the tension inside the church could be cut with a knife.

Outside, meanwhile, Nadine was making a good job of keeping the priest occupied, while Sirius, Charlie and Remus kept watch. Suddenly, Remus spotted movement about 50 yards away at the edge of the cemetery. He signalled to the others and they looked over to where Remus was pointing. They saw the unmistakable black cloak of a Death Eater disappear quickly behind a tree. Sirius moved immediately over to the bench where Nadine was talking to the priest.

"I'm sorry, father," he said, "but you have to leave here immediately. There is danger approaching," he nodded in the direction of the Death Eaters, who at that moment broke cover and started to run towards the front of the church. The priest had a frightened look in his eyes

- obviously, he understood English. But he said, "But this young child is in pain. I cannot leave her like this."

"Don't worry about her father, I'll make sure she reaches safety. Now go before it's too late." The priest needed no further prompting and ran over towards the Villa Bethania to seek cover.

"Nadine - go and warn Ceri and the kids. We'll hold them off as long as we can." The sound of curses and charms filled the air as Nadine rushed into the church and Sirius moved back to his defensive position.

It was 1 minute to midday as Nadine rushed up to Ceri and told her about the attack. They both rushed towards the door, wands in hand, and prepared to hold position there.

It was midday. Suddenly, Hermione and the others saw a bright light within the stained glass window they were watching. Ginny again cried out as she saw another image appear on the front of the aisle floor. The rest looked down and saw a perfect white triangle moving up the aisle towards the image of the blue apples.

"That's a perfect isosceles triangle," said Hermione, "Of course! The teacher will cast 3 - a 3-sided triangle. Look, it's almost reached the fruit - It has to join with it. Just like the riddle said."

The triangle and apple images merged at the centre of the aisle, and when the apples were contained exactly within the triangle, both images completely covered one of the white chessboard squares on the floor.

"That's it," shouted Hermione, "that square must be the starting point of our quest."

"But Hermi," said Ron, "where are we supposed to go from there? I can't see anything else that shows the way."

"It must be a portal," said Ginny, "you know - like the one Ron opened when we met the Grand Master the other day."

"I think you're right, Ginny," said Harry, "Come on - let's see if we can open it."

The four stood, two each side of the square and looked down. Harry took out his wand and touched the square at the centre and said "*ALOHOMORA*".

The square shimmered, and then vanished to reveal a hole with steps leading steeply down below the floor of the church.

"We've found the entrance," whispered Hermione and she looked around the church, "Where's Ceri?"

The others looked around and Harry exclaimed, "Can you here that? That's the sound of curses being thrown. The Death Eaters must have shown up. Wait here - I'll go and see what's happening."

He moved down the church and went to the door where he saw Nadine and Ceri crouched on the floor, flinging charms towards the left-hand side.

Ceri turned and saw Harry approaching, "Stay back, Harry. It's Wormtail and about ten other Death Eaters. You keep looking and we'll hold them off."

"We've found the entrance, Ceri. It seems to be a tunnel leading underneath the church. But we can't go now - we'll help you fight them off. I'll go and get the others."

"No, Harry. We'll be ok. We've got our defensive positions worked out and we'll be able to hold them off for quite some time. You go and start the quest - don't worry about us."

"But Ceri ..."

Suddenly, Harry heard a loud voice. "ANIMA SUMMA." He jerked his head up and looked around but couldn't see who was speaking. He looked towards Ceri and Nadine, who showed no sign of having heard anything. He moved back inside the church and saw that his friends were looking around with their mouths wide open - they must also have heard the voice. He went over to Hermione, "Did you hear that?" he asked.

"Yes Harry - we all did."

"ANIMA SUMMA. FIND YOUR WAY TO THE SECRET. DO NOT BE AFRAID FOR YOUR FRIENDS OUTSIDE - THEY WILL BE SAFE. TIME WILL BE EQUALISED."

"You all hear that?" asked Harry. The others nodded.

Ron voiced what the others were thinking, "Who was that? And what did he mean by 'time will be equalised'?"

They all shrugged their shoulders and shook their heads.

"All right," said Harry, "We'll go. But hang on until I go and tell Ceri." He ran back to the church entrance and touched Ceri on the shoulder. She turned her head and looked at him questioningly.

"Ceri - we're going down under the church. We heard a powerful voice saying that you'd all be safe out here. We'll be as quick as we can."

"Ok Harry - go. And don't worry about us."

Harry returned to his waiting friends and went to the hole in the floor. He put his foot on the first step and then paused, looking at his friends, "Goodness knows what we'll find down there, or how far we'll have to go. Are you all sure you want to do this?"

The others looked at each other and Hermione said, "Don't be silly, Harry. Of course we want to do it. We've come this far and we want to see it through. And in any case, the Grand Master said that we *all* have to go."

The four friends grinned at each other, and then Hermione thought for a moment, "The Grand Master said that the way would be difficult and tortuous. And he also said that if we make one false move, we'd be lost forever. Now I get the feeling that we're about to enter a labyrinth - and there'll probably be many twists and turns. The tunnel may branch in different directions, so I think it'll be a good idea if we map our progress. Ginny, will you keep a record on some

parchment of the way we go? We'll then be able to follow the map to find our way back out after we've found the secret."

Ginny nodded, "That sound like a very good idea, Hermi." She took some blank parchment and a pencil from Hermione's rucksack.

"Why don't we just make marks on the tunnel wall - you know, arrows pointing which way we go?" asked Ron.

"No Ron, we can't do that," said Harry, "If the Death Eaters break through and get into the church we don't want to put up a load of sign posts telling them which way we've gone."

"Oh right. Sorry - I wasn't thinking."

Harry grinned at his friend and then took a deep breath, "Ok. Are you all ready?" Everyone nodded with determination.

"Then let the quest begin!"

Charlie ducked as the lethal green light whizzed just above his head. The Death Eaters were flinging killing curses thick and fast - but they didn't appear to be very precise in their aim. He turned to where Sirius was hiding, "These guys are not playing about - tell the others to be very careful."

"I know, Charlie. They seem to be putting down a lot of covering fire - some of them may be trying to outflank us. There's a weak spot over to our right - I'll move over to the Calvary - I should be able to cover it there." He shouted to the others, "Try to keep their heads down for a few seconds - I'm going to change my position."

Charlie and Remus started to send curses in the direction where most of the Death Eater fire was coming from, while Ceri and Nadine aimed at any sign of movement. It had the desired effect, and Sirius picked a lull in the curses aimed at them to race from his cover over to the Calvary. He made it - just. As he dived for the cover of the stone cross, green light started to pepper the ground around him. He let out a loud breath and raised himself into a crouching position, peering around his stone cover. He had been right - he could see two Death Eaters creeping along the line of trees to his right, trying to get into the Calvary. He raised his wand and took careful aim but he couldn't get a clear sight because of the tree cover. He then raised his wand and aimed at a large tree branch under which the Death Eaters were creeping.

"*FLIPENDO*," he shouted and a ball of energy left his wand and struck the branch at the point where it met the main tree trunk. The Death Eaters were thrown to the ground as a dense bundle of leaves and branches fell on them, leaving them exposed to Sirius' fire. He sent '*Stupify*' spells in their direction, but the Death Eaters' fear lent them a burst of speed as they rushed back to join the main throng of black-cloaked figures.

Sirius grinned and settled down for a long wait.

"Harry's owl - Hedwig - delivered a message this morning, Arthur," Dumbledore sat at the kitchen table at The Burrow, facing Arthur and Molly Weasley. They had a worried expression on their faces.

"Are they all right, Professor?" Asked Molly anxiously.

"Yes, yes - don't worry Molly. They're all ok. It seems that when I sent the note giving them your information, Charlie had already made contact with them. It seems that he and a French girl - the sister of Charlie's magical creatures contact in the Langedoc - were in Rennes-le-Chateau at the same time as the kids and their protectors. They've now joined the team and Charlie's keeping a brotherly eye on Ron and Ginny."

"Oh thank goodness," said Arthur, "You've mentioned the protectors before, Professor, who are they? Do I know any of them?"

"Wait a minute, Arthur," said Molly. At the mention of the French girl, her ears had pricked up and a gleam had come into her eyes, "Tell me, Professor, who's this French girl?"

"Her name's Nadine Blanc, Molly," Dumbledore said with a grin, "and before you ask any more questions, no - I don't know if she and Charlie are an item. I gather they're very friendly with each other but beyond that, I don't know."

"Well it's about time Charlie settled down and found a nice girl. I've lost patience with Bill, but I thought Charlie would have been married by now."

"Molly," said Arthur knowingly, "I can see that look in your eye but you don't even know if Charlie and this girl like each other that way. Now don't go interfering!" He grinned slyly at Dumbledore, "Right Professor, you were about to tell us about the support team."

"Yes Arthur. They're the best people I've got - you know, of course, that I couldn't get any aurors from the Ministry, but these three are right up to the job. Ceri Jones is an American special auror, seconded to my team from the United States. You both know Remus Lupin, of course - my Defence Against the Dark Arts professor. And finally, my most trusted helper, Sirius Black. He ..."

Dumbledore was interrupted by a loud shriek that erupted from Molly Weasley. Arthur had suddenly gone very pale, "Professor Dumbledore - is that Sirius Black the escaped killer from Azkaban?"

"The very same, Arthur," he held up his hands to ward off the expected volley of protests and continued, "I thought you may have heard the odd rumour at the ministry. Sirius Black is innocent of all charges. Indeed, the wizard he's supposed to have killed - Peter Pettigrew - is leading the band of Death Eaters opposing them in France. He was the one who killed the Muggles fourteen years ago - he's a rat Animagus, and you may not believe this, but he was living with you for a long time - Scabbers."

Molly and Arthur gasped and stared disbelieving at Dumbledore.

"Sirius has been working for me for over a year now - he's done some very difficult and dangerous work keeping track of Voldemort. I can't think of anyone better to whom I'd entrust the safety of the four kids."

Dumbledore paused and a grim expression crossed his face, "I won't lie to you both - there has been a Death Eater attack on the kids and I very much doubt it will be the last. It was Ron's quick reactions that prevented any of them getting hurt and gave them the time for the protectors to fight them off."

"Professor Dumbledore," said Molly, "Don't you think it would be best to bring them home? I mean, if things are getting that dangerous ..." she trailed off at a loss for words.

"I'm sorry, Molly, but this has got to be done. I told you before how important it is that Harry uncovers the secret, and Hermione, Ron and Ginny have been destined to be his helpers. This is the key to defeating Voldemort. Look, even as we speak, your children are helping to write wizarding history. When this whole epic comes to the attention of the wizarding public - and it will - I'll see to that - their names will be held in the highest esteem throughout the world. You should be proud of them - I certainly am."

A tear rolled down Molly's face and Arthur put a protective arm around her shoulders, "We are proud of them anyway, Professor, whether they write history or not. We just hope they'll come out of this safely."

Harry slowly led the way down the steps that fell steeply below the church. After a few minutes, the steps came to an end and the four stood at the entrance to a tunnel. They could see in the dim light that filtered down from the church above, that the tunnel was roughly hewed from the rock, about 6 feet high and four and a half feet wide. Jagged pieces of rock jutted from the ceiling and the sides of the tunnel, so they would have to proceed in single file. Suddenly they jumped as the light from above was cut off, plunging them into darkness. The pitch black seemed to envelope them and sent a shiver down Ginny's spine. She reached out to touch her brother, wanting the comfort of familiar contact in the deathly darkness.

"Ahhhh... Gerroff ... Gerroff" The others jumped again as Ron erupted.

"*LUMOS*," Hermione held her wand above her head, the light filling the narrow entrance in which they were standing. Ron was dancing about like a crazed animal, swatting at his shoulder.

Ginny was standing a little behind Ron nursing her hand, "Ron," she wailed, "What did you bash my hand for?"

"Ginny! Don't ever do that! I thought it was a spider!" Ron looked sternly at his sister.

"Sorry," she whispered sullenly. Harry and Hermione couldn't help but laugh at their antics, but it served to lift the gloom that had earlier descended on them. Harry looked up to the top of the steps to see that the square hole above had closed.

"Well, nobody's going to follow us now," said Harry, "Light your wands, everybody - and watch that you don't bump your heads on these rocks jutting down from the ceiling."

Harry again took the lead and entered the tunnel, quickly followed by Ron, then Hermione, with Ginny bringing up the rear. The tunnel was fairly straight, but after a few yards started to dip quite steeply. In places, it was so steep that they had to lean back and brace themselves

against the wall and hold their balance against the jutting rocks to prevent sliding down to the bottom. They proceeded cautiously as the tunnel wound around to the left, and then the right, levelled off and then dipped steeply once more. Both Harry and Ron had to walk with a stoop to avoid hitting their heads on the tunnel ceiling.

They had travelled for about 200 yards before they came to the end of the tunnel. "Hold on a minute," Harry whispered, "the tunnel seems to be opening out just up ahead - I can't see anything yet, just darkness."

He edged slowly forwards and came to the tunnel exit. He stretched his arm out and lifted his wand into the space before him. He saw a much larger tunnel, but as roughly hewn as the one they had just descended. He looked down to see that the floor was fairly level and he slowly walked forward, calling to the others to follow him.

When they were all inside, with all four wands casting their illumination, they saw that they were standing in a tunnel about 20 yards in length, about 4 yards wide and 8 feet high. Harry walked towards the centre and peered ahead, holding his wand in front of him. "There's a blank wall straight ahead," he called back over his shoulder.

"There are tunnels leading off to the left," said Hermione walking over to them. She paused briefly as she counted, "There's six of them and they all look about the same size."

Ron looked towards the opposite wall, "There're no exits on the right side. We've got to go down one of these on the left."

"Yes, but which one?" said Ginny looking doubtfully at the six exits.

Hermione looked closely, and saw that the tunnels were not evenly spaced along the wall. There was one only a few feet from the tunnel they had just come down and one about 5 yards further along. The third was 2 yards further, and so on in a completely random pattern, the sixth tunnel being about 6 yards from the far wall.

"I wonder .." she said to herself. "Ginny - help me do some measuring please." She eased her rucksack from her back and fished inside for the measuring tape. She walked over to the first tunnel and placed the end of the tape on the ground at the left-hand side of the exit. "This tape is 90 feet long so we should be able to do it in one go," she said to the others.

"Uh, what are you doing, Hermi?" asked Ron.

"I'm going to measure the distance from the start of the first exit tunnel to the end of the sixth. I think this puzzle can be solved using the golden section, just like the riddle says. This line of exits can be treated as a straight line. And the golden section is a special point on a straight line - the point where the ratio of the total length to the largest segment is the same as the ratio of the largest segment to the smallest segment."

"Uh, right," said Ron doubtfully, "now in English please Hermi?"

"The ratio of the golden section is 1.618, to the nearest three decimal places. So on a straight line, the golden section point will be the total length divided by 1.618. See?"

"If you say so, Hermi," groaned Ron.

"Ginny, you hold the end of the tape just here please, and I'll walk to the far tunnel and take a reading"

Ginny dutifully bent down and held the end of the tape to the ground as Hermione walked, tape unreeling, to the far side of the tunnel. When she reached the furthest side of the sixth exit, she shouted, "50 feet exactly."

She then walked back towards Ginny, reeling the tape back in as she went. "Right," she said and started rummaging in her rucksack once more. After a few moments, she found the calculator and turned it on. She started to enter the figures, muttering to herself as she worked, "That's 50 divided by 1.618 equals ... 30.9," she looked up at the others, who were watching intently, "So, if the golden section rule is to be applied here, we should find that 30.9 feet from the first exit should land slap bang in the middle of the correct exit tunnel. Ginny, will you help me again please?"

Ginny once more held the end of the tape in the same place as before, while Hermione walked along the line of tunnels, all the while reading the measurements as the tape unfolded. She stopped and held the tape against the floor; unreeling a little more of it until exactly 30.9 feet was shown. She looked up and was shocked to see that she was facing bare rock, in between two of the exits.

"Oh bother!" She exclaimed, her brow creasing in consternation.

"Well it can't be solved by the golden section, then," said Ron, "So what did the riddle say? When the rule of gold cannot be followed, follow the light of the righteous"

"But there's no light here, Ron," said Harry. A sinking feeling started to overtake Harry as he thought that they would fail at the first hurdle. He looked at Hermione and his spirits started to lift at the look on her face. She was obviously onto something.

"Ginny," she called, "Will you move back and hold your end of the tape against the far wall? I'm going to try something else. It may be that the whole length of the wall must be taken into consideration and not just the distance between the two end tunnels."

Hermione walked until she reached the far wall. She looked at the tape and shouted "68 feet." She walked back down the row of tunnels, reeling in the tape as she went. She then picked her calculator back up and started to enter the new figures. "The golden section lies a fraction over 42 feet along from the near wall. Stay there, Ginny. I'll measure it out"

Hermione repeated the process, and stooped to adjust the tape to measure 42 feet. She looked up and this time saw that she was at the exact centre of the fourth exit tunnel.

"Eureka," she yelled, "Come on, you lot - this way. It must be the right one."

As he passed her to lead the way into the tunnel, Harry leaned over and whispered into her ear, "How could I have doubted you, Hermi. You're absolutely marvellous."

Hermione blushed prettily, and waited for Ron and Ginny to follow Harry before moving into the tunnel herself.

Feeling elated, Harry walked more quickly than earlier. The tunnel was about the same width as the first one, but the floor, sides and ceiling were a lot smoother. After about 50 uneventful yards, the tunnel suddenly opened out into what appeared to be a natural cavern. It was roughly oval in shape and about 30 yards across at its longest point, which happened to be straight ahead of them. The ceiling was much higher than before, about 20 feet above their heads.

They all walked cautiously into the cavern looking around with interest. There were some oddly shaped rock formations on the left-hand side, which appeared to have been formed by running water at some time in the distant past.

"Well I can't see any exits along these walls," said Ron after a while, "only that one straight ahead - it just seems to be a continuation of the tunnel we just came through."

"You're right Ron," said Harry, "There's no puzzles for you to solve here, Hermi. Come on, lets keep moving."

As they started towards the exit at the far end of the cavern, they suddenly froze as the most terrible roar filled the air around them. It seemed to be coming from dead ahead, "What the hell's that?" wailed Ginny.

She got her answer a few seconds later as the most hideous monster imaginable emerged from the tunnel ahead of them. It was about 18 feet long with a long bulbous body stretched out behind it, covered in thick black hair. It's heads - there were three of them - were - well - indescribable. The only feature to stick in the memory was the length of the double row of razor-sharp teeth, which dripped an evil-looking purple liquid. It moved fairly slowly, considering the eight legs that it boasted, and to Ron, its movement was strangely familiar.

"Come on," shouted Harry, "Lets get out of here - back up the tunnel, quick."

Harry, Hermione and Ginny turned and started to race back up the tunnel. They had gone only a few yards before they noticed that Ron wasn't with them.

"Oh no," breathed Harry, "RON RON ," he shouted. There was no reply - only the loud roaring of the hideous monster.

"We've got to go back," he shouted, "Ron's still in there."

The three ran back to the cavern entrance and looked inside, fearing to see the worst. What they saw shocked them. Ron stood in the middle of the cavern, immediately in front of the monster, with his wand raised.

"*CONFUNDO*," he shouted and the charm hit the monster squarely between the eyes of the middle head - or what appeared to be eyes - only the gaping mouth could be seen clearly.

The monster stopped and started swaying from side to side, obviously disoriented. Then, much to the amazement of his three friends, Ron laughed out loud, again pointed his wand at the monster, and yelled "*RIDDIKULUS*."

The monster looked at Ron in disbelief, and then disappeared with a 'POP,' leaving behind a boggart, which quickly crawled away into a dark corner.

They walked up to Ron and, slapping him on the back, Harry said, "How did you know it was a boggart Ron? It frightened the living daylights out of us three."

"It was the way it moved, really," answered Ron, "I knew I'd seen that gait before and then it struck me - a Dementor. It moved exactly like a Dementor. I know that's your worst fear, and mine is a spider - it had eight legs and the body of a big fat hairy. I don't know what Hermi and Ginny's worst fears are, but there wasn't really any time to ask them - even if they'd stayed here long enough for me to ask," he grinned at Hermi and Ginny who looked back at him sheepishly, "But those two things told me all I needed to know. It must have picked up on all of our worst fears and changed into an amalgam of all four. Once I realised it was a boggart, it was easy to just confuse it and then dispel it with Riddikulus."

"That was a very brave thing to do, Ron," said Hermione.

"Yes - that it was," agreed Harry, "You were the only one to stand up to it Ron."

Feeling embarrassed, Ron dismissed their praise and pointed at the tunnel up ahead, "Come on. We've still got some work to do. Let's go."

They entered the tunnel, still in single file with Harry in the lead, and walked down it more cautiously than they had the previous one.

They followed the tunnel straight for about twenty yards, and then it bent in a dog-leg towards the left. They walked on for another 40 yards before entering a very unusual cavern. It was obvious from first glance that this was not a natural cave - there were too many straight lines. They walked to the middle and looked about them. It was only about 8 feet high, and there were three sides. The smaller side was behind them, which held the tunnel out of which they had just come, and the ones to the left and right of them were about the same length, and ended in a point, about 20 yards in front of them.

"This is odd," said Hermione, "It's in the shape of a triangle - like the one we saw cast from the stained glass window in the church. Look - there are six exit tunnels on each of the longer sides of the triangle."

"That's twelve to choose from," said Ginny, "Got any ideas Hermi? Is it the golden rule again?"

Hermione thought for a few minutes, "I think so. But this is different. I'll have to look at my notes." She took off her rucksack and rummaged for the notes she had made the night before. She pulled them out and sat on the floor to read.

"Can we do anything while you read Hermi?" asked Harry.

Hermione looked up, "Yes. You can measure the lengths of the three walls - that should be a help."

"Come on, Ron," said Harry as he pulled the tape measure from Hermione's rucksack, "You grab the end and hold it in the right-hand corner."

While the two boys measured the dimensions of the cave, Hermione flicked through the pages of parchment looking for her notes on the golden section and triangles. She found them quite

quickly and started to read. After about five minutes, she stood up and saw that Harry and Ron had just finished measuring the smallest of the three walls. "Well, what have we got?" she asked.

Harry looked at the notes he had made on the back of his hand, "The two longer walls are exactly the same size - 60 feet, and the shortest wall is a little over 37 feet."

"Great," said Hermione, "That sounds like a golden triangle - it's a special type of isosceles triangle, but I won't know for sure until I measure the angles."

She pulled out a fresh piece of parchment, a ruler, a pair of compasses and a protractor from her rucksack and sat back on the ground, placing the blank parchment on top of the pile already on the floor. She looked up at Harry, "How much over 37 feet is the smallest wall?"

"Uh, just over an inch," he replied.

Adjusting the scale to fit the parchment, Hermione drew a line to represent the base wall. Then she took her compasses and measured, again to the same scale, the length of the two side walls. She placed the compasses on each end of the base line and drew 2 arcs, which intersected at the top of the parchment. She drew in the other two sides of the triangle and measured their lengths with the ruler to make sure she hadn't made any mistakes.

"Right," she said, "this should tell me if it's a golden triangle."

Using the protractor, she measured the 3 inside angles of the triangle she'd drawn on the parchment. "Yes," she exclaimed, "It's a golden triangle - the two larger angles at the base measure 72 degrees, and the angle at the top is 36 degrees."

"So what does that tell us, Hermi?" asked Ron.

"It means I can use this drawing to calculate where the correct exit from this cavern is. But there's a problem. You see, if you draw a line from the larger base angle onto the opposite wall, and you make sure that the base angle is exactly bisected - that's 36 degrees, then the point that it hits the opposite wall is the golden section point of that wall. The problem is, there are two base angles of 72 degrees. Which one do we use?"

"There's got to be something here to tell us," said Harry, "Let's look at the two corners and see if we can find anything."

Ron and Hermione went to the left-hand corner while Harry and Ginny went to the right. They looked at the floor all around the two corners and brushed away the small amount of dust and debris that had accumulated over the years, but neither pair could find anything.

Ginny looked up and turned around to call to the other two, and something caught her eye in the corner of the wall about 7 feet from the floor. She raised her wand and looked closely at what she'd seen, "It's here," she shouted, "Look - it's a cross drawn on the wall."

The four teens clustered around and saw, illuminated in the light from Ginny's wand, a cross paté - the symbol of the Knights Templar.

"That's it," said Hermione, "It's too much of a coincidence. That's got to be the sign for which base angle to use." She walked back to her drawing and carefully placed the protractor on the bottom right-hand angle, and drew a line at exactly the 36 degrees angle and extended it to intersect the left hand wall. "That's where the correct tunnel is," she said pointing to her drawing and then looking up at the left-hand wall. She measured the distance along the wall in her drawing and then adjusted the scale back up to actual.

"Ginny - hold the end of the tape measure in the left-hand corner while I measure out along the wall."

Hermione walked along the wall and placed the tape measure on the ground at her calculated distance from the corner. She looked up to see that she was directly in front of the third tunnel from the left-hand corner. "This is it," she said.

Ron had looked on, thoroughly bemused, while Hermione had completed her calculations and measurements, "Are you sure this is the right one, Hermi? That looked pretty complicated to me."

"I'm sure, Ron. Come on, let's go."

Harry again led the others into the tunnel, which was about 7 feet high and 4 feet wide. It was a quite roughly hewn hand-made tunnel, but not as rough as the first tunnel under the church - it could well have been built by the Romans nearly two thousand years ago. After about twenty yards, the tunnel started to arc around to the right and slope downwards. It continued like this for the next seventy yards or so.

Harry put up his hand to stop the others, "Listen," he whispered, "Can you hear that?"

The others could hear a faint roaring sound which seemed to come from up ahead, "Oh no - not another monster," groaned Ginny.

"No I don't think so, Ginny," said Harry, "Come on, let's go on a bit further."

They walked slowly on, still bearing to the right and angling downwards, until, after another fifty yards, the tunnel straightened out and Harry called another halt. All the while, the roaring sound had become louder, and when they stopped it was very loud.

"What is that?" asked Ron, "That noise seems pretty familiar to me."

Harry gestured the others to follow as he slowly walked forward. The roaring noise was deafening as Harry stepped out of the tunnel and looked in horror at the scene before him. The others quickly followed and looked about them with trepidation.

Harry had to shout to make himself heard to the others, "What are we going to do now?"

They had entered a fairly narrow cavern- just over twenty feet wide - and about thirty yards in length and twenty five feet at its highest point. It looked to be a natural cavern, with a lot of natural rock formations. They could see an exit tunnel opposite them - about twenty feet away. Although the tunnel was quite near, it was also quite far - because in between was a raging torrent of ice-cold water. They could see where the underground river entered to their left and exited the cavern to their right, through two very low tunnels. The torrent made the

most horrendous noise as it frothed and boiled as it made its rapid way over the myriad sharp rocks that protruded from the surface.

"There's no way we'll wade or swim through that," shouted Ron, "We'll be swept away by the current before we go three feet."

"Spread out along the bank and see if we can find a crossing point," shouted Ginny.

Ron and Ginny went to the left, while Harry and Hermione walked to the right. After a few minutes, they met back at the entrance tunnel and both pairs shook their heads.

"So what now?" shouted Ginny.

The four looked at each other blankly and then gazed forlornly at the raging underground river.

"I've got it!" shouted Harry, "Why didn't I think of it sooner?"

The other three looked at him expectantly.

"I'll fly you over," he shouted, "I'll transform and take you one at a time. You first, Ron."

Harry transformed to his golden eagle form and stooped to let Ron climb onto his back. Then he spread his wings and pushed off from the ground. He flew slowly over to the far bank and landed just at the entrance to the tunnel, where Ron climbed down and waited. Harry went back and fetched Ginny next, and then returned for Hermione, who nearly strangled him as she held onto his neck for grim death.

After he'd transformed back, Harry led the others into the tunnel, which became very narrow after about five yards. It then cut sharply to the left and continued straight on into the darkness ahead. It appeared to be a natural tunnel, which probably carried a tributary stream into the underground river many years ago. It was still very narrow and the floor, although smooth, was littered with small rocks.

The four's progress was slow as they made their way along, keeping watch by wand-light for over-head rock projections and loose boulders on the floor. Harry entered the cavern before he knew it - he was surprised that the walls of the tunnel suddenly disappeared and before him stretched a large natural gallery. It was quite low, only about fifteen feet high, but was fifty yards long by thirty wide. It was roughly oval in shape.

As they all walked towards the centre of the cavern, they saw that there were a number of exit tunnels on both sides. They counted ten exits on each side of the gallery. "We're spoilt for choice this time," quipped Ron, "But I'll tell you one thing - I'm not moving another inch until I eat something. I'm bloody starving!"

The other three laughed, and realised that they too were hungry. Harry looked at his watch, "It's a quarter to two," he exclaimed, "No wonder we're hungry."

Ginny delved into one of the rucksacks that held Millie's food parcels and she handed them around to the others. Ron immediately went to the package that contained the pizzas, "I've been waiting all day to have a go at these," he said with relish.

"Hang on a minute, Ron - I'll warm them up," said Hermione. She pointed her wand at the exposed pizzas and muttered a heating spell. Soon the cavern was filled with the glorious mouth-watering smell of Millie's special Pizza Margherita recipe.

Ron was the first to grab a piece, which lasted about twenty seconds flat, "This is bloody wonderful," he mumbled as he reached for another piece with a look of ecstasy in his eyes, "You'll have to tell your mother to give my mum this recipe, Hermi."

After fifteen minutes, they washed down the food with a steaming hot cup of tea, again heated by Hermione, and loafed pleasantly on the floor for a few minutes. They were shaken from their stupor by a loud belch, which reverberated through the cavern for a full ten seconds.

"Ron - honestly," exclaimed Hermione.

"Blame your mother, Hermi - not me," he replied.

"Come on, back to work," laughed Harry, "goodness knows how much further we've got to go."

Hermione looked around the cave at the exit tunnels, "This is another golden section problem, I think," she said, "But which side is the right one?"

After a few minutes thought, she sighed, "We'll have to measure both sides and work out the golden section point and see what we get. Come on Ginny, same as before - you hold the end of the tape while I measure."

Hermione and Ginny went through the same process as in the first cavern, and after a few minutes they had the measurements of both sides of the cave. Hermione got out her calculator and shouted out the two measurements for the golden section of each wall. She and Ginny again took each end of the tape and walked to the left-hand wall.

When she had reached the required length, she saw that she was facing the bare rock wall, "This isn't it," she said, "Let's try the other side."

This time, Hermione looked up to see that she was facing the seventh exit tunnel on the right-hand cave wall, "This must be it," she said.

"Come on then," said Harry as he led the way into the tunnel.

Remus ducked behind the cover of the church wall as a Flipendus curse blasted a piece of stone where, a few moments ago, his head had been. "They don't seem to want to give up," he shouted at Sirius.

"No - they're pretty determined this time," he shouted back as he sent a 'stupefy' towards the spot where the last curse had originated.

"How long have they been gone now?" shouted Nadine.

Ceri looked at her watch, "Only about fifteen minutes," she said.

"It seems more like an hour," Nadine replied. She was then sent tumbling to the floor as a killing curse hit the church door and sent a large splinter of wood crashing into her forehead.

"Nadine," cried Ceri as she rushed to her friend, "Are you all right?" She looked at the French girl, who was getting groggily back to her feet. As she straightened, she saw that there was a large cut just above her hairline, and blood was running down into her eyes.

"Hold still," said Ceri, "I'll stop the bleeding." She held her wand against the cut as she muttered a spell, and the flow of blood eased to a trickle and then stopped all together. "You'll need some expert help to heal that cut properly, Nadine. But it should be ok for now."

"Thanks, Ceri. It feels a lot better now."

"Are you two girls all right?" shouted Charlie. He had seen how close the curse had come to them."

"We're ok, Charlie," shouted Ceri, "Nadine's got a cut, but I've stopped it bleeding."

Charlie growled angrily and sent a series of curses at the Death Eater positions, quickly followed by a volley from Sirius. "Eat that, Wormtail," he shouted.

The flurry of activity was followed by a lull in the fighting as the Death Eaters took stock of their assault.

"This is getting us nowhere, Wormtail," said Travis, "They're too well dug in. We'll be here all afternoon and we won't make much impression on them."

Wormtail looked nervous, "We've got to keep trying, Travis. Do you want to be the one to tell Lord Voldemort that we failed?"

Travis grunted, "We won't fail. We can't. Brackton - come over here. Let's do a bit of thinking - we've got to wheedle them out of there somehow."

"That's the best thing you've said all day, Travis," said Wormtail, "We've got to think up a plan to break through into the church."

The tunnel sloped gently downwards and swung to the right after they had gone thirty yards. After another twenty yards, Harry stopped. To his left was a narrow entrance - a large fissure in the rock wall - while the tunnel they were walking down continued on ahead. He called to the others and they looked at the fissure dubiously.

"Do you think this is anything worth looking at?" asked Harry. The others just shrugged, not knowing what to make of the fissure.

"Hang on - I'll go and have a closer look," said Harry as he moved towards the fissure, his lit wand held before him. The other three saw Harry suddenly stop and back slowly towards them. They sucked in their breath as they saw what had caused Harry to retreat.

Out of the fissure came a tall ghostly form. It was a man of about forty-five years old, and he was as white as a sheet. He stopped about five yards in front of the teens and raised his arm towards them. He pointed his index finger at each of them, and then pointed back up the tunnel in the direction from which they had just come.

The ghost spoke in a low, but authoritative voice, "I am the guardian spirit. Your quest has been terminated. You are too young for such an awesome responsibility. A new Anima Summa will be chosen, one who has the experience to complete the task. Go back to your friends and leave this place. Go and enjoy your youth."

Ron and Ginny immediately turned around and started back up the tunnel. Hermi watched them turn, but hesitated - torn between leaving and staying with Harry, who was rooted to the spot. Her brow creased, deep in thought and confusion.

Harry made no move to follow his two friends - he just stood and stared at the ghost, deep in concentration. He then shook his head sharply, as if trying to clear it, and he detected the unmistakable overtones of the Imperious curse.

"Who are you?" he challenged the ghost, "What gives you the right to interrupt the quest of the Anima Summa and his helpers. I am the true Anima Summa, chosen by one greater than you. I will not be deflected from my task - go now and let us proceed."

At the sound of Harry's voice, Ron and Ginny stopped. Hermione still stood where she had been, listening intently.

A sudden transformation came over the ghost. He lost his grim expression and a smile broke out on his ghostly white face, "You are indeed the true one. Proceed to your destiny."

The ghost again raised his arm and pointed to his left, down the main tunnel. He then pointed at the other three and muttered a charm, which lifted the imperious curse he had placed on them all earlier - he had no need to lift it from Harry, of course. Harry had already done that himself.

The ghost then drifted back to the tunnel wall and went back inside the fissure in the rock.

"Thank goodness you know how to resist Imperious, Harry," said Hermione.

"You didn't do a bad job of it yourself, Hermi," grinned Harry.

"Oh not really," she replied, "I only stayed because you were still there ..." she trailed off, getting flustered. Harry looked at her quizzically, and then called to the others, "Lets carry on down the tunnel."

The tunnel still sloped gently downwards, and twisted both to the left and the right for the next 150 yards or so. It became very narrow in places, so narrow that they had to turn sideways to squeeze through. In other places, the ceiling dropped to only two feet above the floor, so they had to crawl on their stomachs to get through.

The tunnel then turned sharply to the left and after another twenty yards they entered a low, circular chamber - about ten yards in diameter. There were three exit tunnels, one straight ahead and one on each side, exactly opposite each other.

The four walked into the middle of the chamber and looked around, "This is not a golden section problem," said Hermione, "I can see nothing that indicates that."

"So is it 'The Light of the Righteous' rule?" asked Ginny, "There's no light here."

"I really don't know," said Harry as he slowly let out his breath.

The four sat on the floor to think, looking around the chamber seeking inspiration - none came.

After a few unproductive minutes of thinking, the four jerked up their heads at a low moaning sound. It was quiet at first, but then became gradually louder. It was coming from the left-hand tunnel.

They stood up in nervous anticipation and looked at the dark entrance of the tunnel. The grey, shimmering form of a young woman of about twenty-five appeared from the darkness and looked at the four.

She hesitated, and then sat down on the floor, her moans of despair filling the small chamber. She continued to wail pitifully and then Ginny cautiously approached her, "Whatever's wrong?" she asked, looking sorrowfully at the ghost.

The young woman looked up at Ginny's face and said, in a halting pitiful voice, "I am lost in this terrible labyrinth. I became separated from the man I love and I can't find him. He had a map and I know that he's found his way out, but I can't follow. I don't know which way to go."

"How long have you been down here wandering these passages?" asked Ginny.

"For a long time, such a long time," the ghost replied, "Do you know the way out? Can you help me?"

"Wait just a moment. I'll speak to my friends," Ginny walked back to the others, "We've got to help her - she's in such torment. I think we should lead her back to the entrance to the labyrinth."

"But what about our quest?" Ron exclaimed, "We've come so far, we can't turn back now." He looked at Harry and Hermione questioningly.

"We can't leave her like this," said Hermione, "I agree with Ginny. We've got to help. I wouldn't be able to live with myself if we just left her."

"Look, I'll take her back," said Ginny, "and you three go on with the quest."

Harry thought for a moment, "No Ginny, that won't work. How would you get across that raging underground river? No, we'll all have to go back together. We'll just have to come back tomorrow and start again."

Ginny looked gratefully at Harry and then turned and walked back over to the young woman, who had been sniffing pitifully as they spoke.

"My friends and I have agreed to help you. We'll take you back to the entrance of the labyrinth. Come on, come with us." Ginny beckoned to the ghost with her hand and turned to go back up the tunnel.

"Wait," said the ghost, "What about your quest?"

"That can wait - there'll be another day for that."

The young woman then stood up and her demeanour changed. Hers was no longer the pose of a pitifully distressed young woman but of a noble lady, full of confidence. "You are filled with compassion for those less fortunate than yourselves," she said in a loud, purposeful voice, "You have proved that you have within you the light of the righteous. Continue your quest and find the secret." She raised her arm and pointed to the exit tunnel straight ahead. She turned around then, and walked silently back into the left-hand tunnel, leaving the four friends gaping after her.

"It was another test," said Harry, "like the last ghost we met."

"And we've passed with flying colours, so it seems," said Hermione, "Come on - lead on Harry."

Harry led the others into the tunnel, which sloped downwards and bore gently to the right for about sixty yards or so. He called a halt as he spotted something up ahead. "Put out your lights," he said over his shoulder as he extinguished the light from his wand. Darkness enclosed them, but up ahead they could see a very faint light reflecting from the left-hand wall of the tunnel. They moved cautiously forward, their wands still extinguished, and as they rounded the bend they saw the tunnel exit no more than ten yards away. And beyond, the light was much stronger. They walked out into a large, natural cavern, which was bathed in a cacophony of coloured light. They looked with awe at the reds, blues, greens, oranges, lilacs and every hue in between. It was beautiful. They looked up at the walls and ceiling, some thirty feet above, and marvelled as a million pinpricks of light sparkled, bathing the cavern in a breathtaking glow of colour. There were numerous stalagmites and stalactites, each one a beacon of beauty as they glowed with their strange inner light.

"Oh, it's so beautiful," breathed Ginny, "What are those lights?"

Hermione walked over to the rock wall, "They're fluorescent minerals, Ginny," she said, "They give off light when they're stimulated by something - usually ultraviolet radiation. But there's none of that here so deep underground. It may be some sort of chemical or mechanical action - perhaps the rock strata are moving very slowly against each other."

"Whatever it is," said Ginny, "I could watch this for ever. It's amazing."

Ron and Harry, meanwhile, had made a circuit of the cavern and walked back to the spellbound girls, "There're no exit tunnels," said Harry, "But come and look at these," he motioned to the centre of the cave and led the way.

"Look at these pools," said Harry. They looked at the floor of the cavern to see several roughly circular natural rock pools, each about five feet across, filled with clear blue-green water. There were four of them randomly spread around the centre of the cavern.

"Look over there," said Ginny, "there's another one." They walked over to see yet another rock pool, about ten yards out from the centre.

Hermione looked around the cave floor, turning as she moved her gaze from left to right. "There's more of them," she said. They walked around the cave and found another three pools, each one further from the centre than the one before, but scattered around in a seemingly random way.

"What do you think, Hermi?" asked Harry, "Are these pools another part of the puzzle?"

"I don't know, Harry," she replied, still looking around her, trying to fathom some order from apparent disorder. They sat down on the floor and looked at the display of coloured lights, as Hermione lapsed into deep thought. She looked up at Harry with the light of inspiration in her eyes, "I wonder?" she breathed quietly to herself, "Harry. Can you transform to your Animagus eagle and take me up to the ceiling?"

"Uh, yes of course Hermi - but what for?"

"I'll tell you that later. Something's just struck me about these pools," she said.

She pulled the rucksack from her back and pulled out a blank piece of parchment and a pencil, "Ready?"

"Are you going to keep your eyes open this time?" asked Ron with a smirk. Hermione glared at him with disdain.

"Ok, Hermi," said Harry, hesitating, "You're not going to choke me this time are you?"

"I'll try not to Harry," she said with mounting impatience.

Harry transformed and Hermione climbed onto his back, clutching the soft feathers at the back of his head. Harry rose majestically and flew around the cavern before rising to its highest point. He flapped his wings slowly as he hovered close to the ceiling.

Hermione tightened her grip with her legs as she gingerly took her hands from Harry's neck. She placed the parchment on top of his head, holding it with her left hand, while she gazed at the floor and started drawing.

"Ok, Harry. I'm finished," she said after about five minutes. Harry glided back to the ground and Hermione jumped down from his back. He immediately transformed and stared at his friend.

"Well?" he said.

"I think I'm onto something," said Hermione as she sat on the floor and spread the parchment out in front of her. She had drawn roughly, the shape of the cavern and, more carefully, the eight rock pools they had found. She studied her drawing for a while and then picked up the pencil once more.

"Look at this," she said as she started drawing. She placed her pencil on the pool at the centre of the drawing then started to draw a curve. When she had finished, she had connected all

eight pools with the curved line. Then she rummaged in her rucksack and brought out the ruler. She started to measure the distances between the pools in the drawing, along the curved line, and did various calculations on her calculator.

When she had finished, she looked up at the others in triumph, "Yes! Solved."

"Uh - would you mind letting us in on the secret, Hermi?" said Ron looking confused.

"It's a spiral, Ron. Look at the curved line," she looked back up at her friend.

"It looks just like those diagrams of spiral galaxies you see in Astronomy books," commented Harry.

"That's right, Harry. It also looks like the swirls on the shell of a snail. Don't you see? It's the golden section again. Remember what I told you before? It's the most common and powerful geometric force in nature. Each of these pools is a multiple of phi away from each other, radiating from the centre."

"So does that mean that one of these rock pools is the way forward?" asked Ron.

"Yes, of course it is," she replied.

"But which one, Hermi?" asked Ginny.

"That's easy, Ginny. We go to the starting point, where the spiral starts to grow - the centre of creation. The rock pool at the centre," she pointed to the pool in her drawing.

She then got up and walked over to the pool and looked down. The others quickly followed. "Uh, it looks pretty deep," said Ron as he gazed into the blue-green water, "How do we know how far it goes - will we be able to hold our breath before we come out of it?" He looked at the other three nervously.

Harry sat on the floor beside the pool and started to take off his shoes, "There's only one way to find out. I'll go down first and see where it goes. You three wait here 'till I come back."

Ginny looked frightened and knelt beside her friend, "But Harry, it could be dangerous. You might drown"

"If this is the right pool, I don't think anything bad is going to happen - I should come out the other side fairly quickly, I think."

"But there's no need to take any chances, Harry. Here, tie this around your waist," Ron reached into his rucksack and pulled out a long piece of thin rope, "There's nothing like being prepared," he said.

"What made you bring a rope, Ron?" asked Hermione, a look of respect in her eyes.

"I don't know, really," he replied, "I thought it just might come in handy."

Harry finished taking off most of his clothes, just leaving his shorts, and piled them at the side of the pool. He took the end of Ron's rope and tied it around his waist, "If I tug on the rope three times, pull me back - but quick." He picked up his wand and muttered "*LUMOS*."

As he turned to go into the pool, Hermione put her hand on his bare shoulder and Harry looked into her concerned, hazel-brown eyes. She flushed slightly and whispered, "Please Harry - be careful."

Harry grinned and then took a deep breath and jumped, feet first, into the pool. The others watched as he quickly sank out of sight.

Harry opened his eyes and looked around him as he slowly sank further. All he could see was the solid rock wall. He looked down but all he could see was inky blackness, the light from his wand not making much impression in the cold water. There was no sign of the pool levelling out at all. He must have gone down about twenty-five feet before he became aware of the first tendrils of fear forcing their way into his mind. He fought a deep desire to tug on the rope and be pulled to safety. He had a far stronger desire - of wanting to succeed, not to give up.

Another five feet - then his toes touched rock. He looked down to see that the pool walls ended in a flat rock floor. He started to panic - where was the exit? He looked about him frantically, circling in the water. He went through two full revolutions before he saw it. In the light from his wand, he could just make out the shape of a tunnel entrance right in front of him. He reached out with his hand, and felt the cold air as it emerged from the water. He leant forward, pushing with his feet against the floor of the pool, and suddenly emerged into a tunnel. He gasped loudly as he sucked in the sweet air, bending and leaning his arms on his thighs until his breathing returned to normal. He straightened and looked back behind him. He was amazed to see a wall of water, seemingly suspended in front of him, covering the tunnel entrance. He marvelled at the magic that must be in play to keep the water suspended like that - he was even more amazed to find that he was completely dry, even his shorts.

He was literally pulled from his reverie by a sudden tugging at the rope around his waist. He realised that Ron and the girls must be worried, after all they didn't know he could breathe now. He tugged on the rope once, and then walked back through the magical entrance and into the pool and rose, without any help from himself, back to the surface. He emerged to see three very worried faces looking at him. He heaved himself back into the cavern and stood up. He felt himself and found, once again, that he was completely dry.

"Where the bloody hell have you been?" asked Ron with panic in his voice, "we thought you'd drowned."

He grinned at his friend, "No, although I did start to get worried at one point." He turned to Hermione, and was startled to see tears in her eyes, "Don't worry, Hermi - you were right. This is the exit. And it's magical, look - I'm dry. It's just like an elevator. You don't have to swim or kick your legs - you just let it take you to the bottom or the top."

As he dressed, he told the others what he had found and what they could expect when they went into the pool, "I'll go first again. But follow, one at a time, straight behind me. I'll direct you to the tunnel entrance when you reach the bottom. Don't forget to take a deep breath first, and don't panic!"

He jumped back into the pool and sank straight to the bottom, where he waited for his friends. First came Ron, and as he sank to the bottom, Harry caught hold of his arm, twisted him around, and gave him a firm push in the back, propelling him in the direction of the tunnel entrance. Ron was quickly followed by Ginny, then Hermione, who both got similar treatment as they were heaved through the water into the tunnel.

Harry joined his three friends and they all sat on the floor and rested while they regained their breath, looking around the tunnel. It was obviously man-made, the rock being scarred by ancient tools, now long gone. It was about seven feet high and five feet wide, and the floor was fairly smooth. It curved down and around to the right, into the blackness beyond.

After a few minutes, they started down the tunnel, which after a short distance straightened out. Harry and Ron led the way, the tunnel being wide enough to allow them to walk two abreast. When they had walked only about fifty yards, they emerged into a narrow, natural cavern, about thirty yards long and eight yards wide. They looked in wonder at the milky-white limestone formations that decorated the sides of the cave, looking like buttresses supporting the rock walls.

They walked into the cavern, about half way, and raised their lit wands high to see if there were any exit tunnels. They saw one exit at the far side of the cavern, opposite the one they had just come from, and one on each side, directly opposite where they were standing.

"This is nothing to do with the golden section," said Hermione.

They continued to look about them and then Ron stiffened and looked intently towards the tunnel at the far end of the gallery, "Can you hear that?"

They all strained their ears and could just make out the sound Ron had heard. As they watched, it grew louder. It sounded like something heavy was being dragged along the ground. They stepped slowly back towards the tunnel they had just come down, never taking their eyes from the opposite tunnel entrance.

The sound grew louder, and then they looked in horror as a very large snake, about forty feet in length and twice as thick as a man's body, come slithering towards them. It opened its mouth to show two large incisors protruding from its top lip. Ron, Hermione and Ginny backed away more quickly as the snake approached, but Harry stood his ground.

The three looked on in fear as the snake approached Harry and opened its mouth. A loud hissing noise accompanied the flicking forked tongue. Harry, of course, understood what the snake was saying.

"Which way do you follow?" asked the snake.

Harry hissed back, "We follow the rule of gold and the light of the righteous."

"What do you seek?" hissed the snake.

"We seek the truth and the secret of Rhedae," answered Harry.

"Who are you?"

"I am the Anima Summa, and the other three are my brave and trusty helpers."

The snake looked at Harry with its beady eyes, appraising him, before hissing, "Your way lies straight ahead - go to the tunnel from whence I just emerged. Take great care - there is danger ahead."

With that, the snake turned to its right, and slithered into the left-hand tunnel.

"What did it say?" asked Ron as the others ran up to Harry.

"It asked me a few questions. And I suppose I gave the right answers, because she told me to take that tunnel at the far side of the cavern."

"She?" asked Ginny.

"Oh yes," he answered, "The voice was definitely female. She also said that there is danger up ahead. We'd better be on our guard from here on."

They walked across the chamber and entered the tunnel, Harry and Ron again to the front. The tunnel was again wide enough to take them two-abreast. They cautiously looked around every twist and turn the tunnel took as they made slow, but steady, progress. After about fifty yards, Harry and Ron both stopped at the entrance to another chamber. Harry turned and gestured to the girls to stay in the tunnel while he and Ron went to investigate. The two boys slowly walked into the chamber, peering around intently. When they were sure that there was no danger present, Ron called for the girls to join them.

They looked around to see an almost perfectly square chamber, obviously man-made, with four exit tunnels leading from it - one at each corner of the square.

"Hermi - is this another golden section problem?" asked Harry.

"I don't think so, Harry. There's nothing I know concerning phi relating to squares with points at all four corners."

"We'll just have to wait and see what happens. The snake said there was danger - I wonder if there's something dangerous going to come out of those tunnels? Hermi - you and Ginny go back and wait in the tunnel we just came down. We'll stay in the middle."

"But shouldn't we all wait in the tunnel?" said Ginny.

"No," answered Harry, "if there's no one inside the chamber, maybe nothing will happen at all and we'll just wait forever."

Hermione and Ginny retreated to just inside the tunnel and waited, looking at each of the four exit tunnels intently. After fifteen minutes, nothing at all had happened and the four started to get impatient.

"Hermi, Ginny - come back please," called Harry.

"We're getting nowhere fast," he said as they approached, "There's only one thing I can think of - we've got to explore all four tunnels. There's no other way. Ron - you and Hermi take the

one in the near left corner. Ginny and I will take the one in the far left. If we don't find anything, we'll check the ones on the right. Check your watches - I make it 3.38 pm. Now whatever happens, we'll meet back here in twenty minutes - not a minute longer. Ok?"

The other three checked their watches and nodded in agreement.

"And be careful - don't take any chances. Run back here and wait if there's the slightest hint of any danger." With that, the four split up and went their separate ways.

Harry and Ginny found themselves in a fairly narrow tunnel, which allowed them to walk only in single file - Harry to the front. The tunnel frequently twisted in different directions and sloped slightly up all the way. The two proceeded with great caution, checking all the while for any fissures in the rock on either side, in case there was something hiding there.

They had been walking only for about four minutes when they heard a faint noise in the distance. They stopped, listening intently, and then heard it again.

"That's Hermi's voice," said Harry with alarm, "They must be in trouble. Come on."

Harry and Ginny ran as fast as they could back down the tunnel and quickly re-entered the square chamber. They ran along the wall and went into the tunnel that Ron and Hermione had gone into five minutes earlier. The sounds of shouting and screaming were now much louder, and they increased their speed but stopped dead when they came to a small cavern, lit with flaming torches in rusty iron holders. The scene before them resembled one of those old fantasy movies - Jason and the Argonauts came to Harry's mind in a flash.

Ron and Hermione were against the left-hand wall, back to back, trying to fight off about a dozen skeletons. The bony nightmares were brandishing thick clubs, trying to get close enough to clobber the two teens, who were pointing their wands and yelling '*FLIPENDO*' with increasing frequency.

The curses were hitting the skeletons, flinging them back and breaking bones, but they would immediately repair themselves - the bones joining back seamlessly - and rejoin the fray.

Ron and Hermione were getting tired and the skeletons were getting closer to them all the while. One got close enough to Ron to swing its club, which just scraped the side of Ron's head. He staggered back, putting his hand to the graze and feeling the warm blood. It was at this point that Ginny and Harry weighed into the fight. Ginny started flinging *FLIPENDUS* curses from the cavern entrance, while Harry circled slightly to the left, towards his two friends. Harry felt a powerful rage come over him as he saw his friends in such great danger, and this was reflected in the power of his magic.

'*FLIPENDO*' he raged as he aimed at one of the skeletons that came up to him. The denizen was struck by a powerful bolt of energy and went hurtling to the back wall of the cave, where it splintered into a thousand pieces. It tried, but couldn't manage to reintegrate itself. After a short while, it gave up the struggle and collapsed into a pile of white powder on the floor.

Again and again, Harry sent a skeleton to a crumbly end, and after about five minutes of fighting, twelve piles of white powder littered the floor of the cave.

Hermione rushed over to Harry and flung her arms around his neck, "Thank God you came," she cried, hugging him tightly, "I thought we were finished there."

Harry slowly caught hold of her arms and eased her gently away from him. He looked into her eyes and said softly, "I'm sorry, Hermi. It was my fault. I nearly got you and Ron killed." He looked miserably at Hermione and Ron.

"But how, Harry?" wailed Hermione, "It wasn't your fault. How could it be?"

"I should never have split us up like that," he said, "Our strength is in our combined powers, and when we split up, our strength was weakened. I should never have done it." He continued to look dejected as Ron and Ginny joined Hermione and placed their hands on his back in support of their friend.

"Come on, let's go back to the cavern," said Ginny, "We need to rest before we check the other tunnels."

The four trooped slowly back and flopped onto the ground. The fight had drained their powers more than they realised and they needed to take time to recuperate.

The four chatted quietly amongst themselves as they rested, and Harry looked at his watch. "It's twenty past four," he said, "What do you think is happening outside? Do you think they've been able to hold off Wormtail for nearly four and half hours? I'm worried about them."

"Don't forget what that voice said, Harry. I'm sure they're all right," said Hermione gently.

Harry sighed and started to get to his feet, "Come on, time to go. Let's try the tunnel Ginny and I went down first - all of us together this time."

As he stood, he caught a movement out of the corner of his eye, "What?" he yelled as he turned to his right. The others jumped to their feet and turned in the direction Harry was looking. Above one of the tunnels - the one in the near right corner - was a shining Templar cross - the cross paté glowing in a silvery light.

"The light of the righteous," breathed Hermione. That fight with the skeletons must have been another test - a test of our strength and bravery - and we're being shown the way now that we've come through it unscathed."

"Are you all up to going on?" asked Harry as he looked at his slightly bedraggled friends.

"Lead on, brave Sir. We shall follow," said Ron in his best theatrical voice.

Harry and Ron led them into the tunnel, which curved first to the right and then sharply to the left, and then continued straight ahead for about forty yards. They slowed as they saw a chamber open up just in front of them. It was faintly illuminated with an eerie green glow. They cautiously walked into the cavern, which was roughly oval in shape and there were a lot of boulders strewn around on the floor. It was about thirty yards long and twenty yards wide, and about twelve feet high.

Hermione and Ginny let out a yell of protest as they bumped into the backs of the two boys. Ginny looked at her brother, who was staring to his right, eyes wide and mouth agape. She followed his gaze and saw what he was looking at. Her hand shot to her mouth to stifle the scream that threatened to emerge.

There was one exit from the cave, off to the right-hand side. The problem was that a very large and hideous creature, which looked like an overgrown scorpion, guarded it. It had a flexible tail, which bent back over its deathly-white body, and ended in a nasty looking stinger, which dripped a greenish coloured liquid.

The creature was facing in their direction, its two huge front pincers opening and closing with sickeningly loud clicks, moving its head from side to side as if searching for something. It made a sudden movement towards them, and they rushed back inside the tunnel from which they had just emerged, eyes wide and panting with fear. The creature was too large to follow them into the tunnel, and after a few moments it turned and went back to guard the exit tunnel.

When they had calmed down a bit, Ron voiced what the others were thinking, "I don't think that's a boggart, so how are we going to get past it? I don't like the look of that stinger one bit!"

"Harry," said Ginny shakily, "why don't you try to stun it or something? Those Flipendus spells you threw at the skeletons were pretty powerful."

Harry nodded and crept slowly to the cave entrance. He saw that the monster was back guarding the exit. He took a deep breath and stepped purposefully into the cave, aiming his wand at the creature's head.

"*STUPEFY*," he shouted. A powerful red beam of energy left his wand and hit the creature squarely on the head. The creature shook its head and then turned in Harry's direction, ready to charge. Harry's eyes went wide as he saw that the spell had no effect, and rushed quickly back into the tunnel just before the monster reached him.

"It didn't work," he said to the others, "it just bounced off. That thing must be one powerful beast!"

"Perhaps you didn't use your full power, Harry," said Ron.

"I gave it everything I had, Ron. No, I think we've got to use something other than brute force to get past it."

"But what?" asked Ginny.

"I think we've got to use our heads, Ginny," said Hermione, "We're going to have to use a bit of guile to get through this one."

Harry nodded and looked thoughtfully at his friends, "Up to now, the monsters we've encountered have had some sort of weakness. We've just got to find out what this thing's weak point is and exploit it."

"What do you suggest we do, Harry?" asked Hermione nervously.

"I don't know, Hermi. Look, I'll inch slowly into the back of the tunnel - but not so far that I'll get trapped - and you three keep an eye on it and see if you can spot anything."

"Oh, be careful, Harry. That thing looks deadly to me", said Ginny fearfully.

Harry slowly edged to the tunnel entrance and peeked cautiously around the right-hand corner. He looked back and called the other three when he saw that the scorpion was back at the exit tunnel, about fifteen yards away. He slowly and quietly stepped over to the left-hand corner of the entrance and started to tip toe around the back wall of the cave. Ron, Hermione and Ginny took his place at the right-hand side and looked intently and unblinking at the monster.

Harry kept his eye on the creature as he slowly edged his way along the back wall. The creature, meanwhile, started moving its head from side to side, as before, as if it were trying to detect a target with some sort of internal radar. Apart from that, it made no movement from its position in front of the exit tunnel

Harry had gone about four yards around the back wall before something happened. He was so intent on keeping a close watch on the creature that he didn't spot the small rock in front of him. With a loud crash, his left foot hit the rock and he tumbled forward, just saving himself from falling by bracing his hands against the rock wall.

The creature's head snapped up and it charged - straight at Harry. Hermione let out a cry of warning and the scorpion hesitated, stopped in its charge, and turned its head towards Hermione. The hesitation was all that Harry needed. He turned and rushed back towards the other three. The monster was quick - very quick. It raced after Harry, its stinger hovering above its head, primed to strike.

As it closed on him, Harry made a desperate dive and flung himself into the tunnel, just as the stinger crashed down with awesome power just behind his right foot.

His friends helped Harry to his feet, and he dusted himself off. "Phew!" he breathed, "that was too close for comfort. That thing's as fast as lightning."

He looked expectantly at the others, "Well - did you spot anything?"

"Yes," said Ginny, "Did you notice that it didn't attack until you tripped over that rock - and it stopped and turned when Hermi yelled? I think its blind and it detects its prey by the sound it makes."

The others looked at Ginny, and then at each other, "It makes sense," said Ron, "Hang on a minute - I'll take a closer look."

Ron slowly walked to the entrance to the cave and peeked around the corner - he saw that the creature was back in its guarding position at the exit tunnel, moving its head from side to side in the now familiar way. Ron looked closely at it for about a minute and then went back to the others. "Ginny's right. I got a close look at its head - it hasn't got any eyes. It's blind, all right."

"So we've found its weak spot," said Hermione, "but how are we going to use it? It makes up for its lack of sight with keen hearing and blistering speed."

After a few moments, Harry looked at his friends, "I think I've found a way - I'll tip toe around the back of the cave, keeping my eye on the ground, this time, so I won't trip over anything. You three move very quietly towards the exit tunnel, but not so far that you can't get back if anything goes wrong. When I get to the far end, I'll make a noise and draw it away. When it attacks, you three move quietly and go down the exit tunnel. When you're all inside, make a noise to distract it away from me."

"That's fine Harry," said Ron, "except for one big flaw. We'll be in the tunnel and you'll still be stuck outside with no way to follow us."

"I've thought of that, Ron. I'll creep back to the entrance tunnel and throw a rock to the far side of the cave. When it charges over, I'll make a dash for the exit."

"So why don't we do that now, Harry?" asked Hermione, "There's no need for you to risk going over to the far end of the cave."

"Uh - I hadn't thought of that." Harry looked shamefaced at Hermione, then bent down, rummaged around on the floor, and picked up a rock about the size of a cricket ball. "Ready?" He walked to the tunnel entrance, followed by the others, and then flung the rock at the far corner.

They all tensed themselves, ready to make a dash for it, as the rock sailed through the air and hit the far wall with a resounding crash. They looked at the creature, waiting for it to race over to the sound. It jerked up its head - but made no move.

"What!" exclaimed Ginny.

"I think it must be able to tell the difference between the sound of its prey and the falling of a rock," said Hermione, "It makes sense, really. There must be a lot of small rock falls in this cave - look at how the floor is littered - so it's learned to tell the difference in the sounds."

"That's great!" groaned Ron, "What do we do now?"

"We stick with my original plan," said Harry with determination.

"No Harry, you can't!" exclaimed Hermione in disbelief, "You'll be stuck here, and there's no point in us three going on without you - you're the Anima Summa!"

"Look, Hermi, I'll find a way - I'll think of something. Look on the bright side - at least we'll be three-quarters of the way there."

"Harry!" she said, full of exasperation. She looked at the others for support but they just shrugged their shoulders.

"If Harry's made up his mind," said Ron, "you should know that there's nothing that will stop him. And I can't think of any way to get past that thing - can you two?"

The two girls shook their heads glumly.

"We'll wait for you just inside the exit tunnel," Ron said to Harry, "Just shout if you want us to do anything to help. We won't go on without you."

Hermione and Ginny both hugged Harry as he made to go towards the cavern entrance. He nodded at them both, and then crept slowly into the cave, keeping his eyes firmly peeled on the ground in front of him. In a few minutes he had reached the far left-hand end. He waved to his friends and motioned for them to start to edge towards the exit tunnel.

He waited until they were within about 10 yards of their goal and then waved and motioned for them to stop. He stamped his feet and started shouting. "Hey! Over here - come and get me."

The creature jerked his head in Harry's direction and rushed towards him, its pincers held high and snapping in anticipation of the kill. When it arrived, it struck - the stinger was a blur as it plunged down and - buried itself in the soft floor of the cave. Harry was no longer in that spot. As soon as he'd finished making a noise he'd silently edged away and was now standing about three yards away from the monster - standing stock still against the rock wall.

The creature jerked its stinger out of the floor and again moved its head from side to side in confusion, trying to detect where the target was. Harry was afraid even to breathe. He concentrated on holding his breath and not moving a muscle. He looked at the hideous form, so close to his left-hand side, willing it to move away. Then he heard a commotion over by the exit tunnel. He moved his eyes to the right and saw Ron stamping on the ground and yelling, "Come on you ugly bugger - we're over here!"

The scorpion jerked around, its hind part just missing Harry, and sped off with frightening speed towards Ron, who dashed back inside the exit tunnel to join the two girls. Harry let out the breath he'd been holding and relaxed his muscles - the plan had worked, and his friends were safely inside the tunnel.

By this time, the scorpion had once more taken up its familiar pose, guarding the exit. Harry thought about what he could do. He slowly and quietly edged back the few yards to the place he'd been standing when he'd attracted the creature towards him. He looked about him and up at the ceiling, just six feet above his head. His jaw set with grim determination - then he silently transformed into his Animagus form.

He looked at the creature with his keen eagle eyes, steeled himself, and then started stomping on the floor and screeching loudly. The scorpion charged. When it was just five yards away, the eagle pushed powerfully with his legs and glided silently to the right. Harry was careful not to flap his wings for fear of drawing the creature towards him. He then veered to the left and floated quietly towards the exit and landed just outside.

He looked back over his wings, now folded, and saw that the monster had heard his claws land on the floor and was charging back towards him, just fifteen yards away. Harry just had time to transform back and dive into the exit tunnel. He was lucky that his legs were spread as he dived. As his friends caught hold of his arms and hauled him inside the tunnel, the stinger crashed down between his legs. The creature reached out its right pincer and made a grab for Harry's foot - but the vice-like claw closed on empty space - Harry had been pulled just out of its reach.

He looked gratefully at the three as the adrenalin flow started to ease. He was breathing rapidly and his face was red from the excitement of it all.

"Am I ever glad to see you three," he breathed as he was hauled to his feet and grabbed with great relief by his three friends.

With a last look back at the hideous creature at the tunnel exit, the four quickly continued on their way, this time with Ron and Hermione in the lead, and Harry, with Ginny holding under his arm, bringing up the rear. They walked for fifty yards or so before the tunnel bent sharply to the left.

Harry looked at Ginny as she stopped, "What are you doing, Ginny?"

"I'm mapping this turn on the parchment, Harry. Haven't you noticed me doing it before? I've been drawing our progress from the time we left the church. I've been pacing out the lengths of these tunnels, and judging the angles of the twists and turns, trying to draw a fairly accurate map of the labyrinth."

"Sorry, Ginny. I've been up front till now so I hadn't noticed."

She finished drawing on the parchment and grabbed Harry's arm as they followed Ron and Hermione. Harry looked and could see Ginny silently moving her lips as she counted the steps she was taking. After another fifty yards, Ron and Hermione stopped. "There's another cavern just ahead," Ron whispered over his shoulder, "Stay here - I'll go and see if there's any nasty surprises in there."

After a few moments, Ron called back, "It seems to be empty, and I can't see any monsters or anything."

The others sighed with relief and followed Ron into the cavern. They raised their lit wands and looked around them.

"They're up to something. It's too quiet." Remus called over to where Sirius was taking cover just inside the Calvery.

"Yes, you're right. They haven't sent any curses for at least five minutes," he answered, "Charlie, Ceri, Nadine - keep your eyes peeled. Something's going on out there."

They all looked in the direction from where the last curses had been flung, but could see nothing. "Do you think they've given up?" Nadine said to Ceri.

"No way, Nadine. They've got too much to lose to give up - like their lives. `You Know Who' isn't a very forgiving person. No - they're up to something all right."

They continued to survey their surroundings, trying to detect a sound, a movement, a disturbed blade of grass, anything that would give them a clue concerning the strategy of their opponents. They could detect nothing.

His heightened state of alertness lent Remus a sixth sense. He didn't hear anything and didn't see anything. He just felt a prickling at the back of his neck.

He moved quickly to his left - and that saved him from serious injury, or even death. As he turned, he spotted Wormtail about thirty yards away - and the ball of energy that he'd sent hurtling at his exposed back. It caught Remus in his upper right arm and flung him into the stone monument behind which he'd been sheltering. He let out a groan as the pain laced through his right arm, and his wand dropped from his stiffened fingers.

Wormtail had earlier transformed to his rat Animagus and run silently behind the church to come up behind the defenders. He'd transformed back to see Remus Lupin's back exposed to his gaze. He couldn't believe that his target had managed to avoid the full brunt of the Flipendus curse, which he'd aimed at his exposed spine, but he grinned evilly as he saw that Remus was now at his mercy.

He pointed his wand squarely at Remus' chest and took careful aim. He started to utter the killing curse when he was thrown to the floor as a hastily-aimed spell from Sirius' wand exploded just in front of him, sending clodges of earth into his stomach. Wormtail immediately returned to his rat form and ran quickly behind the church.

The activity signalled the start of a furious bout of curses from the other Death Eaters, who had used Wormtail's distraction to change their positions. Charlie was forced to move from his now vulnerable hiding place, and he ran frantically towards Remus, just avoiding the curses that followed his progress.

He dived behind Remus' cover and looked at the ashen face of the DADA professor as he clutched his right arm, "Where are you hit, Remus. Are you ok?"

Remus groaned through the pain, "I think my arm's broken. I was lucky it wasn't more serious."

In response to Sirius' urgent calls, Charlie told him that Remus' situation, and that he wasn't badly hurt. Sirius grunted with relief as he flung yet another spell at the Death Eaters. "Charlie - see if you can get behind the church. I saw Wormtail's rat run there after his attack."

Charlie dashed to the side of the church, and eased his way around the corner to try to find Wormtail. There was no movement at all. Wormtail had escaped back to his bunch of thugs.

Charlie returned to Remus' side, "Can you fight on, Remus?"

"Yes, I can use my left arm - I won't be very accurate or powerful but at least I can make a nuisance of myself as far as the Death Eaters are concerned. You go and find a better spot - I'm ok here."

Charlie looked around and saw a good place just this side of the Calvary - behind an old horse-mounting stone. He dashed over during a lull in the firing and settled down behind it.

It was another natural cave, roughly circular, about thirty yards across and twenty feet high. They examined the walls, ceiling and floor but could find no exit tunnels at all. The only light in the cavern came from their wands. Apart from a few stalagmites jutting up from the ground, the cavern was otherwise featureless - just bare rock walls all around, immovable and challenging in their starkness.

"Do you think we've taken a wrong turn back there somewhere?" asked a dejected Ron.

"I don't think so," said Hermione, "Why would that scorpion be guarding the last exit if there was nothing to protect. No - I'm sure we've come the right way."

"Hey - perhaps this is the place," said Ginny suddenly, "The end of our quest - and we've just got to wait for something to happen."

"Well," said Ron, "If we've got to wait, I'm going to wait in comfort. Let's finish our food - I'm starving!"

"Again!" Hermione exclaimed with disbelief. She looked at her watch, "Oh, it's five o'clock - I didn't think it was that late."

"See Hermi," he replied, "We haven't eaten for ages." With that he flopped down on the ground and started to take out the remaining food parcels from his rucksack. He was soon joined by the others. Despite her earlier incredulity, even Hermione felt hunger pangs once she started to think about the food that was left. And after all, it was tea-time.

"Any more pizza left?" mouthed Ron through a great chunk of Cornish pasty.

"No Ron," answered Ginny, "You polished it all off the last time we stopped for food. Don't you remember?"

"Oh yeh - just checking in case you held some back."

After they finished all the food, Hermione heated the remaining two flasks and poured them all a hot cup of tea. They all felt a lot better after that - they were now ready to resume their journey. They all stood and again looked about the cavern, "We must have missed something," said Harry, "Let's spread out and examine the walls more closely - there's got to be an exit somewhere."

They each picked a section of the cave to explore and slowly walked around the walls, stopping from time to time to examine even the smallest flaw in the rock. After ten minutes, they gave up. "There's nothing here," groaned Harry, "What're we going to do now? I don't fancy going back to face that scorpion again!"

"All we can do is wait, Harry," said Hermione, "Something will turn up I'm sure."

They all sat back down on the ground and waited, looking around the cavern for any sign. They waited for another fifteen minutes, and then, high up on the wall, they spotted movement.

"Look," shouted Hermione, "Do you see that?"

High up on the wall, just beneath the ceiling, they saw 7 circular lights dancing slowly around each other. There was no sound, just the slow movement of the seven lights.

"It must be something to do with the light of the righteous," said Hermione, "But the last time we saw that it was a silvery-white colour. None of those lights are silvery or white. See if you can detect any pattern in their movement."

After a little while it was evident that the movement of the lights was completely random.

Suddenly, Ginny slapped her thigh in recognition, "Of course - look, it's a rainbow. It's the seven colours of the rainbow - Red, Orange, Yellow, Green, Blue, Indigo and Violet. What do you think it means?"

The three looked at Hermione, hoping for some answer. She studied the lights again for a moment and then brightened, "Yes. I think I've got it!" She turned to her friends and started to explain her idea.

"Think of the sunlight shining through a prism - it disperses the white light into the seven colours of the rainbow. The sun is the source - the white light - and we've got to find the source of these rainbow lights. It's got to be the light of the righteous."

She looked at the others, who nodded their agreement with her assessment of the situation.

"I think we've all got to do this together - at the same time. We've all got to be involved in finding the source. Point your wands at the lights, and when I nod, say the incantation 'Ostendo Origo.' Ok?"

"Where did you get that one from Hermi?" Asked Ron.

"It means 'Show the source.' I read it in that book you bought me for my last birthday. Ready everybody?"

She looked to see that they were all looking at her, and pointing their wands at the moving lights. She nodded her head.

'*OSTENDO ORIGO*' they all shouted at the same time. They watched in fascination as four silvery blue lights sped towards the top of the wall. As they neared the lights, they merged into a single, powerful beam of energy and then struck dead centre - in the middle of the seven lights.

They waited in anticipation as the lights immediately stopped moving. They then started to move again, but this time in towards each other - to the spot where the spell had just struck the wall. The seven lights merged into one - and a silvery-white light shone brilliantly. It then slowly moved across the top of the wall to their right, and then down. It stopped about five feet above the ground, immediately to their right.

"Come on," Harry said to the others. He walked up to the waiting light, held his wand against it and uttered '*ALOHOMORA*.'

He stood back as the silvery light intensified, then started to get smaller and smaller until it was just an intense spot on the wall in front of them. Then it disappeared all together, and in its place, a small hole appeared. It became larger and larger until an exit tunnel was revealed.

Harry looked at his companions and then stepped into the tunnel. The others quickly followed, holding their wands above their heads to show the way. Ron moved up and walked alongside Harry.

After a short while, the tunnel curved sharply to the left, and then straightened. It meandered along for about 150 yards before curving sharply to the right again. They stopped and saw that it gently bent around further to the right.

"I don't believe this," gasped Ginny. She had just finished mapping the latest leg of the tunnel.

"What?" asked Ron.

"We're nearly back to the place we started. Much deeper than that, but I estimate that if we continue to move to the right, we'll be underneath the church again in about a hundred yards."

"Are you sure, Ginny?" Said Harry.

"Well, I tried to be as accurate as I could, and I'm probably out a bit. But we're not far from the church - deep under the church."

They looked at each other dubiously, and then continued down the tunnel. Harry called a halt when he detected a faint yellowish light coming from somewhere up ahead. "Kill your lights," he whispered.

The yellow light was slightly brighter when their wands were extinguished.

"I think I recognise this place," said Harry suddenly, "It's very similar to the tunnel I was in when I had those dreams."

The others looked at him hopefully, "Perhaps we're getting close to the secret," said Ginny.

They walked slowly forward, the glow getting slightly brighter with each step, and then they suddenly emerged into an irregularly shaped cavern.

They looked around and immediately saw the source of the yellow light - six ancient-looking torches were perched in their holders around the rock walls. The torches were not lit with any natural fire - it was definitely magical. The eerie yellow glow seemed to soak into the rock and the walls themselves added to the glow.

They all jumped at the sound of a loud, challenging voice coming from the far end of the cavern, over to the right.

"STAY. HOLD STILL. DO NOT MOVE."

They looked and saw an amazing sight. Harry gasped, "It's the one in my dream - the one that's been calling to me."

In the yellowish gloom, they saw a tall, very old man dressed in the uniform of a Knight Templar. His large and lethal-looking sword was raised above his head. He slowly approached, and they inched backwards, back towards the tunnel. He stopped about ten yards from them, and said in a strong, authoritative voice, "WHO ARE YOU AND WHAT DO YOU SEEK."

Harry stepped forward and replied, "Lord Knight, greetings. I am the Anima Summa that you have summoned, and these are my 3 brave and trusty helpers. We seek the truth and the secret to aid us in our task against the Dark Forces."

He looked at the knight as he waited, hoping that he'd said the right things.

The knight looked at Harry, and then beyond him at his three friends, appraising them with a practiced eye. He lowered his sword to his side and then spoke once more, "YES. I SEE THAT YOU ARE WHOM YOU SAY. WELCOME. I HAVE WAITED LONG. BUT I DID NOT EXPECT ONES SO YOUNG. FOR SUCH A TENDER AGE YOU MUST INDEED BE BRAVE TO HAVE COME SO FAR THROUGH THE LABYRINTH."

He then seemed to pull himself taller, and raised his head slightly, "I AM THE SPIRIT OF JACQUES DE MOLAY - THE LAST GRAND MASTER OF THE KNIGHTS TEMPLAR - THE DEFENDERS OF THE SECRET OF RHEDAE. IT HAS BEEN MY TASK, FOR THE LAST EIGHT HUNDRED YEARS, TO GUARD THE SECRET OF RHEDAE. BUT I WAS ALSO GIVEN ANOTHER TASK ALL THOSE YEARS AGO. I WAS AWAKENED FROM MY SLUMBER OF VIGIL BY A GREAT EVIL - AN EVIL THAT THREATENS THE PEACE OF THE WORLD. IT IS MY DUTY TO SUMMON THE ONE WHO CAN DISPELL THIS EVIL - THE ANIMA SUMMA. AND SO YOU HAVE COME. MY TASK IS NOW DONE AND I CAN YET AGAIN SLUMBER. BUT YOU CANNOT. YOU ARE JUST BEGINNING YOUR JOURNEY."

He paused, and then continued, "YOU ARE ABOUT TO WITNESS THE SECRET OF RHEDAE."

He walked back over to the wall and raised his sword once more. He placed it against the rock and uttered something in an unfamiliar language. The rock seemed to shrink away from the tip of the sword, and then parted to reveal a long corridor. It stretched ahead darkly, beyond the vision of the four friends who had walked up alongside the knight.

The knight gestured with his sword, "COME. GO TO THE CHAMBER AND SEE THE SECRET OF RHEDAE"

He stood to one side as first Harry, and then the other three, entered the corridor and walked slowly into the darkness.

Chapter 10 The Secret of Rhedae

Harry and his three friends didn't light their wands as they slowly walked down the corridor into the darkness ahead. The floor of the tunnel was lit by the yellow backlight coming from the chamber behind them. The floor was smooth, although covered by the dust of millennia. Their footprints were the first to disturb its symmetry in a very long time. They were all feeling humbled, the weight of privileged responsibility giving them an air of reverence as they walked.

They had gone about fifty yards before they came to a halt. They sensed that they had just entered a space that was larger than the tunnel. The light from the Knight's cavern behind was now all but gone, but before any of them could raise their wand to give some illumination, a faint silvery glow suddenly sprung from the ceiling above. They looked up to see the rock ceiling, smooth and arched like the ceiling of a gothic cathedral, glowing with an inner light. They looked about them to see a circular chamber, about ten yards in diameter. Equally spaced around the walls hung four long shields. They each had a white background surrounding a red Templar cross.

"Oh, look at the floor," breathed Ginny with awe.

They all looked down to see that the floor of the chamber was covered in a vast mosaic, each piece no bigger than a thumbnail. The colour of the mosaic was predominantly milky white, with darker coloured pieces fitted to form a pattern. They walked to the side of the chamber so that they could better see the design.

Around the outside of the floor was a circle of black, inside which was the outline of a Templar cross in red, the arms of each of the four extremities just touching the ends of the circle. At the centre of the cross was another circle, again in black, and inside this circle was a strange golden shape. It was a very simple shape - just two curved lines meeting at one end and then arcing out and then back in on themselves, and crossing each other just before they touched the other end of the inner circle.

"I've seen that design before," said Hermione, "but I can't think where."

They looked back up from the floor and gazed around the chamber. To their right, and exactly placed between two of the shields, were two columns stretching from the mosaic floor to the arched ceiling. They could see that they were made of polished milky-white marble, which reminded them of those found in a Greek or Roman temple. Hermione couldn't resist. She walked up and stretched out her hand to feel the smooth beauty of one of the columns.

"It's lovely," she breathed, caressing the stone like she would the delicate wing of a butterfly.

"Do you think we have to do something?" asked Ron, "I mean, I can't see any secret here."

"I don't know, Ron," answered Harry, "I think this is one of those times when we have to be patient. We know we're at the centre of the mystery. We'll just have to wait until something happens."

"It is a thing of beauty, is it not?"

The four jumped at the sound of the soft and gentle voice that came from behind them. They turned and saw a glowing silvery-white form in the shape of a man, but no clear features were visible - they were hidden by the intensity of the light that surrounded him. The four teens had to shield their eyes as they looked directly at the apparition.

The spirit was looking at Hermione as he spoke, *"These two pillars were brought from the inner temple of Jerusalem by my trusty servants, the Knights Templar. That was once my resting place until it came under threat. Before that, my home was the great repository of knowledge in the Library of Alexandria. That was destroyed, also. Since those times, Rhedae has been my home."*

"Wh ... who are you?" whispered Hermione in a small and nervous voice.

"I am the spirit of the Light. I have been known by many names through the ages. Now I am known as The Secret, but I have also been known, among other names, as the Holy Grail and The Anointed One."

Hermione looked at the spirit, and then down at the design at the centre of the mosaic. A look of awe came over her beautiful features as she raised both hands to cover her mouth, and she then sank slowly onto the floor, not moving her eyes, which were now wet with tears, from the spirit.

"I see that you know me, child. You know my other names. You are the one of intellect - the one who has helped, along with the brave," the spirit turned and looked at Ron, "and the one with compassion," he looked at Ginny, "bring the Anima Summa into my presence."

He finally turned and looked at Harry. He, together with Ron and Ginny, had watched and listened to the words - but they didn't understand. They didn't know what Hermione knew.

"I am a repository of ancient wizarding knowledge, one of three that still exists throughout the world. That knowledge was gathered by one far greater than I and shared between the three guardians. It is our duty and honour to share this knowledge with the true defender of the light - the Anima Summa. That is why you have been summoned here - to witness those secrets."

The spirit slowly walked over towards Harry and looked him directly in the eye and spoke, still with that soft and gentle voice, "Allow me to see into your heart and mind so that I may be completely sure that you are indeed the true Anima Summa."

Harry blinked nervously, but nodded his assent. The spirit raised both arms and reached out towards Harry. He placed one hand on his head and the other over the centre of his chest. Harry could feel nothing, apart from a warm glow coming from the hands that were on him.

After a few brief moments, the spirit dropped his arms, "Yes. You are the true Anima Summa. You are young, but strong and brave. You are filled with the qualities of your three helpers - they are your right arms - your pillars - your conscience - your friends. With these three, you are rich beyond all the treasures in the world. You are part of them as they are part of you.

"You have three more tasks to perform, Anima Summa - three quests that will prepare you for the final conflict with the Dark. I can help with the first, but you must find your own way with the other two. Those two tasks will see you journey to other ancient places in the world. You

must seek out the secrets and mysteries of my two fellow guardians and feed on their council. Only then will you be ready to face your destiny.

"But first, you must seek out the one who will be your closest ally. Your first task is to find your Anima Summa."

Harry's eyes opened in astonishment, "But .. but ..," he stuttered, not able to get out the words.

Ron came to his rescue. "But we thought that Harry was the Anima Summa. There can't be two of them can there?"

The spirit smiled gently and looked at Ginny and then Hermione, "These two know. They are both aware that there is another. But do not be angry with them. They were charged to keep their silence, a silence that served a purpose. You, Anima Summa, were not to learn of this until you came to me. I will now tell you of the prophecy."

"Th .. the prophecy?" Harry asked.

"It has been pre-ordained that in times of great peril, when the Dark threatens to overtake the Light, an Anima Summa will arise in the midst of the world. He must seek out his soul mate - his true Anima Summa - and join with her. They must then, together, seek out the mysteries and secrets of the ancient world and gain the secret magical power to challenge the Dark. You have completed the first task, and now you must complete your second before starting the final two quests."

"But .. but what about my friends? They have helped me up to now, won't they be permitted to help me in the other tasks?"

"Yes. They will always be with you. They are part of the prophecy. But you must also be joined by your Anima Summa. You cannot gain the power if she is not by your side. She has been specially chosen, from the moment of her conception, just three months after you were conceived."

"Who is she? Who is the other Anima Summa?" Harry asked, still in a daze.

"That I do not know. Only you can find her. Your three friends cannot help you in this task. It is for you alone."

"But how? How will I know if a girl is the right one?"

"That is where I can help you," the spirit reached into his shining robes and pulled out two objects. He reached over and held them out towards Harry, "Take these. They will help. They will know when the time is right for you to meet your Anima Summa. It may be today, tomorrow, next week, next month. I cannot tell you when, only that these will guide you. Make no mistake, when the time is right and you meet the right one, they will help you know it beyond any shadow of a doubt."

Harry reached out and took the objects from the spirit. He looked down and saw two silver rings nestling in his hand. They each had a design on their outer sides - a Templar cross and

the same design as the one at the centre of the circle in the mosaic. "How will they help?" he asked.

"When you have been guided to your Anima Summa, you must place one of the rings on her hand, and the other on yours. This will seal the bond. They will also help you in your final two tasks. The sealing of the bond will activate certain ancient knowledge, which I am about to give you. This knowledge will be held in the back of your mind, and that of your Anima Summa, only coming to the surface when you are needful. Be warned, the knowledge I impart is very ancient and powerful. Be sure to use it only to do good, and never for any selfish or personal act. Come, stand over my symbol - there at the centre of the mosaic."

Harry, still in somewhat of a daze, slowly walked to the centre of the floor and stood over the strange design. He looked up to see the spirit raise his right arm and point his hand, palm upwards, in his direction. He felt a strange, tingling sensation as a bright, silvery light came from the spirit's palm and surrounded his head and shoulders. It lasted only for a few moments, and then it was over. Harry looked about him, confused. He searched through his mind, his memories, trying to find the knowledge that had just been given to him. But he couldn't recall anything - except just one thing that hadn't been in his mind before. He looked at the spirit, his eyes wide and staring, searching for the features that would confirm what he now knew. His legs felt weak and he sat on the floor, as Hermione had done before him.

"You now know my other names also," said the spirit smiling, "It is true."

"Harry?" Ginny went over and looked down at him, "Who is he?"

"It .. it .. it's ..," he trailed off, speechless and looked over at Hermione, who had regained her composure, although she still looked as stunned as Harry.

"Ginny, Ron," she said quietly, "That design in the middle of the floor - I remember where I'd seen it before. It was in Rome, when I went there on holiday a few years ago with my parents. We visited the Catacombs beneath the Pantheon. That symbol was everywhere - it's a fish, the sign the Christians used in the early days. The name 'The Anointed One' - it was translated from the Greek. It means Christ. Here, standing before us, is Jesus Christ."

"What?" breathed Ron in disbelief, and looked at the spirit, "You're Jesus? But how? Weren't you crucified and then rose into heaven?"

Jesus smiled at Ron and then at Ginny, who was now sitting at Hermione's side, holding her hand, *"Yes. I am he. But only one aspect of the man you know as Jesus. I exist in more than one place and more than one time. I am here, but I am also where you call Heaven. I am now, but I am also then and also will be."*

"I .. I don't understand," said Ron softly.

"You don't understand now, brave one, but you will. At some time in my future you will see the true nature of things. But it is not for me to explain the workings of the great one at this time. You must find your own way to that."

"But didn't you teach everyone, two thousand years ago, how to get to heaven?" asked Hermione, now looking intently at the spirit. She had a deep and urgent desire to know. That was her nature.

"Yes child - but not in the way that you have been told by others. I have been saddened, over these long years, to see my teachings changed in a subtle way. But it is not really the fault of the Liar. He was merely doing what he knew best to ensure that the world knew of me and what I represent. He knew that to preserve the word of Light for the future, he had to make my history appeal to the powers of the time - mighty Rome. Without their acceptance of the word, it would not have survived to this day. So he was merely misguided, as well as good."

"Who was The Liar?" Asked Hermione.

"You will find out in the years to come. I will now merely point you in the right direction - read the scrolls unearthed at Qumran - read the Dead Sea Scrolls. Hidden in those scriptures is the identity of The Liar - but do not look on him unkindly."

Jesus' eyes grew harder and his voice lost its soft and gentle quality, "Reserve that look for those powerful and greedy men who have taken my name in vain. They have twisted my teachings for their own ends and have carried out atrocities beyond belief in my name."

His voice softened once more, and he stepped back towards the far wall, "What you have heard and seen this day must remain a secret. Do not reveal it to anyone except that noble and dearly-loved servant of the Light - Albus Dumbledore. Listen to him, Anima Summa. He will be a source of great help and council in the times ahead. He is your friend and has vast knowledge - heed what he offers. Know one more thing - the rings you have been given must be returned to me when you have completed all your tasks. They are yours only for a fleeting moment in the long march of time. They must be preserved for a time when the next Anima Summa seeks the secret. I pray that it will be a very long time until that happens, because it is Darkness that spawns the quest.

"It is time for you to leave this place," Jesus looked at Ron and smiled, *"And I know that one of you is in great and urgent need of sustenance."*

Ron's face coloured as a low rumble came from the depths of his stomach, "Sorry," he whispered as he put his hands over his belly. Jesus turned and faced Harry.

"You must now go and start your first quest to find your Anima Summa. Remember, you must do this alone - do not seek help. Great powers will be bestowed on you both, but only if you accomplish the task alone. Use only the power of the rings. I bid you God speed and farewell, sons and daughters of the Light."

Jesus then seemed to shrink and the light faded. Before he vanished from their sight, the four looked at the true face of Jesus.

"Wait, please," shouted Harry, "I've got a lot more questions. I need to know what the last two tasks are..." But he was only speaking to empty space. Jesus had gone.

The four friends gathered together at the centre of the chamber and put their arms around each other, seeking comfort in their closeness. They stayed like that for several minutes, trying to come to terms with what they had just witnessed.

Finally, Ron spoke, "Well. That was something else! He didn't look a bit like those paintings and statues you see in churches, did he?"

"Did you feel the power coming from him?" said Ginny, "It was like being bathed in something incredibly good. It's difficult to describe."

"Yes, Ginny," said Hermione, "I think we all felt that."

"So now we know the secret of Rhedae," said Harry, "But I've got a lot more questions than answers. When and how did you know about the other Anima Summa, girls?"

Ginny and Hermione looked at each other sheepishly, and then Ginny replied, "We found out when we were doing the research into the message from your amulet. We're not the only ones who know, Harry. Professor Dumbledore found out last summer, when he received a prophecy from the centaurs. His inner circle knows, as well - including Sirius, Professor Lupin and Ceri. We were sworn to secrecy - we were told that it could cause you harm if you found out the full truth before you were ready for it."

Harry nodded, "I can accept that. But where do I go from here?" He thought for a moment, "Do you know any girl with a birthday of 31st October 1980?"

"Harry," Hermione answered quickly, "Even if we did, we can't tell you. You heard Jesus - we aren't permitted to help. I'm sorry but you have to do this without us."

Harry nodded gravely, "That's what worries me. I'm never at my best when it comes to girls - they're a mystery to me." He looked at his two female friends, "You don't seem to think the same way as us boys."

"Amen to that," said Ron with feeling.

"We'll support you as much as we can, Harry," said Ginny, "We'll always be there for you if you want to talk. But just don't expect us to find your Anima Summa for you - we can't. Only you know your innermost feelings - listen to them. And don't forget the rings."

Harry looked down - he was still clutching the rings tightly in his hand. He put them safely in his trouser pocket and sighed, "Well I suppose we'd better get back."

Ron looked at his watch, "It's half past six. Six and a half hours we've been down here, and it'll take us at least two hours to find our way out of the labyrinth, even with Ginny's map."

"Oh lord," said Harry looking sick, "The others outside the church. They can't have been able to hold off the Death Eaters this long. I hope they're all right. Come on, the sooner we start, the sooner we'll get back."

The glow dimmed as they rushed out of the chamber, and winked out just as they entered the corridor. The four hurried along, drawn by the yellow glow up ahead in the Knight's cavern. They emerged and saw that Jacques de Molay was waiting for them.

"I SEE FROM YOUR FACES THAT YOU HAVE SPOKEN TO JESUS," his resounding and authoritative voice filled the cavern.

"Yes, Sir Knight," replied Harry, "And we now know the tasks ahead. But we are worried for our friends' safety above ground. They are facing great evil to protect us and we've been so

long in the labyrinth. We have to get back to them before they are over-whelmed - if they haven't been already."

"DO NOT WORRY, ANIMA SUMMA. YOUR FRIENDS ARE STILL SAFE. WAIT THERE AND I WILL RETURN YOU TO THE CHURCH, WHICH IS DIRECTLY ABOVE." He turned and held his sword against the corridor opening, again muttered in a strange language, and the rock wall closed, leaving no sign that an opening had been there only a few moments before.

He turned back to the four, "I WILL CONTINUE TO GUARD THE SECRET, AND I AWAIT YOUR RETURN - FOR YOU SURELY WILL RETURN TO BRING BACK THE RINGS OF JOINING. NOW GATHER TOGETHER BEFORE ME - STAND CLOSE."

They did as they were asked, and huddled together in front of the Knight, who lifted his sword and held it over their heads.

"FAREWELL BRAVE SOULS. MAY THE GREAT ONE GRANT YOU SAFE PASSAGE IN YOUR QUESTS"

He then quietly uttered something in the same unfamiliar language that he'd earlier used, and a blue light emerged from the tip of his sword, covering all four in its radiance. They closed their eyes against the glare, and then blinked them open - and found themselves standing in the church, on the white square in the aisle that had, six and a half hours before, allowed them entry to the labyrinth.

Hermione looked at her watch - her eyes curious. And she gasped. "Look - it's only just after twelve thirty. That's only half an hour since we left!"

"That's impossible, Hermi," exclaimed Ron as he checked his watch, as did the other two. They all looked at each other with disbelief.

"Now we know what that voice meant by 'Time will be equalised.' The time we lost on our last visit has been returned to us on this."

"That's powerful magic, Hermi," said Ron, "This is beyond me."

They all suddenly turned towards the entrance to the church as they heard the sound of a curse exploding against the wall outside.

"You two stay here," said Harry quickly to the girls, "Ron - let's go to see what's happening outside."

The two boys rushed quickly to the back of the church and turned into the porch leading to the main door. They saw Ceri and Nadine, her face and blouse streaked with blood, peering outside and shouting spells as they aimed their wands to the left of the church. Harry went over and touched Ceri on her arm.

She turned round and looked at them with surprise, "What's the matter, Harry. I thought you were starting on your journey below ground. What's happened?"

"It's a long story, Ceri. We've completed the quest, but we'll tell you all about it later. Right now we need to get out of this mess. Is anyone hurt?" He looked at Nadine's head.

"Nothing serious, Harry. Nadine's got a cut on her head, and Remus has a broken arm. Apart from that, we're not doing too badly."

"Where are the Death Eaters holed up?" asked Harry.

"Some are over to the left of the church, in the churchyard, and some are further to their right, just this side of that line of trees."

Harry cautiously looked outside and saw the lights of the curses flung by the Death Eaters. He quickly pulled his head back inside and thought for a few moments. He then turned to Ceri; "The girls will help you here at the door. Ron and I will get behind them and attack from there. Can you get the word to the others outside?"

"Yes - but be careful you two. Don't take any risks - do you hear me?" She looked intently at the boys, who nodded gravely and turned to go.

"Wait," Ceri called, "How are you going to get behind them?"

"Oh we'll fly," said Ron, "Or at least, Harry will - and I'll hitch a lift."

The two boys rushed back into the church and spoke to the girls, who hurried back to help Ceri and Nadine. Harry and Ron walked over to the church bell tower and looked up into the cavernous heights above.

"Ready?" asked Harry. Ron nodded and then saw the large golden eagle appear before him. Ron climbed onto Harry's back and leaned forward to hold his arms loosely around the eagle's neck.

Harry kicked off and flew up to the top of the bell tower, being careful to avoid the bell ropes, and alighted behind one of the big bells. They peeked around the side of the bell and surveyed the scene before them. They could easily see Remus and Charlie, each crouching behind a large stone close to the entrance to the church. Sirius was a little further off to the right, at the edge of the Calvery. They quickly spotted the Death Eaters from their elevated position, crouched in an arc behind tombstones and trees at the edge of the graveyard.

Ron pointed to the line of trees at the back of the cemetery, "I think that's the best place to land, Harry, behind those trees. But it'll be a good idea if you take a circular route, around to the right and close to the ground, so that we won't be seen."

Harry nodded his head and moved to the right-hand side of the tower, ready to glide down towards the ground. Neither he, nor Ron, saw the tall young girl, about Harry's age - perhaps a little younger, watching them intently from one of the top windows of the Villa Bethania. She raised her hand and brushed her long white hair back from around her lovely face, craning forward to look intently at the eagle. Her beautiful vivid green eyes lit up with a flash of recognition as she stared at Harry piercingly. A far-away look then seemed to come over her, as the eagle and his passenger dropped from the tower towards the ground and then levelled out and skimmed the grass as they moved swiftly to the right.

Harry flew in a wide arc, and approached the line of trees from the back end, the branches and leaves masking their approach from the Death Eaters. Harry landed behind a particularly large tree and transformed after Ron quickly jumped down from his back. They both peered around the side of the tree and saw three of the black-robed figures not thirty yards away, fully exposed to their gaze. The other eight were further over, closer to the church.

"You take the nearest and I'll take the second one. We'll both have a go at the one furthest away," Harry whispered in Ron's ear. Ron nodded and held up three fingers, and counted down to begin their attack.

The boys stepped around the tree and aimed their wands at their targets. *'STUPIFY'* they both shouted together. The two Death Eaters dropped like stones, and the third looked up in surprise, just in time to see two beams of light hit him in the chest. He followed his two black-robed friends to the floor, unconscious.

"Potter's behind us," Travis shouted. All the other Death Eaters turned and stared, seeing Harry and Ron run back behind the cover of the large tree. The distraction allowed Ceri and Hermione to rush from the front of the church and join the three men outside, the five forming a far more solid and aggressive line. They added to the Death Eaters' confusion as they sent spell after spell at their positions.

Wormtail started to feel panic, but steeled himself to the fight, "Travis - you take three others and go after Potter and his friend. We'll hold the others off here."

Travis beckoned to the three closest to him and they started crawling along the ground in the direction of the large tree. Harry could see what was happening, and he and Ron fired off spells, trying to slow the Death Eaters' approach.

Deprived of more than half their firepower, Wormtail and the remaining three stood no chance against the seven clustered in and around the church. Soon, two of the Death Eaters lay stunned on the ground, and Sirius and Charlie started to move forward, outflanking Wormtail and the other Death Eater. With Travis and the other three effectively pinned down by Harry and Ron, their position soon became hopeless.

Ron stupefied one of the four, and Sirius placed Wormtail's companion in a full body bind. Wormtail finally gave in to his panic and Apparated back to the cave. When he saw him disappear, Travis quickly followed, leaving the other two to face overwhelming odds, and they were soon over-powered by Sirius and Charlie.

All nine Death Eaters were quickly rounded up and bound securely inside the line of trees, to await the arrival of the French aurors. Sirius knew that such a lot of magical activity would attract their attention, and he didn't have long to wait.

"Nadine - are you all right?" Charlie had rushed over to the church door and held the French girl by the arms as he looked at her with concerned eyes.

"Yes, don't worry Charlie - I'm ok - honestly. It's just a little cut. Ceri stopped the bleeding and I'll soon get it fixed properly."

Ginny just stood watching the two with a smirk on her face.

Harry and Ron joined Hermione as she bent over Remus, who was carefully cradling his arm.

"You need to get that seen to quickly, Professor," said Hermione, "We'll ask Nadine if she knows of a good wizarding nurse close by. You can both go together to get your injuries fixed."

Remus nodded and looked up at Harry, "Did you find the secret, Harry?"

"Yes Professor, we did. But we'll tell you more about that later. But Hermione's right - I'll go and ask Nadine to get you to a nurse."

When three French aurors arrived about five minutes later, Nadine explained what had happened, and they took charge of the prisoners, promising to get in touch with their counterparts in London to come to collect them.

"Any problems, Nadine?" asked Sirius.

"They weren't very happy, Sirius. They asked me to tell you that they should have been told about any possibility of trouble on their patch. And they're not too pleased about the tidying up they'll have to do - altering the memories of the priest and a few of the locals who saw the fight."

"Oh well, c'est la vie - isn't that what you say?"

She laughed at Sirius' terrible French accent, then called to Charlie, "Charlie - will you help me take Remus to get his arm fixed? I know a witch just down the bottom of the hill who's a good nurse - she lives in a little cottage just outside the village of Couiza. It shouldn't take long." She glanced at Ron, whose forehead looked a bit of a mess, the congealed blood bearing witness to the ordeal he had gone through beneath the church, "You'd better come too, Ron. You need to get that cut fixed."

"Uh, Ceri," said Ron tentatively, "Before we go, have you got any food left?"

Ceri laughed, "Yes, Ron. We've got all of it left - we didn't have much time for a lunch break you know."

"Great," shouted Ron, "That means you've still got the pizza!"

"Go and get your head fixed, Ron", said Ceri laughing, "We won't eat anything until you get back, I promise."

Charlie, Remus, Ron and Nadine drove off in the Land Rover, leaving the others to rest until their return.

While they were waiting, Hermione looked over at Harry, standing on his own outside the Calvery, deep in thought. She walked over and gently touched his arm, "Are you ok, Harry? You look a bit worried."

"Worried is not the word for it, Hermi. I'm bloody petrified. I've just been told by none other than Jesus himself, that I've got to find a girl - and not just any girl, mind you, but my Anima

Summa - the one I'll probably spend the rest of my life with. I just can't get my head around that, Hermi."

She looked with sympathy at her friend, "It'll take time for you to come to terms with it, Harry. I did - uh, I mean both Ginny and I did when we found out about it. Try not to worry too much."

Harry looked at his friend with confusion, "I'm sorry, Hermi. I've got to get some air. I'll be back in a little while." He transformed and kicked off powerfully from the ground, soaring up into the clear blue sky. The feeling of freedom helped and he felt his problems slipping away as the air raced over his body and wings. Out over the countryside he flew, high above the sun-baked fields and vineyards.

After a while, his keen eyesight spotted the Land Rover as it made its way back up the hillside to the village of Rennes-le-Chateau, and he knew that he should return to join his friends. He landed at the side of the church and transformed. Again he didn't see that he was being watched. The white-haired girl looked at him intently with her vivid green eyes. She'd seen the eagle and she'd seen the boy. Her face took on a look of enchantment and she sighed deeply. As Harry walked around to the front of the church and out of sight of the beautiful young girl in the villa, she stepped down from the window, lay on her bed and closed her lovely eyes. A smile lit up her beautiful face as she dreamt.

Harry walked up to the others just as Hermione was explaining about the time being equalised. "Ah there you are," said Sirius, "We were worried about you."

"Sorry, Sirius. I just had to be by myself for a while. I've got a lot to think about."

"Yes, I know Harry. Hermione told us that you've found out about your Anima Summa. Sorry I couldn't say anything about it before."

"Don't worry, Sirius, I know."

"So what's the secret of Rhedae then?" Ceri asked.

"Uh, sorry Ceri," said Hermione, "We can't tell you. It has to remain a secret. All we can say is that all four of us, and the other Anima Summa when she's been found, have to go on another two quests. We don't know what they are yet, but I'm sure we'll find out when the time's right."

"Can't you tell us any more?"

They all turned to see Nadine, who had just asked the question, with Remus, Ron and Charlie standing behind her.

"Sorry, Nadine. I've just been telling the others. We can't reveal the secret. We've been sworn to secrecy."

"Oh, I'm so disappointed. I've wondered about the mystery of Rennes-le-Chateau ever since I can remember."

"Believe me, Nadine," said Ginny, "You wouldn't believe us even if we could tell you. But we can tell you about the dangers we came up against in the labyrinth."

"Hang on a minute," said Ron testily, "First things first. Where's the pizza, Ceri?"

They all laughed and then helped Ron polish off the remainder of the food. The adults looked on incredulously as the teens told them of their journey through the maze of tunnels and caverns, marvelling that they had come through one ordeal after another, and now talked as if it had just been a stroll in the park!

Later, as they drove back to Carcassonne, the four friends were preoccupied, deep in thought. The adults recognised that they had been through a harrowing experience, one that possibly no one else on the planet could expect to go through, and they kept quiet, giving them time to work things out in their own way.

Harry couldn't help thinking about his immediate task. The more he thought about it, the more fearful he became. He would rather face a hoard of monsters in caverns than one single girl - girls - they made him uneasy, unsure of himself. How was he going to cope?

Ron also thought about the task facing his friend - and sympathised, but at the same time grateful that it wasn't himself that was facing it. He was also looking forward to the two quests he would be going on with his friends. The excitement of the labyrinth was still racing through his blood.

Ginny was more reflective. She felt deeply for Hermione - she knew what she would be thinking at that moment. Harry was so close to her and yet so far away. Ginny knew that she couldn't help; she could only give her support.

Hermione's thoughts were varied and opposing in the emotions they elicited. She was full of excitement at what she'd witnessed, and couldn't wait to read the Dead Sea Scrolls. She also relished the puzzles and mysteries that would no doubt need to be solved on the final two quests. She was also full of despair - the boy she loved was sitting next to her, not thinking about her, but of another girl, one he possibly hadn't even met yet. She wondered and worried how she'd be able to cope seeing Harry with his Anima Summa - the girl that he would love above all others.

The Grangers greeted the four as they trooped into the kitchen late that afternoon. Nadine had thoughtfully driven slowly, and in a circuitous route, back to Carcassonne, giving the youngsters time to settle down after their ordeal.

"I didn't expect you home so early," said Millie, "Did you find what you were looking for?"

"Yes, Mum," said Hermione, "I think we've got everything we need now."

"Good," said Arbuthnot, "You can relax for the next two days - just laze about and recharge your batteries for next term - you're going to be busy with your OWLS."

"Don't remind us," groaned Ron.

"Well Ron," said Millie with an amused grin on her face, "are you ready for something to eat yet?"

"Mrs. Granger, I'm always ready for that. Uh - have you got any of that pizza left?"

Later that evening, the four sat outside the tent in the garden, talking quietly.

"I wonder what those last two quests will be," said Ron, "I know we've got to find the other two guardians, but where will they be?"

"Jesus said that they'll be in ancient places," said Ginny, "And we'll have to solve their mysteries. What do you think, Hermi? How many other ancient and mysterious places are there?"

"Oh, there's a lot, Ginny, far too many to try to guess where the two we want will be. And they're all over the world, Europe, Africa, Asia, the Americas, and some ancient places haven't even been found yet - some are known only from ancient writings, and others are merely legends."

"But what sort of places are they, Hermi?" asked Harry.

"Well, let's see. There's Egypt, of course - the ancient sites dotted along the Nile are full of mystery. Then there's Sumeria - the present day Iraq. It's even older than Egypt, and just as mysterious. That ancient Mesopotamian civilisation came before the Assyrians and ancient Babylon arose from their ashes. Did you know that some of the oldest stories in the Bible are based on Sumerian legend?"

"Legend?" exclaimed Ginny, "So does that mean they're not true?"

"Not necessarily, Ginny," answered Hermione, "I said they were based on legend, not myth. Myths are mostly fiction - the product of some ancient scholar's fertile imagination, but where legends are concerned, there's always some grain of truth hidden in their depths."

"Well I hope we don't have to go there," said Ron, "I don't think that Saddam Hussein will be too pleased about us poking about in his country. Any other places, Hermi?"

"There's the mysterious civilisations of the Indus Valley, in modern day Pakistan; the ancient places found in South America, like Tiahuanaco in Bolivia, and loads of places in Peru and Mexico. Then, of course, there's El Dorado - the legendary city of gold."

"Gold?" said Ron, his ears pricking up, "where's that, Hermi?"

"Ron, if we knew where it is, it wouldn't be a mystery any more! The Spanish invaders, and countless people ever since, searched for it, but no one's ever found it. It's still out there somewhere - perhaps in the jungles of Brazil, who knows?"

"Oh," said Ron, deflated.

"There are so many other places. It just goes to show how much there is to be discovered out there. It's fascinating." Hermione had a dreamy look as she stared, unseeing, into the darkening sky.

"What about some of the other legends?" asked Ginny.

"Again, too many to recount," Hermione replied, "but the most mysterious of them all, of course, is the legend of Atlantis."

"But that's just myth, Hermi," exclaimed Harry.

"Maybe, Harry, and maybe not. The ancient Greek philosopher, Plato, first wrote about it. He wrote about an even more ancient Greek scholar, Solon, who was told about Atlantis by temple priests in Egypt. Most historians today say that Plato invented the story, just to illustrate a philosophical point - the fall from grace of a once powerful state - but a lot of other people think that his story is true."

"And where did he say Atlantis could be found?" asked Ginny.

"He only said that it was 'Beyond the pillars of Hercules.' Now that could be anywhere, but most think he's referring to the straits of Gibraltar - it guards the entrance to the Mediterranean Sea. So that would put Atlantis where it's name suggests - in the Atlantic Ocean. But others have argued that it's actually in the Mediterranean, some say it's in the Caribbean, and some have even suggested that it's buried beneath miles of ice under the Antarctic continent."

The four became quiet for a few minutes as they contemplated those ancient and mysterious places that Hermione had spoken about. There were just too many to second guess where they'd have to go on their quests.

Ginny broke the silence, "Harry, have you been able to remember any of the ancient spells Jesus gave you?"

"No, Ginny. I've tried and tried but there's nothing. I'm beginning to wonder if they're there at all!"

"They're there, Harry," Hermione whispered, "Don't forget, he said that you wouldn't be able to access them until you seal the bond with your Anima Summa, and even then only when you need them."

"What did he mean by that, do you think?" asked Ron.

"I think it means that Harry and .. and his Anima Summa will only be able to remember a spell when it's needed. For instance, if they find themselves in danger, something to help them get out of it will be placed from their subconscious into the conscious parts of their minds where they'll be able to use it."

Harry let out a great sigh, "This is all very well, but I've still got this first quest hanging over my head - the Anima Summa. I just don't know where to start."

Hermi reached out and squeezed his hand, "Don't get too despondent, Harry. You'll do it, I know you will - and don't forget you've got the rings to help you."

Harry gazed deeply into Hermione's eyes, and felt a wave of great affection come over him. 'What's that?' he thought to himself, 'Hermi's so .. so...'

He mentally shook himself and squeezed her hand in return, "I know, Hermi. And I know that you'll be there for me, all three of you. I want you to know that when I find my Anima Summa, it won't affect the way I feel about you - all of you."

Hermione was immediately reminded of the earlier thoughts she'd had on the trip back to Carcassonne, and she retrieved her hand slowly as she felt tears start to sting her eyes. Here was the boy she loved, holding her hand and speaking to her about friendship, and all she wanted to do was fling her arms around his neck and kiss him to death.

"I .. I've got to go to the bathroom," she finally whispered and then got up and walked quickly back to the cabin.

"What's wrong with Hermi?" Harry asked.

Ginny, of course, knew what was wrong with Hermione, "I think it's just the reaction of what happened today." She stood up and followed her friend into the gite, hoping that she'd be able to console her.

The next morning, Hermione, Harry and Ron sat at the table in the kitchen finishing their breakfast. Ginny had already finished and had gone into the garden and slipped into the copse of trees at the back. She had a glint of determination in her eye as she waved at everyone, looking around for her brother.

Ginny made a beeline for Charlie, when she spotted him in the tent, and dragged him over to a quiet spot at the edge of the little grove of trees.

"You had a bit of a shock yesterday, Charlie - you know, when you saw the cut on Nadine's head. I've never seen you so worried."

"Well, I thought she might have been badly hurt, Ginny. I felt bad enough about dragging her into all this danger, and it would have been my fault if anything ..." he trailed off looking worried at what might have happened.

"Oh, I see. So you feel very protective of her?"

"Well, yes - as I said, if it wasn't for me, she wouldn't have been placed in danger."

"And that's all? You're concern has nothing to do with the way you feel about her?"

"What do you mean, Ginny?"

"Oh, I think, Charlie, that she's spotted what I could see the last few days we were together."

Charlie turned as he heard the voice behind him, "Demont! How on earth did you get here?"

Demont Blanc grinned, "Nadine left a message with one of the French aurors yesterday - Giles is a very good friend of mine. He told me where you were and a good spot where I could Apparate." He paused and looked at the pretty red-haired girl, "And this must be your sister - there's no mistaking that colouring."

Charlie snapped out of his surprise, "Sorry. Demont - this is Ginny, my scheming little sister. Ginny, this is Nadine's scheming big brother, Demont. Come on, I'll introduce you to the others."

As the three walked back to the clearing in the middle of the grove, Ginny leaned over and whispered in Demont's ear, "So you've seen it too?"

"Yes," he whispered back, "I think we need to get our heads together later, don't you think?"

Ginny grinned and nodded, glad that she was going to get some help in her quest to get Nadine and Charlie together.

After the introductions were over, they all sat drinking coffee. Nadine sat next to her brother, her arm looped through his. Sirius told Demont what had happened the previous day and that the quest was now over.

"Yes - it all fits now," said Demont, "just before I came here, I had a report that the creatures seem to be back to normal. Have you been able to detect any emanations lately, Nadine?"

Nadine looked surprised, "Well, in all the excitement, I didn't check. Hang on a minute." She closed her eyes and let her mind reach out, trying to pick up on the vibrations. "No. There's nothing! They've stopped."

"Just as I thought," said Demont, "Well, Charlie. I suppose this means that your job is finished. I suppose you'll be going home now?"

"Oh no, Demont. Not yet," Charlie's panic was obvious to everyone, "I mean, we've still got to monitor the dragons for a while to make sure they're back to normal. And we'll have loads and loads of reports to write for both our ministries."

"Oh, of course. How could I have neglected to think of that?" Demont stole a sly glance at Ginny and they both grinned at each other.

Any further banter was interrupted as Harry, Ron and Hermione walked into the clearing. "That's where you are," Ron said as he looked at his sister, "We've been looking for you for ages."

"Ah - this must be your brother, Charlie. I don't think I've ever seen three red-headed people together in one place before."

Nadine did the introductions, and they all sat down together, waiting for a fresh brew of coffee. Ginny went back on the offensive as she looked at Nadine, "So, Nadine, what are you going to be doing now that the problem with the magical creatures is over?"

Nadine thought for a moment and then looked slyly at her brother, "I suppose I'll have to contribute to the reports that need to be written. After all, I have been closely involved with the work."

Charlie had a huge grin on his face as he responded, "Well of course - you need to document how we traced the path of the vibrations - and for a while, you'll still need to check that they don't recur."

"I must say," Demont suddenly exclaimed looking at Ginny, seemingly changing the subject, "this is a very pleasant spot here. I think I'll have a look around."

"I'll show you around, Demont," said Ginny as she got up and caught hold of his arm, "there's a great view of the city just over here."

As they walked, they conspired unashamedly, "I had a good heart-to-heart with your sister the other night," said Ginny, "She likes Charlie a lot. But she seems a bit reluctant to start anything. She feels that Charlie has got to make the first move - but she doesn't know if he's ready yet."

"And what does Charlie think?"

"Oh he likes Nadine - he likes her a lot. But he feels that she may not want to start anything because of her recent bad experience. It's so frustrating, Demont. I can see how they feel about each other so why can't they?"

"Ah - matters of the heart are so delicate, Ginny. But I'm elated. All they need is time - time to realise what we can both see as plain as the nose on our faces. And I think I can give them the time they need. After all, this report is going to be very complicated and it's going to take ages to get it all done."

Ginny grinned, "What have you got in mind?"

"Well, I'll have to write the bulk of the report, but Charlie and Nadine both need to do a fair bit of field work together to confirm that all is now well. Just leave it to me Ginny."

Ginny hugged Demont, "See you at the wedding, then?"

As they walked back to the clearing, they were greeted by the wonderful aroma of freshly brewed coffee, Ceri just pouring the eleventh and last mug, "Ah, just in time," she said looking towards Demont and Ginny, "Come on - sit down and taste the delights of my special brew."

"So," said Demont a little later, "What are you all going to do now?"

"We've got today and tomorrow," said Sirius, "then it's back to Hogwarts. What are you kids going to do until then?"

"We'll just laze around today, but Mum and Dad's got a trip to Toulouse planned for tomorrow. It's about sixty miles North-West of here," Hermione answered, "We really should get down to some work before the term starts, maybe we'll do some this afternoon?" she looked at Ron and Harry, who groaned, anticipating an afternoon of bullying by their determined friend.

The adults laughed and then Demont sighed, "Well, Charlie, Nadine - we'd better get a move on. We've got a long drive back to the cabin, and I'm being pressured to get an interim report done for the ministry."

The three said their goodbyes and then walked over to the Land Rover. As they got in, Ginny kissed Nadine on the cheek and whispered, "Don't let him off the hook." The French girl

laughed and waved at Ginny as she slowly drove onto the track leading onto the main North-South road.

"I'll miss them," Hermione said as she chatted to Ceri a little later, "they're great fun to be with."

"Yes, I'll miss them too," Ceri replied. Then she looked closely at the girl sitting beside her, seeing and feeling the sadness, "What about you, Hermione - how are you coping with .. things?"

She looked at Ceri, and she felt her eyes begin to water, "I don't know, Ceri. Sometimes I think I've got it sorted. But then I think about the time, which won't be far away now, when I'll have to see Harry with his Anima Summa. I .. I... don't know if I'll be able to cope, Ceri. Oh, why couldn't things have been different?"

Ceri reached out and held Hermione as she sobbed despairingly into her shoulder. She felt really bad for this lovely girl, but knew that there was nothing she could do to help with her pain.

Early on the morning of 9th April, Professor Dumbledore warmly greeted the travellers shortly after they appeared outside the main doors of the castle. He saw the strain etched on all their faces, and knew that the quest had been difficult.

"There's a hearty breakfast waiting for you in the Great Hall," he said, "the rest of the students and teachers won't be arriving till this afternoon, so we'll have the place to ourselves. I'm looking forward to your report."

As they all walked into the school towards the Great Hall, Harry hung back and beckoned to the headmaster. "Professor, we have to see you alone to give you the full report - some of it is for your ears only."

Dumbledore looked quizzically at Harry, "All right, Harry. Come up to my office after breakfast."

A little while later, Dumbledore sat behind the desk in his office looking at the four friends, "Well, you certainly had a very harrowing experience in the labyrinth, and I want you to know how proud I am of all of you. You showed great courage to find the secret of Rhedae - and I suppose that is what this little meeting is about. Only I can be told the nature of that secret, am I right?"

"Yes Professor," said Harry, "He told us that only you were to know what it is."

"He?"

Hermione cleared her throat, "Yes, Professor. The secret of Rhedae is the spirit of Jesus Christ. He told us that you are a much-beloved servant of the light and you were to be told the secret. He also told us that we are to seek your advice in the times ahead."

"Jesus?" whispered Dumbledore, "You talked to Jesus?"

"Yes sir," answered Hermione, "He told us that he is one of three guardians of ancient wizarding knowledge, and Harry, his Anima Summa, and the three of us are to seek them out. Only then will Harry be able to tackle the Dark Side. He put some of this ancient knowledge in Harry's brain, but he won't be able to access it until he joins with his Anima Summa."

"I see," said Dumbledore, tugging his beard. His eyes had a far-away look. "I had no idea that these repositories of ancient wisdom existed."

"Professor?"

Dumbledore shook himself back to the present and looked at Harry, "Yes Harry?"

"Before we can start on these quests, I have to find my Anima Summa. Jesus told us that she was born three months after me. Can you help me find her? I mean, you have all the student records and their dates of birth, haven't you?"

"Yes I do, Harry. But I don't think I can help. Jesus probably told you that no one must help you with this task - it would dilute your powers and could affect the outcome of the struggle against the Dark Side. I can tell you that there are several students at Hogwarts with birthdays on or around 31st October - and don't forget that your Anima Summa was *conceived* 3 months after you, so she may have been born a little before, on or a little after that date. No Harry - I don't think that looking at the student records is going to help you. The only clear help you have was given to you by Jesus - the rings. The best advice I can give, and I know it's not easy for you, is that you try not to force the issue. Wait for the rings to guide you."

The headmaster smiled at the crest-fallen look on Harry's face and continued, his voice calm and reassuring, "Believe me, Harry, you will find your Anima Summa - don't doubt that. It has been pre-ordained. So just try to relax and let this take its course."

"I .. I'll try, Professor. But it's like sitting on a time bomb."

"I can imagine what you're going through, Harry," a twinkle came into Dumbledore's eyes and his mouth curved into a wicked smile, "But rest assured, your fuse will be lit - just don't go around with a box of matches in your hand. You may get burned."

Hermione, Ron and Ginny couldn't suppress their laughter at the professor's attempt to lighten Harry's burden - but Harry couldn't laugh.

The students and teachers began arriving back at the school that afternoon, and the school lost its unnatural silence as it was filled with the excited chatter of friends relating what they had done over the holiday.

Kristen arrived a little after the other students, appearing by Portkey outside the main doors. She looked around and spotted Harry and her other three friends walking down by the lake. She quickly walked towards them and called out, "Hey - I'm back. Wait for me."

She reached up and kissed Harry on the lips in greeting. Harry instinctively reached into his cloak pocket and felt the rings - but there was no reaction. Kristen frowned as she saw the disappointed look on Harry's face, "What's the matter, Harry. Aren't you glad to see me?"

"Uh, sorry Kristen - no - I mean, of course I'm glad to see you. How was your holiday?"

"Ok, I guess," she replied. She looked at Harry with narrowed eyes. She knew there was something wrong with their relationship - it wasn't as it had been when they first started going out together. She looked at Hermione wondering if it was she that Harry really liked.

Her thoughts were pushed to the back of her mind as Ginny looped her arm through hers and pulled her along by the side of the lake, "We had a great time in France, Kristen - let me tell you what Ron did in Carcassonne."

As the other three followed behind, Hermione punched Harry's arm, "Is that any way to greet your girlfriend, Harry? She must be feeling awful!"

Harry had a pained look on his face as he whispered his reply, "I'm sorry, Hermi - I held the rings but I couldn't get a reaction - nothing"

"Harry, you know that the rings will only react when they feel you are ready to meet your Anima Summa. It doesn't mean that Kristen is or isn't the one - you've just got to be patient."

"Come on, Harry," said Ron, "you know Hermi's right. If you're not careful you're going to lose Kristen."

Early the following morning, just as the dawn was breaking, Harry woke from a restless sleep. He had found it difficult to get to sleep last night - he just couldn't get the thoughts of finding his Anima Summa out of his head. He knew that the advice given by Dumbledore and his friends was right, but he just couldn't feel relaxed about it at all - after all, it was his whole future that was in the balance.

He tried to get back to sleep, but his thoughts, together with the loud snores of Neville, defeated his best efforts. He sighed in resignation, got out of bed, and started to dress. Suddenly, his head jerked up, and he stared at the window. He didn't know what had caught his attention, but he had an irresistible urge to look out of the window.

He got up and walked to the window. He looked down at the grounds, which were now bathed in that special quality early-dawn diffused light, searching for something. He didn't know what he was looking for, only that there was something there that was tugging at the far reaches of his mind.

He caught a slight movement by the side of a tree at the edge of the lake and he stared intently. Then he saw her, as she stepped in front of the tree and looked up at his window.

She was a beautiful young girl, about his own age. She had long white hair, and as the sun peeked out from behind a cloud low down on the horizon and shone on her, he could see that she had the most striking vivid green eyes. Their eyes locked together and Harry could see a look of recognition in her face. She raised her arm and slowly waved a greeting, smiling. Harry didn't know, of course, that it was the same girl that had watched him from her bedroom window in Rennes-le-Chateau.

Harry quickly waved back and rushed over to his bed to put on his cloak. He sprinted down to the common room, taking three steps at a time down the spiral staircase, and dashed out

through the portrait hole. His breathing was heavy as he opened the main doors of the school and ran quickly down to the lake.

As he approached the tree, he could see no sign of the girl. He turned and looked all around the grounds, but there was no sign of her. He slapped the side of his leg in frustration, still turning and looking in all directions. It was as if she had never been there.

"Who was that?" he asked himself aloud, "I feel as if I should know her - but I don't think I've ever seen her before. Could she be ...?" Harry pushed his hand into his cloak pocket and held the rings - which were as inert as they always were.

Again he slapped his leg in frustration and slowly walked back up to the school.

"AAaaaaarrrrgggghhhh"

The horrible sound tailed off to an agonised gurgle as Lord Voldemort lifted his wand, ending the Cruciatus curse. He looked at the pathetic bundle lying in front of him with disdain and pushed him over with his foot so that he could look into his victim's face.

"I told you what would happen if you failed, Wormtail. Feel the wrath of your master." Again, Voldemort pointed his wand at Wormtail and yelled "*CRUCIO*."

Wormtail convulsed and let out a shriek of agony as the fire coursed through his nervous system. A full minute passed before the Dark Lord lifted the curse.

"Give me one good reason why I shouldn't kill you now. Prepare to die."

Wormtail's eyes bulged as he saw Voldemort once again point his wand at him. He lifted his arm as if to ward off the killing curse that he knew would soon strike him, and thought desperately, trying to think of a way to save his life.

"No, wait master, please wait. I can still find out what you want to know."

Voldemort scowled, still keeping his wand trained on the slobbering Wormtail, but didn't let loose the curse that would end his miserable existence. "Well, Wormtail. I won't wait for much longer. Tell me, quickly."

"Remus Lupin - he was with Potter's protectors in France. So he must know what it is they were looking for, and he'll probably know about what this Anima Summa thing is."

"So? He'll be at Hogwarts protected by Dumbledore, so he's out of our reach. Tell me something useful Wormtail, or you die now."

"No master, please. Wait. I know how to get hold of Lupin." Wormtail cowered before Voldemort, his arm still raised to ward off the unstoppable curse.

"Don't try my patience, Wormtail. Tell me what you know now."

"Lupin is a werewolf - and I know where he hides out when he transforms - it's away from Hogwarts. The full moon is tomorrow night, and if you let me take five Death Eaters with me, I can capture him and bring him to you."

Voldemort thought for a moment, and then, "All right, Wormtail. This is your last chance. Bring him to me tomorrow night at the Callanish stone circle. And Wormtail - if you fail me this time, I won't give you a chance to talk your way out of your death. Do I make myself perfectly clear?"

"Yes, my Lord. I won't fail you this time."

"Take Travis with you, and tell him that the same fate awaits him if you fail."

Remus Lupin arrived at the shrieking shack early the following evening, before the last light of day left the sky. He wanted to make sure that he wouldn't be caught outside when the first rays of the full moon fell. He was content that he would be able to come through his ordeal without too much trouble, with the help of Snape's serum and the comfort of Padfoot's presence.

He looked at his watch and thought, 'Hmm, Sirius should be here in about half an hour. I'd better make sure that all the doors and windows are bolted shut.'

He went to the main entrance and pulled the heavy steel bolt firmly across. Then he walked towards the next room. As he walked through the door, he felt that he was not alone. He sensed, more than saw, the Death Eaters hiding in the shadows. He turned to run back out of the room but was jumped on by three of the Death Eaters, who quickly threw him to the floor and held him. He looked up and saw Wormtail and two others walk over towards him, smiling.

"Ah, nice of you to turn up, Moony," said Wormtail, "We've come to take you to a little meeting."

Although restrained by the three big Death Eaters, Remus managed to trace with his extended finger, unnoticed by his captors, a few letters in the dust by the side of the door. He wrote 'WORMT' before he was hit by a stupefy curse. He knew nothing more until he regained consciousness at the stone circle of Callanish. He was thrown into a shallow hole at the side of the megaliths, and covered with a heavy fallen capstone. There in that confined space he would be forced to stay until his ordeal as a werewolf ended and he was ready to be interrogated.

"Moony ... Moony?"

Sirius had arrived at the shrieking shack and was puzzled that Remus was not in the room they normally stayed in. He walked from room to room, trying to find his friend. By this time it was starting to get dark, and he needed his raised illuminated wand to find his way about.

As he entered the room to the side of the main entrance hallway, he could see that there was something amiss. Several chairs were overturned and there were signs of a struggle where the

dust had been disturbed. "Oh lord .." he said to himself as he looked about the room for any clues of what had happened.

Shaking his head, he turned and walked back to the door, when he spotted the letters scribbled in the dust to the side. "W. O. R. M. T." he spelled out.

"Wormtail!" he breathed with anger. He quickly retraced his steps to the tunnel entrance that would take him back to Hogwarts.

"Yes, I know it looks as if he was captured by Wormtail, but where would he have been taken?" said Ceri.

Ceri, Sirius, McGonagall, Snape and Dumbledore sat around the headmaster's desk in his office.

"It could be anywhere," said Snape, "'You Know Who's secret cave, any one of a number of sites they use to hold their secret meetings, or anywhere in between."

"I know, but we've got to do something," said Sirius. "Wormtail will take him straight to 'You Know Who' and there won't be much left after he's finished with him"

"Why do you think they went after Remus?" asked McGonagall.

"Oh that's pretty obvious, Minerva," said Dumbledore, "Wormtail saw him in France with the others so he's quite aware that Remus knows everything about what's been going on with Harry. Voldemort is after information - and I fear that he'll get it. Oh, Remus won't give it to him voluntarily, even under torture, but he won't be able to resist Veritaserum."

"Then we've got to rescue him before he can be made to talk," said Sirius.

"We can only do our best, Sirius," said Dumbledore, "I think the best plan is to Apparate to the sites where they hold their meetings and look at each of those. Severus, have you any idea where Voldemort's cave is?"

"No, Headmaster. Only the chosen few have ever been there, and I'm not one of those any longer."

"So we'll just have to hope that he isn't taken there," said Ceri.

"Sirius, Severus," said Dumbledore, "You two make up a list of the known sites where he may be held. We'll be able to cover more ground if we split into three teams of two - Sirius and Ceri, Severus and Flitwick, Minerva and myself. I'll go to brief Professor Flitwick while you make up the list, then we can get started - there's no time to lose if we're to get Remus back in one piece. Oh, and make sure that Harry and his friends don't find out about this - you know what they're like and I don't want to have to go looking for them as well as Remus."

About half an hour later, they all met up again in the headmaster's office, this time joined by Professor Flitwick.

"Right, let's see that list," said Dumbledore.

McGonagall let out a gasp as she saw the list, "There's over forty places here, ranging from the Scottish islands to the Channel isles. It'll take ages to check them all, even if we split them three ways."

"It's the only chance we've got, Minerva," said Dumbledore, "Sirius, you and Ceri take the ones that that you've been to recently - you know their lay-out better than us. We'll use the shrieking shack as a base - we'll meet back there after each site has been checked; we don't want to go charging all around the country if one of us finds him quickly."

"Come on then, let's get going," said Sirius, "It'll be dawn in an hour, and they'll start to question Remus as soon as he changes back from his werewolf form."

The sun cast an eerie glow over the sinister standing stone circle at Callanish. At the centre of the circle, a wooden wrack had been erected, with ties at each corner, and around it stood Wormtail, Travis and the four Death Eaters who had captured Remus. All six of them dropped to one knee as the Dark Lord Apparated in front of them.

"So, you've managed to do something right at last, Wormtail. Fetch him out and tie him to the wrack - let's see if he'll talk."

Four of the Death Eaters lifted the capstone from Remus' makeshift dungeon and dragged him to the centre of the circle where he was roughly tied into the wooden frame. They then stood back to allow Voldemort to approach him.

"So, you are Remus Lupin - one of Potter's protectors?" hissed Voldemort.

Remus looked at the deadly form in front of him and suppressed a shudder. He breathed deeply and whispered, "Go to hell, Voldemort. You won't get anything out of me."

"Oh won't I? Brave words, Lupin, but a bit misguided I fear. You don't know the agony I can inflict on you. So why don't you answer my questions and save yourself a lot of pain. Now, what did you find in Rennes-le-Chateau?"

"Nothing. We didn't find anything - it was a wild-goose chase."

"What is the Anima Summa?"

Remus' eyes opened a bit wider in surprise, but quickly covered it up, "The what? I've never heard of it."

Voldemort's jaw set in anger as he lifted his wand and pointed it at Remus. "*CRUCIO*," he roared.

Remus stretched taut as the curse hit him, sending rivers of agony through his body. After twenty seconds, Voldemort lifted the curse, allowing Remus to sag back onto the torture wrack.

"That's just a mild sample of what I can dish out, Lupin. And I can keep this up as long as I like, always making sure that death won't release you from your suffering. Now let's start again. What did you find in France?"

Remus gritted his teeth and whispered, "One or two pretty French ladies, but not much else."

"*CRUCIO*"

And Remus' agony continued as the sun made its way towards its zenith.

Back at the shrieking shack, Sirius and Ceri walked in to join the other four who were waiting for them.

"Anything?" asked Dumbledore.

"Nothing," said Ceri. "That's the fifth site we've been to and no sign of activity."

"All right," said Dumbledore, "let's go to the next ones on our list. See you all back here in about half an hour"

"Lupin, why don't you be reasonable. Why submit yourself to this torture? All you have to do is answer two simple questions, then you can go."

"Don't make me laugh, Voldemort," said Remus through tight lips. His body was covered with sweat and his face was haggard. "If I tell you what you want to know, you'll kill me five seconds later. So go to hell."

Voldemort let out an impatient snort and walked over to Wormtail. "Have you contacted Lucius?" he whispered.

"Yes, my Lord. He should be here with the Veritaserum in a few minutes."

"Good. In the mean time, go and tell Travis and the others to break a few of his bones. Perhaps that will loosen his tongue."

Prompted by Wormtail, Travis and the largest of the other Death Eaters stepped up each side of Remus and took hold of each of his hands. They looked towards Voldemort, waiting for a signal.

"Lupin. Once more - are you going to answer my questions?"

"No"

Voldemort nodded, and the two Death Eaters caught hold of Remus' middle fingers and bent them back at an impossible angle, until a distinct snapping noise could be heard. Remus screamed in agony and blood dribbled down his chin as his teeth inadvertently bit into his tongue.

"Will you answer my questions?"

"No. Never," groaned Remus.

Two more fingers were broken and Remus sagged, unconscious, onto the torture wrack.

A few moments later, a black-hooded Lucius Malfoy Apparated into the stone circle, holding a vial of brownish liquid in his right hand.

"Ah, Lucius - you've brought the Veritaserum. Good. Travis - revive him."

At that moment, Sirius and Ceri Apparated to a spot several hundred yards from the stone circle. They immediately saw the activity and quickly ducked behind a large monolith.

Travis splashed cold water on Remus' face to bring him back to a spluttering, barely conscious state. Malfoy walked over to the wrack and gestured for Travis to hold Remus' head and force open his mouth, which he did with little resistance. Malfoy held the vial above the open mouth and let a few drops fall onto Remus' tongue.

"Right, my lord, just wait a few minutes for the Veritaserum to take effect."

"Thank you, Lucius," said Voldemort as he stood impatiently in front of Remus.

Sirius had an agonised expression on his face as he whispered, "What are those devils doing to Remus?"

"Keep calm, Sirius," said Ceri, "we're badly outnumbered, and 'You Know Who' is here as well. If we go charging in now, we wouldn't stand a chance, and we'd be no help to Remus."

"Yes, I know you're right, Ceri. But I don't think we'll have time to go back to the shrieking shack and wait for the others. We've got to do something now, or Remus is finished."

"All right. Let's try to get closer. I saw that Death Eater put something into Remus' mouth. I think they've given him Veritaserum to make him talk."

They transformed into their Animagus forms and slowly and stealthily crept to the spot where they'd remained hidden the last time they'd visited the site, where they had a clear view and could hear what was being said.

"Right, Lupin," said Voldemort, "let's see if your tongue is any looser now, shall we?"

Voldemort roughly caught hold of Remus' hair and jerked his head back so that he was looking directly into his eyes. "What did Potter and his friends find in Rennes-le-Chateau?"

From the look on his face, Sirius and Ceri could see that Remus was trying to fight the serum, but inevitably had to give in. His voice had a dull quality as he told Voldemort what he wanted to hear.

"They went through a labyrinth underneath the church and found a secret chamber. They were told that this was one of three quests to find the ancient knowledge which will help to defeat the Dark Side."

"And did Potter find any knowledge there?"

"Yes. It's in his subconscious, but he can't access it yet."

"When will he be able to access it?"

"When he joins with his Anima Summa"

"Ah - the Anima Summa. Who or what is it?"

"Harry is the Anima Summa - a servant of the Light ordained to fight the Dark side."

"If Potter is the Anima Summa, there must be another one as well if he has to join with it - am I right?"

"Yes - there is a girl who is his Anima Summa."

"Who is she?"

"I don't know. No-one knows yet, not even Harry. He hasn't found her yet."

"Is she one of the girls at Hogwarts?"

"I don't know."

Voldemort released his grip on Remus and turned back to his followers, "We won't get any more out of him - he's told me what I wanted to know. I must return to my cave to think about what I've heard and to determine our next actions. One thing I do know - Potter has to be stopped before our greater plans for world domination can proceed."

He turned to Lucius Malfoy, "Contact the inner circle - I want you at my cave in two days time to discuss the plans I will have ready by then. And tell our friend at the school to keep a close eye on Potter. I want to know everything he does and which girls he gets friendly with. Wormtail, leave two of my servants here to tidy up this mess and then follow me back to the cave."

With that Voldemort disappeared, shortly followed by Malfoy.

Wormtail gestured to two of the Death Eaters, "You two stay here. You know what to do. Make sure that no sign remains of what went on. Travis and you others, come on - let's get back to the cave."

After their partners in crime had disappeared, the two Death Eaters faced each other.

"Are you going to kill him or do you want me to do it?" said one nonchalantly.

"I'll do it," said the other leering at Remus who was now struggling futilely with his restraints, "Watch and learn."

He lifted his wand and pointed it at Remus' head.

"*AVADA K.*" that was as far as he got with the killing curse before a heavy weight struck his back and sent him sprawling onto the ground.

"What the .." he shouted as he turned over to see the full set of Padfoot's fangs slobbering just an inch from his throat. His eyes widened and he froze with fear, unable to move a muscle.

The other Death Eater had only moments to witness the action before he fell to the ground unconscious, stupefied by Ceri. She walked over and took the other Death Eater's wand from his trembling hand before Padfoot transformed and rushed over to the torture frame. She then put him in a full body bind.

"Remus," he said with compassion in his voice, "are you all right? What have they done to you?" He looked at Remus' hands and felt a wrench in his stomach as he saw four of his fingers bent back at impossible angles.

"Sirius! Thank god. I thought I was done for. How did you find me?"

"Later, Remus. Let's get you down from that thing"

As Sirius untied his friend and gently helped him to sit on the ground, Remus let out an agonised sob, "Sirius, Ceri - I told them about Harry and his Anima Summa. I told 'You Know Who' everything."

"Don't blame yourself, Remus," whispered Ceri, "We saw them give you Veritaserum. There was nothing you could have done."

"Come on," said Sirius, "we'll take you back to the shrieking shack with these two plonkers. The others will be waiting for us and we can get you to Madam Pomfrey to sort out those hands."

As they prepared to Apparate, Sirius turned to the torture wrack and lifted his wand.

"*EFFLIGO*" he roared, and a bright red light shot from his wand and hit the wooden frame. It shimmered and then disappeared, leaving only a few wisps of white ash that drifted slowly to the ground.

"At least they won't be able to use that anymore," he said bitterly. Then they Apparated back to the shrieking shack, taking the Death Eaters with them.

"How is poor Remus now?" asked McGonagall.

"Madam Pomfrey wants to keep him in the hospital for a day or two," said Sirius, "She's sorted out his hands, but it seems that he took quite a lot of the Cruciatus curse from 'You Know Who' as well."

They were sitting around Dumbledore's desk and Sirius and Ceri had just finished giving their report on the events at Callanish.

"So now 'You Know Who' knows everything," said Snape gloomily.

"Don't blame Remus," said Dumbledore, "You, above all others Severus, know the power of Veritaserum. And in any case, I suppose it was inevitable that he'd find out. He knew that something was going on, and Voldemort would leave no stone unturned until he unearthed the truth."

"Yes, I suppose your right, Headmaster," said McGonagall, "but now that he knows, he'll try anything he can to prevent Harry getting his full Anima Summa powers. Those poor kids are in even more danger now."

"I'm afraid your right, Minerva," said Dumbledore, "We'll just have to be doubly vigilant and keep a very close eye on them. I'll see Harry and the other three after this meeting and tell them what's happened. I don't think there's anything to be gained in keeping them in the dark about it. And it may just serve to stop them going on any of their clandestine excursions beyond the school grounds."

"What do you think 'You Know Who' will do, Headmaster?" asked Sirius.

"There are a number of things he may try, but I don't think he'll attempt a mass attack on the school - he'd be foolish to try that. But just in case, we'd better check and strengthen the school defences."

"Don't forget the spy that's in Hogwarts," said Ceri, "He or she may try to kill Harry - it would be a simple matter to slip poison in his food or drink."

"I don't think so, Ceri," said Dumbledore, "I think that Voldemort will want to capture Harry alive."

"How can you be so sure about that, Headmaster?" asked McGonagall.

"When he killed Harry's parents, and then tried to kill Harry, Voldemort inadvertently transferred some of his powers to Harry - how else would Harry be a Parselmouth? Voldemort will want to get those powers back, and not only those powers. Don't forget, he now knows that there is ancient knowledge and spells buried in Harry's subconscious. He'll certainly want to take those for himself. There are certain spells and procedures available to Dark Arts practitioners that may just achieve that transfer of knowledge and power."

"Perhaps he'll try to lure Harry outside the protection of Hogwarts - like he did when he captured Harry's Muggle friend, Lara," said McGonagall.

"That's a possibility, Minerva," replied Dumbledore, "We are just going to have to keep a close watch on Harry and all his friends - a very tight watch."

Dumbledore looked at the others and tried to lighten the grim mood that had settled on them, "There is one good thing that's come out of this, of course. Voldemort has had to put his plans on hold, so we can concentrate our efforts on protecting Harry and the others - that's our full-time job now, especially Sirius, Ceri and Remus when he's fit again. I only hope that Harry finds his Anima Summa sooner rather than later - at least then they'll have the powers from the first quest at their disposal."

"What do you think those powers will be, Professor?" asked Ceri.

"I don't know, Ceri. They haven't been used since Merlin's time, and that's a long time ago. I can't even guess what they'll be. But neither can Voldemort - he may just be in for the biggest surprise of his evil life."

Chapter 11 The Anima Summa

Lord Voldemort was not in the best of moods as he sat in his cave in a very remote part of Northern Scotland. His mood was so foul that Wormtail and Nagini cringed at the back of the cave, in the darkest corner they could find, trying to be as inconspicuous as possible.

Voldemort had spent the best part of two days trying to work out how to get Harry out of Hogwarts and into his clutches, but had not yet come up with a foolproof plan. He had sent some of his Death Eaters to test out the magical defences surrounding the grounds at Hogwarts, and their report had not been encouraging. No weaknesses could be found, and there were even some additional protective spells in place compared to the last time they had done their checks.

"Wormtail," he roared.

Wormtail jumped and scrambled over to the Dark Lord's throne, where he grovelled at its base.

"Go and signal the inner circle - they're late. I will not be kept waiting."

"Yes, my lord," said Wormtail as he rushed out of the cave to activate the signalling device. The inner circle was not late - they weren't due to meet for another half hour, but it would have taken a braver man than Wormtail to point this out to his master.

Within three minutes, all inner circle members had gathered outside the cave. "Why have we been summoned early, Wormtail?" asked Lucius Malfoy.

"Don't ask," Wormtail shuddered, "I haven't seen him in this bad a mood for a very long time. Come on, we'd better get in there quick."

Everyone had gone pale at Wormtail's words and wondered who would have to take the brunt of Voldemort's wrath if the meeting didn't go well. They all tramped cautiously into the cave, and approached the dark figure at the centre with trepidation. The dancing light from the flaming torches on the wall reflected off Voldemort's smouldering, slitty red eyes as he watched them approach the throne.

"I have thought hard and long, these past two days," he said, "but I have not yet found a way to get Potter into my clutches. What have *you* done? I want some answers, and I want them now. Nott, what do you advise?"

Nott visibly paled as he felt that sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"I .. I ... I've spent the last two days wracking my brains, my Lord. But I haven't been able to come up with anything acceptable yet."

"Brains? What brains?" roared Voldemort, "*CRUCIO*"

Nott fell to the floor and writhed about in agony, until Voldemort mercifully lifted the curse.

"I hope the rest of you have done better than Nott. Lucius - what about you?"

"My Lord," Lucius bowed his head, "Our friend at the school has told me that there has been increased activity by the teachers around the perimeter of the school grounds. They have been strengthening their defences, and Potter and his friends are being very closely watched. Whenever they go outside the school building, someone keeps a close watch on them - they've even started patrolling the edge of the Forbidden Forest whenever they go outside."

"Hmm - that doesn't help, Lucius. I know about the increased defences. Tell me something positive."

"Uh - there are two possibilities I can think of, my Lord," Lucius paused, thinking quickly for the second one - the first he'd already had up his sleeve when he found out about Voldemort's evil mood.

"Well. Don't keep me waiting. Speak"

"First, we can keep two Death Eaters permanently stationed in the Forbidden Forest. They can keep a close eye on what goes on, and they can also be alert to Potter and his friends when they come out into the grounds. A lot will depend on luck, but one of them may get close enough to be snatched and brought here to you. It doesn't matter who we snatch - Potter will come running if he knows that one of his friends is in danger."

"Hm good, Lucius. Not brilliant, but at least it's something. Arrange for our two best followers to set up camp in the Forbidden Forest as soon as the meeting's over. Now, what's your second plan?"

"Uh, it's not so much a plan as a possibility for you to consider, my Lord. The Dementors - you could use your influence to get them on our side. I'm sure they wouldn't need much persuading if you dangled the carrot of a few souls in front of them."

"The Dementors - Hmm, I wonder," Voldemort reflected, "Yes, I think you may have something there, Lucius. But we need to be very clever. I can't afford to take all of them from Azkaban - that would force the ministry to publicly admit my presence. But I can take some of them. They might well be very useful as a diversionary tactic if we need to attack the school directly. Yes, thank you Lucius. Good."

"I only wish to serve you, my Lord," Lucius grinned to himself. His quick thinking had once again got him out of an awkward situation and gained points with the Dark Lord.

"What news from our friend at Hogwarts, Lucius? Any news on Potter's Anima Summa?"

"I'm afraid not, my Lord. But I'm certain he hasn't found her yet. Potter is still moping around the school, looking despondent."

"Right. I want you all to think about how we can attack Hogwarts. It may not come to it, but if all else fails I want a plan in place. We will meet here in one week's time. Now go."

After the inner circle had left, Voldemort appeared in a slightly better mood. At least he now had something to work at. "Wormtail - I'm going to Azkaban, and I want you with me. Come on."

Wormtail cringed at the prospect of being anywhere near a Dementor, but he followed his master out of the cave, ready to Apparate to a spot where Voldemort knew he'd be able to speak to one of the evil creatures.

"What can I do, Ron? There has to be some way I can find my Anima Summa. I mean, it's even more urgent now that Voldemort knows about everything."

"I know, Harry," said Ron sympathetically, "but there's nothing you can do - you heard what Dumbledore said. You've just got to let things take their course. Knight to King 6."

Harry and Ron were sitting in the Gryffindor common room playing wizarding chess, although their minds were not really on the game.

"Do you think it's Kristen?"

"I don't know, Harry. There's no way of telling. Only the rings can help."

"But the rings are just dormant all the time. If she's the one, surely they'd react in some way?"

Ron could only look at his friend with sympathy. He, above all others, knew how mysterious girls appeared to be.

"Well what about that strange girl I saw in the school grounds the other morning? What was she doing there, and why was she looking up at our window? Perhaps she's the one?"

"She may well be, Harry. But didn't you say the rings didn't react?"

"Yes, but that was after she'd gone. Maybe I have to be very close to her before they'll react."

"What'll react?" asked Ginny. She and Hermione had walked over to the two boys and just caught the last bit of their conversation.

"Harry was wondering if he needs to be very close to his Anima Summa before he gets a reaction from the rings. He thinks it may be that strange girl he told us about the other day."

"Are you sure you've never seen her before, Harry?" asked Hermione.

"No - I'm sure. She's so beautiful that once seen, never forgotten."

Hermione felt the familiar pang of disappointment at Harry's words. It seems that he'd been smitten by that girl before he'd even spoken to her.

"I must say it's strange that she just turns up in the school grounds, looks up at your window and then disappears. Are you sure it wasn't a dream?" asked Hermione.

"No, I'm sure, Hermi. I just wish I knew how to get in contact with her. That's the only way I'll find out if she's the one."

"Well, I'm at a complete loss on this," said Ron, "All we can do is wait."

"I think I'll go and find Kristen," said Harry suddenly, "I've just realised I don't know when her birthday is."

"Oh lord," whispered Ginny as Harry went through the portrait hole. She looked at the other two with a glum expression on her face.

"Hey, Kristen, hang on," Harry shouted as he spotted Kristen just about to go into the library.

She turned and smiled as Harry approached, "Hi Harry, what's up?"

"Kristen, I've only just realised something. I don't know when your birthday is, and I wouldn't want to miss out on getting you a present."

"Well that's more than six months away. 31st October."

Harry's mouth dropped open, "Uh, you mean you were born on 31st October 1980?"

"Yes that's right, Harry. But why are you acting so strange? There's nothing special about 31st October is there - apart from Halloween that is?"

"Uh, no .. no. Uh, Kristen, would you like to come for a walk down by the lake?"

"I've got to get this Potions essay done by tomorrow ... well ok, but just for a little while."

As they walked around the lake, Harry pulled Kristen over to a seat under one of the oak trees that grew just back from the water's edge. As they sat down, Harry turned towards her and put his left hand behind her head, playing with her hair, while he put his right into his cloak pocket and held the rings. Then he slowly pulled Kristen towards him and kissed her tenderly on the lips.

When they broke apart, Kristen's eyes narrowed at the look of deep disappointment on Harry's face. The rings had not reacted in the slightest, and Harry couldn't conceal how he felt.

"Well that's great, Harry. You've just ruined a lovely moment. If that's how you feel when you kiss me, I don't know why we're still going out together."

Kristen shot to her feet and run back up towards the school, tears running down her pretty face.

"Kristen .. Kristen, I'm sorry. It's not what you think," shouted Harry. But Kristen continued up to the school and rushed up to Gryffindor common room and straight into her dorm.

'I've done it now,' Harry thought to himself. 'Why didn't the rings do something? She was born at exactly the right time to be the Anima Summa. I wonder if there's something wrong with these rings?'

Deep down, however, Harry knew that there was nothing wrong with the rings. He forced himself to think about the way he felt about Kristen. He liked her, sure - he liked her a lot. But did he love her? Is this the girl he wanted to spend the rest of his life with?

'Perhaps not,' he thought, 'oh why does everything have to be so complicated?'

As she ran up the spiral staircase to her dormitory, Ron, Hermione and Ginny couldn't help but see her.

"I was afraid of this," said Ginny, "she looks pretty upset. I'll go and talk to her." Ginny slowly made her way up to Kristen's dorm trying to think what she could say to her.

She opened the door and saw Kristen sprawled on her bed, her head buried in her pillow. "Kristen? What's the matter?"

Kristen slowly turned around and sat on the edge of her bed. Tears were still running down her face. "It's Harry," she said, "After he kissed me down by the lake, I couldn't believe the look on his face. He seemed so disappointed at me, just like he wondered why he'd bothered to kiss me in the first place. I felt so hurt, Ginny. What have I done to deserve that?"

"Believe me, Kristen, it's not your fault. I know dozens of boys who'd give their right arms to go out with you."

"Remember when we had that talk back at your birthday party? I've thought for some time that Harry's in love with somebody else - I've tried to ignore it, but after today I don't think I can. I think it's best if we split up, Ginny - for both our sakes. I can't take much more of this torture, wondering when he'll realise he loves somebody else."

"Oh Kristen, I'm so sorry"

"I think it's Hermione, Ginny. It's the way he looks at her sometimes. I think it'll be best if I go and tell him now."

"Wait Kristen. You can't tell Harry you think he loves Hermi." Ginny took a deep breath and told Kristen about the Anima Summa and the coming conflict with the Dark Side. She felt she had no choice, and it was only fair that she be told.

"So that's why he was so interested in my birthday? It's the right day for his Anima Summa. But why do you think he was so disappointed?"

"Probably because he didn't get a reaction from the rings, Kristen. I knew when he stormed out of the common room to find you that he'd try to force things along."

"So I can't be the Anima Summa, then. When is Hermi's birthday?"

"It's in September, Kristen - too early for her to be the Anima Summa."

"But I was so sure it was she he's in love with."

"He may well love her Kristen. I'm sure he loves you as well. And I know he loves me - even though it's only like a little sister. But being in love with someone and being the Anima

Summa don't necessarily go hand in hand. Oh - when he finds the right one, he will love her - love her above all others. Make no mistake about it. Look Kristen, it doesn't mean that you're not the Anima Summa - it may just mean that the rings feel that Harry isn't ready for her to be revealed yet."

"I don't think so, Ginny. There'd be a lot more to his feelings for me if I were the one. I've got no illusions about it. But at least I can understand why Harry reacted like he did this afternoon. I still think it's best if we split - I'm only in the way, anyway, and it'll free up his feelings and emotions for his search for the right girl."

"Don't say anything to him about who you think he's in love with, Kristen. It'll just confuse him even more."

"I won't, Ginny. And don't worry - I won't say anything to a living soul about what we've just spoken about."

Ginny squeezed her friend's hand, smiled at her, and went back down to the common room to tell Ron and Hermione what had happened.

"I'll give her a few minutes, and then I'll go out and make sure Harry's all right," said Ron, "I know how he's going to feel."

Harry was still sitting on the bench under the oak tree when Kristen slowly walked up to him. He didn't notice her approach - he was miles away in a world of his own, trying to make sense of things.

"Harry?" she whispered.

Harry looked up, shaken from his reverie, and stood up, "Kristen. Look I'm sorry about earlier. I didn't mean to upset you."

Kristen took his hand and pulled him back to the seat, "I know, Harry. Ginny told me everything - about the Anima Summa. I know you were trying to get a reaction from those rings. There was nothing was there?"

Harry looked surprised, wondering why Ginny had told Kristen about the Anima Summa, "No. I'm sorry Kristen. When you told me your birthday, I was sure it was you."

"It's not me, Harry. I think we'd be a lot different together if I were the one. I.. I think you love someone else, Harry. I've known for a while now, but I didn't want to believe it. It's just a feeling I've had for some time."

"But you're wrong, Kristen. There isn't anybody else. Why do you think that?"

"Just call it intuition, Harry."

"But who do you think I'm in love with?"

"I.. I can't tell you that Harry. And after what Ginny told me I'm not even sure myself anymore. Look - I think it'd be best if we split up. Our relationship isn't going anywhere and

I'll only be in the way of you finding your Anima Summa. I like you a lot, Harry, but I've got to face up to the fact that I'm going to lose you sooner or later."

Harry thought for a minute before he replied, "I'm so sorry Kristen. I never meant to hurt you in any way. I've been so confused about things and I know I must have seemed distracted when we're together. I'm sorry."

Kristen lifted her hand and held the side of Harry's face for a moment as she looked wistfully into his eyes - eyes that were full of remorse, mingled with hurt.

"We can still be friends, can't we Harry?"

Harry squeezed her hand, "Of course we can, Kristen. You're one of the nicest girls I know."

"Bye Harry. See you later." Kristen got up, her eyes watery, and walked back up to the school.

Ron passed Kristen as she ran up the staircase towards Gryffindor common room. He could see that she was upset, and didn't stop to talk to her. He walked out of the main doorway and saw Harry, who was still sitting on the seat down by the lake.

"Kristen and I have split up, Ron," he said as Ron approached him.

"I know, Harry. Ginny spoke to her earlier and told us what she was going to do. She's quite a girl, Harry. You know that she's put you before her own feelings, don't you?"

"Yes, Ron - I know. But she was right. We weren't really going anywhere, and it would have been cruel to keep stringing her along. I always seem to make a mess of things when it comes to girls, Ron."

"You're not the only one, Harry. I only hope it gets easier as we get older."

"But I haven't got time to get older, Ron. I have to find my Anima Summa now. The fate of the wizarding world depends on it."

"Come on, Harry. Let's go back up to the common room. You're not going to solve anything moping around out here."

"Ron, why do you think Ginny told Kristen about the Anima Summa?"

"I don't know, Harry. But she must have had a good reason. She knows how important it is to keep it quiet."

"Hmm. I think I'll go and speak to Dumbledore, Ron. Come on, let's get back."

"I'd better go and make sure she's all right, Hermi," said Ginny as they saw Kristen walk listlessly back up to her dorm.

"Ok, Ginny. I'll wait here for you."

Left on her own, Hermione's thoughts inevitably turned to Harry. 'He must be feeling terrible. He's unattached now,' she thought, 'but there's no use raising my hopes. So I might as well try to make the best of being his friend. Oh - it's just not fair!'

"What's happened with Harry and Kristen, Hermi?" Hermione was jerked from her thoughts by Parvati, who had noticed Kristen's comings and goings, and how upset she was.

"Oh. I think they've split up, Parvati."

"How? Why?" she asked, wide-eyed.

"I don't know any details, Parvati, but I think they're best left alone for a while."

"Right," she replied as she left hurriedly in search of Lavender.

"Sit down, Harry," said Dumbledore, "I can see that there's something bothering you. Do you want to tell me about it?"

"It's the Anima Summa, Professor," replied Harry, "I'm just so confused. I found out that Kristen's birthday is 31st October 1980, but when I was with her, the rings didn't do anything. We .. we've split up now."

"I'm sorry, Harry. Kristen's a very nice girl."

"Yes, she is. Look, there's something else I want to tell you, Professor. Early the other morning, I saw a girl about my age looking up at me in my dormitory window. But when I went down, she'd vanished. I haven't seen her before, and she doesn't belong at the school. So why was she there? Do you think she might be my Anima Summa?"

"She may well be, Harry, but I really don't know. Look, Harry, you really must try to relax about this. I know it must be very difficult for you, but it's always been my experience that such things will work themselves out in their own way and in their own time. Believe me, when it happens, it will be spontaneous - it won't happen because you try to force it. The best advice I can give is that you try to concentrate on studying for your OWLS, the Anima Summa situation will take care of itself."

"Thanks, Professor, I promise I'll try."

The news of Harry and Kristen splitting up spread like wildfire throughout the school. The female population was now on full alert, and many a devious plan was in the making for attracting his attentions. Harry, however, despite Dumbledore's advice, was approaching despair. Wherever he went in the school, he'd try to walk close to any girl that appeared to be the right age, all the time holding the rings in his cloak pocket, but he could detect no reaction from them.

"She just can't be one of the students at the school," he told Ron, Ginny and Hermione one evening as they sat in the common room, "I've been close to just about every girl in the school - even Millicent Bulstrode, uhhh - but there's just nothing from the rings at all. I think it just *has* to be that girl I saw in the grounds - it's *got* to be - there isn't anybody else."

"You've got to stop beating yourself up with this Harry," said Ron, "Listen to what Dumbledore told you. Don't forget that we've got the match against Slytherin in a few weeks, and you'll need to be fully alert if we're going to beat them."

"That's easy for you to say Ron," replied Harry with more force than he'd really intended, "but how can I put this out of my mind. It's starting to drive me crazy."

Hermione reached out and squeezed Harry's arm, concern etched on her features, "None of us thinks it's easy for you Harry. But you must see that if you keep worrying like this you'll make yourself ill."

Harry didn't reply and got up and walked out through the portrait hole, quickly followed by Ron.

"This is getting bad, Ginny," said Hermione, "He *will* make himself ill if he doesn't calm down soon."

"How about you, Hermi?" asked Ginny, "How are you coping with all this?"

"I .. I'm trying my best, Ginny. I keep telling myself that it's stupid to have these feelings for Harry, but I just can't help myself." She looked sadly down at her hands and twiddled her fingers.

Ginny reached over and took Hermione's hands in her own and looked into her eyes, "Things will work out, Hermi. I just know they will."

The weather was idyllic in the little mountain valley in the Langedoc. Charlie, Nadine and Demont sat lazily on padded chairs outside the cabin, listening to the tinkling sounds of the stream as it made its way past them. They had just finished an al fresco lunch, and were in the process of polishing off their second bottle of wine.

Their investigations in the Forbidden Forest had confirmed that everything was now back to normal, and they were taking a bit of time out to relax before starting on their full report to their respective ministries.

"Have you heard from Professor Dumbledore yet Charlie?" asked Demont.

"Yes, I had an owl from him this morning. He advises that we don't say anything about Harry and the Anima Summa in our report. He thinks that it would attract too much attention from the ministry and the wizarding press at a time when he's tightening security. It may give 'You Know Who' an opportunity to sneak some of his followers into the school."

"That makes sense, Charlie," said Nadine, "Any news on Harry's Anima Summa?"

"Nothing yet, Nadine. Dumbledore says that Harry's getting a bit anxious about it, though."

"Yes, I suppose he must be - the poor kid. It's a lot of responsibility for young shoulders to bear."

"Well I only met him for a few minutes, but I think he'll be able to cope if anyone can," said Demont.

Charlie and Nadine had told Demont about Harry's quest just after they'd arrived back at the cabin a few weeks ago, and had sworn him to secrecy.

"So what are we going to tell them?" asked Charlie.

"We could tell them that the magical creatures had picked up on the cries of a telepathic Banshee - they have been known to exist," suggested Demont.

"Or a rogue Augury - sending out telepathic predictions of forthcoming doom," said Nadine.

"I suppose either of them would be plausible," said Charlie, "But we'll need to do a bit of research on these creatures first."

"I've got just the book in the cabin," said Demont, "I'll go and do a bit of reading. You two stay there for a while - I'll call you when I've found something."

"Do you have the feeling that your brother takes every opportunity to leave us on our own?" said Charlie, smiling as he watched Demont disappear into the cabin.

"Yes, I do Charlie," Nadine replied laughing, "I've tackled him about it, but he just shrugs it off."

"Not that I'm complaining, of course. I do like your company, Nadine."

"The feeling's mutual, Charlie."

They both smiled at each other, and then lay back in their chairs, deep in their own thoughts. The last few weeks had brought them closer together, but they were both afraid of taking things a stage further. Both their thoughts dwelt around how they could achieve this without leaving themselves vulnerable to rejection.

"Come on you two, I've found it," Demont shouted from the cabin doorway, "We'd better make a start."

Charlie got up from his chair and held out his hand to help Nadine to her feet. Nadine was pleasantly surprised when Charlie held onto her hand and led her slowly back to the cabin.

"We're starting to get worried about Harry, Professor Dumbledore. He seems to be getting worse," said Ginny as she, Ron and Hermione walked down to the Quidditch pitch to watch Gryffindor's practice session. They had run to catch up to the headmaster as he made a rare visit to see the team's progress. In reality, he was more interested in how Harry would cope with Quidditch given his disturbed state, but he didn't show his worries as he talked to the three friends.

"I'm confident that things will sort themselves out soon," he replied, "we have to be patient as well as Harry. The best thing you three can do is to be with him as much as possible and show your support."

High above the Quidditch field, Harry was flying his broomstick in wide, slow, sweeping arcs, scanning the space below for the Golden Snitch. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a flash of gold and steered towards it. He didn't chase the Snitch, however - he'd seen something else. A flash of white some distance away down at the edge of the Forbidden Forest. He peered more closely and saw that it was a figure with white hair - could it be that girl?

Harry increased his speed and flashed towards the girl, who looked up at him, smiled, waved - and then walked back into the forest. Harry landed where he'd seen the girl and started to run into the forest after her, but he was stopped by a pair of strong arms that encircled his waist.

"Hold on there Harry," said Sirius. He and Ceri had been patrolling just inside the edge of the forest, knowing that Harry was out on the Quidditch field.

"But Sirius, I saw that strange girl I told you about. She was right here a few moments ago. I've got to go after her."

"You stay with me, Harry," said Ceri, "Sirius, see if you can find her."

Sirius turned and dashed into the Forbidden Forest, "Make sure he doesn't follow, Ceri," he shouted just before he transformed into Padfoot.

"It was her, Ceri. I know it was," said Harry breathlessly.

"Did the rings do anything?"

Harry looked dismayed as he thrust his hand into his Quidditch cloak, "Oh it's too late now. I was too intent on getting to her to try them earlier."

"What happened?" shouted Ron as he and the two girls, quickly followed by Dumbledore, ran up to them.

"Harry saw that strange girl again," said Ceri, "Sirius has gone to try to find her."

"Did you see her, Ceri?" asked Dumbledore.

"No, Professor. We were about fifty yards away just inside the forest when we saw Harry hurtling towards this spot. There were too many trees in the way for us to spot anybody."

"I'm sorry," said Sirius as he walked out of the forest, "I didn't see anything. Couldn't even pick up a scent. Sorry, Harry."

Dumbledore put his hand on Harry's sagging shoulder, "There'll be other times, Harry. She just seems to be waiting for the right time to meet you face to face. You kids had better get back up to the school. Dinner'll be ready shortly."

Dumbledore held up his hand to prevent Sirius and Ceri following the four as they slowly walked back up to the school, "I wanted to speak to you both. Severus came to see me a short while ago - there have been some developments. He's heard from reliable sources that the Dementors are about to join forces with Voldemort."

"What?" breathed Sirius. He shuddered at his terrible memories of them during his stay at Azkaban, "Do you think they'll leave Azkaban?"

"I don't know, Sirius. I think it's doubtful that they'll all leave. Voldemort wouldn't want to raise too many suspicions with the ministry at this stage. But it's something else we'll have to watch out for. I don't want those evil creatures getting anywhere near the school."

"And so say all of us," said Sirius.

"Honestly, Ron," said Hermione, "You really must do some work. The OWLS are only four weeks away."

The four friends were sitting around a small table in the common room. Ginny was writing an essay for Hagrid on the qualities of Unicorns, Hermione was revising Potions, and Ron was reading *'Quidditch Through the Ages.'* Harry was looking at his *'History of Magic'* textbook, although he wasn't taking much of it in.

"There's plenty of time, Hermi," said Ron, "don't worry."

"Ohh. I might as well talk to the wall," she replied. She turned to Harry, her expression softening, "How are you doing, Harry? Are you managing to get any work done?"

"Some, Hermi, but it's not easy trying to concentrate on this dry stuff. I think I'll go down to the library."

"I'll come with you, Harry," said Ron.

Hermione looked forlornly after Harry as he went out through the portrait hole. She wasn't doing a very good job of suppressing her feelings for him, and Ginny looked sympathetically at her friend, knowing what she was going through.

Suddenly, Ginny erupted, "What's the matter with him? Can't he see you? Can't he see that you exist?" she blurted, but regretted her outburst immediately.

Hermione looked with surprise at her friend, "You know he can't feel anything for me, Ginny. He's got to save that for his Anima Summa."

"I know, Hermi," she replied quietly, "I'm sorry. But it hurts to see you suffering like this."

Later that day, their double Potions class with Snape did nothing to ease the mood of the four.

"Are you with us today, Potter?" Said Snape as he spotted Harry daydreaming when he should have been mixing his potion.

"Yes, sorry Professor," Harry said as he commenced chopping the billywig stings.

"We'll see, Potter. You can be the first to test if your potion manages to levitate you."

Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle sniggered at the other end of the room, relishing Snape making a fool of Harry again. Hermione gave them a withering stare and then watched Harry to make sure he chopped the stings in the correct manner.

A little while later, after the potions were brewed, Snape stood up from his desk at the front of the room, "Right. Let's see if you've done this properly. Longbottom, go over to Potter's desk and take a spoonful of his potion."

Neville jumped, and then slowly got up and walked over to Harry. As he passed Hermione, she whispered, "Don't worry, Neville. I think he's done it correctly."

"Get a move on, Longbottom. We haven't got all day," said Snape disgustedly.

Harry scooped up a spoonful of his potion and held it out for Neville to drink. He tentatively sniffed the liquid and then put the spoon in his mouth and swallowed the contents.

"Come out the front, Longbottom. This should only take a few minutes to work - assuming Potter's brewed it properly, of course. Oh by the way, I forgot to tell you that there can be some nasty side effects if the potion is not done in exactly the right way - you may have to endure pink hair for the rest of the day."

The Slytherins erupted with laughter as they heard Snape's pronouncement and watched eagerly as Neville walked to the front of the room. He felt very self-conscious as the whole class looked at him and waited with baited breath. Harry looked very uncomfortable as he willed the potion to work properly. He didn't want to be the cause of any further embarrassment to Neville.

Then, Neville started to float gently upwards. He stopped just before his head touched the ceiling. No side effects could be seen. The Slytherins groaned with disappointment, but the Gryffindors clapped loudly, a few of them slapping Harry on the back.

"That will be quite enough," said Snape, not disguising the disappointment in his voice, "It seems that you are able to do the odd thing properly, Potter. More by luck than judgement, no doubt. Longbottom, the effects will last for ten minutes, after which you will slowly drift back to the floor. You may then join your classmates in their next lesson. Class dismissed."

"We can't leave poor old Neville hanging about like that," whispered Hermione as everyone filed out into the corridor.

"But Snape's still in there, Hermi," said Ron, "He'll put us on detention and deduct points if we try to get him."

"He's right, I'm afraid," said Harry, "The best we can do for Neville is to tell McGonagall why he'll be late for our Transfigurations class."

That evening, Harry was sitting alone in his favourite seat by the window in the common room. He had a sad look on his face as he stared, unseeing, at his History of Magic textbook.

He was brought back to awareness by a light touch on his arm. He looked up to see Clare Bryant, the precocious little first year student, staring at him with a serious look on her pretty face.

"Harry? I.. I was wondering. Can I be your girlfriend?"

Harry sat stunned for a moment, then a slight grin spread over his face, "Why would you want to be my girlfriend, Clare?"

"Because ever since you split up with Kristen, you've been looking so sad. And I don't like to see you sad. I just know I can cheer you up."

Harry stifled a laugh and thought furiously, not wanting to upset her. "Clare. That's one of the nicest things anyone has ever said to me. But don't you think I'm a little bit too old for you?"

"Well yes. But I'm growing up very fast."

"Oh I can see that, Clare. Give you a couple of years and the boys won't know what's hit them." Clare grinned and waited expectantly, "But right now, I don't think I could have another girlfriend. I need to get some thinking done before I commit myself again. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Well yes, I guess so Harry. But if you change your mind any time soon, will you think of me?"

"How could I ever forget you, Clare? And thanks for the offer. You've done my ego the world of good."

"Ok. `Bye Harry," and she walked back to her friends at the other end of the room.

"What was that all about?" asked Ron as he flung himself down in the seat next to Harry.

"Oh, that was Clare trying to cheer me up, Ron. And do you know, I think it's worked - for the moment at least."

One week later, in the middle of the night, there was an incident at a cottage at the edge of Hogsmeade. The cottage stood alone, some distance away from the centre of the town.

An elderly wizarding couple slept soundly in their bed upstairs, and didn't hear the sound of breaking glass at their front door. Even if they had, it is unlikely that they could have done anything to prevent the tragedy that followed - they were too old to generate the power needed to defend themselves.

The first they knew that anything was amiss was the crash of the bedroom door as it exploded inwards off its hinges.

"What ..?" said the elderly wizard as he slowly lifted himself from his pillow.

"What is it, Daniel?" said his wife as she pulled the bedclothes up to her throat.

"Oh my god," was all the wizard was able to say as he saw the two ghoulish forms approach the bed, one to each side. They moved as if drifting just above the floor.

The screams of the unfortunate couple were abruptly cut off as their mouths were covered by the hideous open gashes, and their souls were ever so slowly sucked out of them.

That night, the Dark Mark appeared over the village of Hogsmeade.

Later the next morning, Dumbledore held a meeting in his office, with his usual close aides in attendance.

"It must have been horrible for those poor people," said McGonagall with a shudder, "To think that such a thing could happen in Hogsmeade."

"It's as I feared," said Snape, "The Dementors have joined 'You Know Who.'"

"I'm afraid you're right, Severus," said Dumbledore, "Voldemort has done two things here. First, he needed to give the Dementors something to keep them sweet. Second, he's sending us a warning, telling us he can strike close to home."

"But have the Dementors left Azkaban?" asked Remus, now fully recovered from his ordeal at Callanish.

"No. I checked with the ministry this morning. Most of them are still on guard duty, although a few seem to be missing."

"Is the ministry going to put out a general warning on this?" asked Ceri.

"I'm afraid not," said Dumbledore, "They still don't want the wizarding world to know that Voldemort is back, and the magical community knows that only Voldemort could influence the Dementors to carry out such attacks on them."

"So what are we going to do, Headmaster?" asked Sirius.

"Increase our defences to detect the presence of Dementors," he replied, "We can't prevent them coming into the school grounds, but at least we can make sure we're warned when they come close so that we can go and repel them."

"Should we tell Harry and the others, Headmaster?" asked McGonagall.

"Not yet, Minerva. They've got enough on their plates already, without giving them any more to worry about. Let's try to keep a lid on this as long as we can. Come on, let's get down to the grounds and re-set the defences. Will you get Professor Flitwick on your way down please, Severus?"

The morning of the first day of June saw the school grounds bathed in warm sunshine. The students had finished breakfast and were trooping excitedly down to the Quidditch field to see the final game of the season - Gryffindor verses Slytherin.

Tensions were high among both the teams and spectators. Whoever won the game would be school champions for the year. The teams walked onto the field, the Gryffindors looking nervous but determined, the Slytherins looking their usual confident, cocky selves.

Madam Hooch released the balls, and blew her whistle to start the match. Harry took up his usual position flying lazily above the main action, with Malfoy in close attendance.

"You're going to lose, Potter," he sneered as he flew straight in front of Harry, trying to dislodge him from his broom.

Harry deftly swerved around him, and ignored the remark, keeping his eyes peeled for the Golden Snitch.

After half an hour, the score stood at Slytherin 60 Gryffindor 40, and there had been no sign of the Snitch. David Bletchley, the Slytherin Keeper was having a stormer - Gryffindor would have been way out in front if it weren't for his acrobatic saves.

Then Harry spotted a flash of gold down at the base of the Slytherin goal posts. He angled his broom downwards and started his dive, but was surprised to find that instead of streaking towards the ground, he was only just making any headway. He turned to see Malfoy right behind him, a malevolent sneer on his face, and both hands grasping the back of Harry's broom.

"Get off, Malfoy," he shouted, "That's a foul."

The Slytherins cheered wildly as they saw what was going on, but the rest of students shouted indignantly. When Harry looked back, the Snitch had disappeared.

"Oh look at that," shouted Lee Jordan who was commenting on the game, "That's dirty, Malfoy. Come on Madam Hooch - penalty!"

Madam Hooch had spotted the infringement and blew her whistle for a penalty to Gryffindor, which Katie Bell dispatched with style, sending Bletchley the wrong way.

The game continued for another hour, and Slytherin began to gain the upper hand. The score stood at Slytherin 150 Gryffindor 100. Harry was kept fully occupied, not only with looking for the Snitch, but trying to keep Malfoy at bay. The Slytherin was trying every dirty trick in the book to keep Harry's attention away from his search for the Snitch.

"I know what your tactics are, Malfoy," Harry yelled as their broomsticks once again came close, "You're trying to keep me occupied until you build a lead over 150. But it's not going to work."

"Why not, Potter? Just you try to stop me." Malfoy's eyes went wide as Harry looped up and over his head at great speed, and stormed off in the opposite direction. Malfoy did his best to keep up with Harry, but the surprise tactic had opened a gap between them, which Harry

found easy to maintain. For the next 15 minutes, he zoomed around the perimeter of the field, with Malfoy vainly trying to keep up with him.

"Just look at Harry go," yelled Lee Jordan, "Give it up, Malfoy. You'll never catch him."

Apart from the Slytherins, the students were doubled up with laughter at Malfoy's attempts to get close to Harry. This did nothing for Malfoy's temper and he started flying wildly, trying anything to get to Harry.

Harry suddenly changed his flight path, and started flying straight down the field to one set of goal posts, and then turning back to storm up to the other set of posts. Malfoy followed at great speed, but he was trying to weave between the goal posts at a speed beyond his capabilities to control.

After five lengths of the field, the inevitable happened. While trying to steer his way around Slytherin's right-hand goal post he lost control, and collided with it. Malfoy avoided hitting his head, but he had to let go of his broom as his hands encircled the post. As the broom dropped to the floor, Malfoy was left suspended high in the air, his body wrapped around the post.

To the uncontrollable mirth of the students, even some of the Slytherins, he slowly started to slip down the post, and finished up with a thud as his backside hit the floor.

While this was happening, the score had reached 190 - 120 to Slytherin.

Now free of his tormentor, Harry could concentrate his efforts on looking for the Snitch - and he saw it low down at the base of the Gryffindor goal posts. He swooped down and caught it easily.

"Harry's got the Snitch," yelled Lee Jordan, "Gryffindor win 270 - 190. Gryffindor are the champions."

The Gryffindor students streamed down from the stands and rushed to congratulate their team. Hermione, Ginny and Ron were among the last, since they had been watching from the very top tier. As Ron and Ginny ran down the stairs, Hermione paused. She'd spotted something over by the edge of the Forbidden Forest. She squinted her eyes and saw a figure in the distance. What she had spotted was a flash of white hair.

"Ron, Ginny," she shouted, but her two friends had disappeared into the crowd, and the cheering drowned out her shout.

Hermione quickly left the stand and started running around the left-hand edge of the pitch, in the direction of the forest. She didn't run directly to the figure, but aimed over to one side, hoping that she wouldn't scare her away.

As she got close, she saw that it was a young girl, about her own age, with white hair. She was dressed in a dark blue cloak, and if it hadn't been for her hair, she would never have been spotted. 'It must be that girl that Harry's been seeing,' she thought as she gained the cover of the trees about two hundred yards from where the girl was still standing.

She quietly walked along the edge of the forest and got within twenty yards before the girl suddenly turned and spotted her approach. She looked startled, but didn't try to run away. Hermione walked slowly up to her. She could see the vivid green eyes set in a beautiful face, which was surrounded by startling white hair.

"Hello, I'm Hermione. Who are you?"

The girl's eyes grew wide, and she stammered, "My name ees Margot. You are `Arry's friend, no?"

"You're French?" said Hermione, "Yes I'm one of Harry's best friends. Why are you here? Why have you been watching Harry?"

"I .. I cannot tell you. I must go. I should not be `ere."

"No wait. Why don't you speak to Harry? He's desperate to meet you."

"No .. no. I cannot. Ze time ees not yet right. I must go now."

"What do you mean, the time is not yet right? You're Harry's Anima Summa, aren't you? When will the time be right for you to meet him?"

"Ze time is very soon, now. But .. no .. no. I `ave said too much already. I `ave to go now. Tell `Arry I will speak to `eem soon. Au revoir."

Margot smiled at Hermione and then turned and walked back into the forest.

Hermione stood rooted to the spot, deep in thought. 'I've met Harry's Anima Summa. She's the one he'll spend the rest of his life with. She seems very nice, though. I'd better get back and tell Harry what she said.'

Hermione slowly turned, looking forlorn, and started to slowly walk back up towards the Quidditch pitch. She hadn't gone five yards before she heard the loud `crack' of a foot breaking a twig behind her. She turned and saw two figures dressed all in black, with hoods pulled down over their faces, walking quickly out of the forest towards her.

Hermione turned and started to run, but one of the men grabbed the back of her flowing cloak and pulled her to a stop.

"Let me go," she shouted, struggling to free her cloak.

"No you don't, my pretty," said one of the men, "There's someone who'd like to meet you, and we wouldn't want to disappoint him now, would we?"

The Death Eater raised his wand and pointed it at her. Quick as a flash, Hermione pulled her own wand from her cloak and yelled, "*EXPELLIARMUS*."

The Death Eater's wand went flying from his hand, and, his eyes wide with surprise, he fell onto his back. The other Death Eater, in the mean time, raised his wand and also yelled "*EXPELLIARMUS*," and Hermione saw her own wand fly from her hand.

"Stop messing about and get up," he said, "let's grab her and get out of here. The Dark Lord will be very grateful when we deliver Granger to him."

The two Death Eaters' attention was distracted when they heard a yell in the distance, "Hang on Hermione, we're coming."

Hermione took advantage of the distraction and started to run towards Ceri, Sirius and Remus who were about a hundred yards away, and closing fast.

"Quick, get her," said the first Death Eater.

"No - it's too late, now. Let's get out of here." As he said this, a look of pure venom contorted his features and he raised his wand and aimed it at the fleeing Hermione.

"*FLIPENDO*," he roared loudly.

A brilliant ball of energy sprung from his wand and hit Hermione in the middle of her back with great force. She was flung forward and hit the ground awkwardly, where she lay unmoving.

"NO!" an agonised cry escaped from Sirius' lips as he saw the girl fall. He doubled his speed as he chased after the two Death Eaters, who had just entered the edge of the forest.

"Remus," gasped Ceri, "Get Hermione up to the hospital, I'll help Sirius get those two devils." And she ran after Sirius into the forest.

Remus knelt down beside the still form of Hermione, lifted her hand and felt for a pulse. His eyes held a grim look as he felt only a very weak beat. He looked up at the sound of running feet and saw Dumbledore, McGonagall and Flitwick approaching.

"What's happened, Remus?" Dumbledore said breathlessly.

"Two Death Eaters attacked her Professor. She's in a bad way. We've got to get her up to Madam Pomfrey straight away."

Dumbledore levitated Hermione and they all rushed back up to the school. The sounds of jubilation were quickly hushed as the students saw the inert form being taken up towards the main entrance.

"Oh no," gasped Ginny, "Harry, Ron - it's Hermione. Something's happened to her."

The three friends quickly followed behind as Hermione was taken up to the hospital wing, where Madam Pomfrey directed her towards a bed and started her examination.

Everyone watched anxiously as the nurse completed her examination and poured a few drops of potion between Hermione's pale lips and applied a healing spell to her shoulder.

She then rose and sighed, "All we can do now is wait. Her shoulder was broken - probably from her fall - but she's taken a very powerful Flipendus curse in the middle of her back, right behind her heart. I don't understand it - by rights, it should have killed her. I don't know how she's survived this long."

Harry's eyes were wet, and his voice choked, as he spoke, "I do, Madam Pomfrey. It was the pendant I gave her for her birthday last year. Look - the sapphire is glowing faintly. The wizard I bought it from said it contained magical properties to lessen the spells cast by evil ones."

"It's a good job you gave it to her, Harry," said the nurse, "It saved her life back there. I just hope she comes through this."

"Come on," said Dumbledore, "We can't do anything more here. We'd better see to the students. Remus, you'd better try to find Sirius and Ceri - they may need help. Ron, Ginny, Harry - I think it'll be ok if you stay here with Hermione. She'll want to see her friends if .. when she wakes up. Is that ok, Poppy?"

Madam Pomfrey smiled weakly at the three distraught friends, "Yes, Professor, I think that'll be ok."

Ron and Ginny sat by the bedside, not taking their eyes from Hermione. Harry couldn't bear to sit still, and he slowly walked over to the window and looked out. He let out a gasp as he saw the strange girl with white hair down by the Quidditch pitch. She was looking anxiously up at the hospital window.

"She's down there - that girl - she's down by the Quidditch field," he said.

Ron and Ginny looked up and started over to the window. The three of them looked down at the girl but couldn't quite make out her features - she was too far away - but then turned sharply around as Hermione let out a gasp. The three rushed over to the bed, all thoughts of the white-haired girl driven from their minds.

Harry was the first to Hermione's side, and he reached out and gently caught hold of her hand.

"Harry?" she croaked. "What happened?"

"Shh, Hermi. You're going to be all right," he looked up at Ginny, "Ginny, get Madam Pomfrey."

"Harry," said Hermione in a very weak voice, "I .. I've got to tell you something. It's urgent."

"That can wait, young lady," said Madam Pomfrey as she quickly brushed Harry and Ron aside. After a minute, she looked up and smiled, "She's going to be all right. Her heart-beat is much stronger now. But she'll be full of aches and pains for a few days. Thank god for that pendant."

"Pendant?" said Hermione.

"The one Harry gave you for your birthday, Hermi," said Ginny, "It saved your life. If it weren't for that, the Death Eaters would have killed you."

Hermione looked up at Harry and squeezed his hand, "Thank you again, Harry."

A tear rolled down Harry's cheek, this time from joy rather than sorrow, as he smiled at his friend and held her hand even tighter, "It'll take more than Death Eaters to take you away from me, Hermi."

Hermione smiled and looked with longing at her friend. Then she remembered that she had something urgent to tell Harry.

"Harry, I saw her - the strange girl - I spoke to her."

"What?" Ron, Ginny and Harry spoke the word in unison.

Hermione thought for a moment. She knew she had to be careful not to tell Harry that Margot was his Anima Summa. "I saw her down by the forest, watching the game. Her name's Margot and she's French. I spoke to her for a few minutes before she ran back into the forest. I asked her to come and speak to you, Harry, but she said the time wasn't right yet. She said that she'd speak to you soon though. She seems very nice."

Hermione looked away at the last few words, and Ginny squeezed her other hand in understanding and support.

"She's down on the Quidditch pitch now, Hermi," said Harry, "She's looking up at the hospital window. She seems anxious. Perhaps she saw what happened to you and wants to make sure that you're ok."

"You must go down to her, Harry," said Hermione, "Perhaps now's the right time for you to meet her."

Harry didn't move. He was torn between leaving his sick friend, and going down to see his future. He couldn't decide what was best to do - it would seem so selfish to rush out and leave Hermi now. He had an almost overwhelming feeling of love and protection towards his friend, and it confused the hell out of him.

'What *is* this I'm feeling for Hermi? It's not like the brotherly love I feel for Ginny. It's different somehow. So what is it? It can't be love - she's not my Anima Summa, and she's not meant for me. So what is it?'

"It's too late now," said Ron as he looked out of the window at Margot's receding back, "She's just gone back into the forest."

"Don't worry, Harry," said Hermione, "You'll see her soon. She told me."

Then the hospital door flew open and Padfoot, Ceri and Remus rushed in. "Thank god," breathed Ceri as she saw that Hermione was conscious.

"She's going to be ok," said Ron, "The pendant Harry gave her for her birthday saved her."

Padfoot looked around and saw that the nurse wasn't in the room, so he transformed. "How are you feeling, Hermi?" Sirius asked gently

"A bit weak, Sirius. And I'm aching all over. But other than that I feel all right. Did you find those horrible men?"

"Yes, Hermi. We got them," said Sirius grimly. "They're on their way to the ministry for questioning. And I dare say they'll be feeling some aches and pains for a few days as well."

Sirius then transformed back to his Animagus form as he heard the nurse's door open. "What's all this noise," said Madam Pomfrey as she came out from her office. "Out, out - all of you. This girl needs to get some rest. You can come back and see her tomorrow. And what's this dog doing in my hospital?"

The school returned to normal the next day, and the students resumed their classes. Ron, Harry and Ginny were run off their feet taking books up to Hermione. She refused to take things easy - there were only a few weeks left before they sat their OWLS.

Ginny was sitting by her bedside, stacking some books that Hermione had finished with to take back to the library, when she felt her friend's hand touch her own.

"Ginny - I feel so stupid. I just can't get these feelings I've got for Harry out of my head. And I've just met his future wife, for goodness sake."

"I saw the way Harry looked at you yesterday, Hermi," said Ginny, "And didn't you notice that he wouldn't leave your side to go and see that girl when he had the chance?"

"I know, Ginny. But that was just concern for a friend. I can't pretend it's anything more than that. I know, Ginny. I've spoken to Margot."

"Oh, Hermi," Ginny breathed with compassion.

Towards the end of the next day, Hermione was allowed to leave the hospital, given a clean bill of health by Madam Pomfrey. She went into the Great Hall for dinner, and all her friends rushed up and made a big fuss. Hermione was overwhelmed before Ginny caught her hand and led her to the table to sit next to her, and opposite Ron and Harry.

"Feeling better now, Hermi?" asked Ron.

"Much better thanks, Ron," she replied. She turned her gaze to Harry, who sat grinning at her. She once again felt that lurch deep inside as their eyes met. She quickly looked away and stared down at her plate.

After dinner, the four friends tramped up to the common room to do some badly-needed revision. Harry and Ron went to sit at a free table over by the window, while Hermione and Ginny joined Parvati, Lavender and Kristen at the other end of the room.

"When do you think she'll turn up next, Ron?" asked Harry suddenly.

"Who - Margot?"

Harry nodded.

"Who knows, Harry? She did tell Hermi that it'll happen pretty soon, though." Ron got up and looked out of the window down towards the lake and the edge of the forest. "No sign of her yet," he said.

Harry sighed and looked back down at his Transfigurations book.

Ginny looked at Hermione sitting next to her and saw that her head was buried in her Potions textbook. She knew that Hermione's thoughts were far away from Potions, because she'd not turned a page for the last five minutes, and her eyes stared blankly, unmoving, at the page.

Ginny reached over and gently squeezed her hand.

Hermione looked up with moist eyes, "It's ok, Ginny. I'll get over it... honestly."

Hermione didn't really feel that she'd get over it any time soon. She looked up and across the room at Harry as he sat reading his book. She had a sudden urge to get up and go to him, but she curbed the impulse.

'Why couldn't things have been different,' she thought to herself as she looked longingly at Harry.

Harry's head suddenly jerked up as he felt something. There was a feeling of warmth on the outside of his thigh. He put his hand into his cloak pocket and was astonished as he felt the heat coming from the rings. He also felt that they were vibrating slightly.

He got up and looked out of the window, looking for Margot. But the grounds were deserted.

'This is stupid,' he thought to himself, 'She's got to be somewhere near.'

He went back to his seat and looked slowly around the room. He saw some first and second year students on the next table, Fred, George and Lee the next table over, and Seamus and Neville a little further over. At the far end of the room he saw Parvati, Lavender, Kristen, Ginny and Hermione.

Only Hermione was looking in his direction. He saw that she was looking sadly at him, her eyes full of hurt and longing. She looked lost. She quickly looked back down at her book when she registered that Harry was staring at her.

There was a sickening lurch deep within him as Harry saw what was in Hermione's eyes. That overwhelming urge to protect her filled his mind.

The rings, now held firmly in Harry's hand, felt warmer and the vibrations increased.

He again looked all around the room, and up to the top of the spiral staircase, but there was no sign of Margot. His eyes were dragged back to Hermione. All he could think of was making the hurt he'd seen in her eyes go away.

Harry felt a strange vibration rising from the rings, moving up his body. He looked down and saw a faint silvery glow rising to envelope his head and shoulders.

He looked through the slight silvery haze at Hermione. And then it struck him. He thought back to when she was lying on the hospital bed and the feelings he'd had.

'I don't want Margot,' he thought to himself, 'I want Hermi. I .. I love her. I think I always have loved her. How could I be so stupid to ignore it before?'

He looked at her bushy brown hair, the cute nose, soft full lips, her beautiful big hazel-brown eyes. Her whole being was beautiful. Harry savoured the wondrous feeling that came over him - but then came up against the prophecy.

'But I can't love her,' he thought, 'She was born the wrong time. She can't be my Anima Summa - can she?'

Unseen by Harry, Ginny was staring at him intently. Of all the people in the room, it was her alone that had seen the faint silvery glow rise to cover Harry's head and shoulders. She also saw the direction in which he was looking - and she felt the excitement thrill throughout her whole being as she saw the beautiful event unfold in front of her.

She'd been waiting for months for this to happen. She thought back to the time she'd spoken with Hermione's mother back before the Easter holidays.

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"Hello again Mrs. Granger," said Ginny as she saw Hermione's mother waiting at the Main entrance to the school, "Hermi seems a lot better. I think you've done her the world of good."

"And it's thanks to you, Ginny. I'm so glad she's got a friend like you. I know that Hermi's father will want me to thank you properly for what you've done."

"It's the least I could have done, Mrs. Granger. You said earlier that you hadn't seen her this ill since she was a little baby. What was wrong with her?"

"She was very ill for the first few months of her life. There were times when we thought she wouldn't survive. But thank god she did. You see, she was born prematurely, and she wasn't very strong at first."

Ginny's ears almost flapped when she heard this, but she forced herself to remain calm, "Uh, prematurely Mrs. Granger? How much premature was she?"

"About six weeks, Ginny, perhaps a bit less."

"Ohh," was all Ginny could say then. Her mind worked overtime as she calculated that if she had been born normally, Hermione's birthday would have been on or around 31st October 1980!

"But Hermione never told us about this, Mrs. Granger."

"She doesn't know, Ginny. Oh you know how it is. By the time she was able to understand things, and she turned out to be a strong, healthy girl, it just didn't seem that important any more. We didn't see any reason to tell her."

She quickly said her goodbyes to Mrs. Granger and then rushed up to Professor Dumbledore's office. Luckily he was outside his office, just about to go up the staircase, when Ginny called out to him, "Professor, Professor - I need to speak to you. It's urgent."

"Calm down, Ginny," he said, "Come on up and you can tell me all about it."

Dumbledore had a twinkle in his eye as he absorbed the information given by Ginny, "I did wonder if something like this might happen. Ginny - I want you to swear to me that you won't breath a word of this to anyone - no one at all. Not Ron, not Hermione, and especially not Harry. This has to remain between us two alone."

"Yes Professor. I promise."

"I'll give you the password to my office, Ginny - and every time I change it. If you see any developments between them, I want you to come here and tell me immediately. Do you understand?"

"Yes sir. I promise."

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Ginny now sat transfixed, waiting to see what would happen next. She couldn't stop a little tear running down her face as she waited. She glanced at Hermione and saw that she wasn't aware of anything yet. She still wore the sad expression on her face.

'If she's not the one,' thought Harry, 'why am I feeling like this?'

The power given off by the rings was increasing all the time, and the silvery light surrounding Harry started to get a bit more distinct. The light also did something else. It slowly extended across the room and alighted on Hermione.

Again, only Harry and Ginny saw this.

Harry gazed longingly at his friend with growing realisation, 'I love you Hermi' he thought. 'She must be the one. How can she not be?'

Suddenly, Hermione's head snapped up. She thought she'd heard something - Harry faintly calling to her - telling her he loved her. She looked over at Harry, her vision blurred by the tears that she strove to hold back, and saw that he was still staring at her. But she didn't notice the silvery light. She looked back down at her book, sadly.

'I'm getting delusional now,' she thought. 'I really must get a grip.'

Harry had seen Hermione look up suddenly just after his thoughts of love for her, and he wondered if the rings were sending his thoughts across the room. He could now clearly see the silvery light covering her.

As the rings grew more active in his hand, he again thought, 'I love you Hermi,' and this time tried to will those thoughts in her direction.

Suddenly, Hermione's eyes went wide, and her mouth dropped open. She'd heard it again. She looked back up and across to Harry. His emerald green eyes were sparkling, and he was smiling at her. Her eyes were full of wonder as she finally saw the narrow band of light that joined them both. And she realised then that she hadn't imagined anything - She couldn't prevent the tears that ran down her cheeks then - she knew at last that Harry loved her.

She formed her own thoughts now, 'I love you too, Harry. I always have.'

Harry heard it in his mind. There was no longer any doubt.

He suddenly rose to his feet, knocking his chair backwards, and strode purposefully over to the girls' table. Everyone looked on in amazement as Harry gently took Hermione's hand and drew her to her feet. When they touched, the silvery light disappeared, although the rings were still warm and vibrating. Nothing was said as they looked deeply into each other's eyes. He then pulled her gently towards the portrait hole, and they went outside.

Ginny's face was now awash with tears, but the wide grin she wore revealed her feelings. She saw Ron, his face set in a grim expression, go to follow them through the portrait hole, and dashed to stop him.

"He's hurt her before, Ginny. I won't let him do it again."

Her voice was choked as she stretched up and whispered in his ear, "No Ron. He won't hurt her. How could he? Hermione's his Anima Summa."

"What!" said Ron staring at his sister as if she had two heads.

"There's something I've got to tell you, Ron. Something that I was sworn to keep secret until it happened. But it *has* just happened and it doesn't matter any more. Come on - I'll tell you on the way to see Dumbledore."

Harry and Hermione sat on the bench beneath the tall oak tree down by the lake and gazed into each-others' eyes. They were both in deep shock, and had not spoken a word to each other.

Harry lifted his hand and gently laid it on Hermione's cheek, his thumb wiping away the tears that still flowed freely from her beautiful eyes. She leaned into his hand and covered it with her own. She closed her eyes, unable to comprehend fully what was happening.

"I love you, Hermi," whispered Harry.

"I love you too, Harry," she replied.

He pulled her head towards him and gently kissed her. They were soon lost in the wondrous feelings of love that followed, their kisses becoming deeper and more urgent.

Breathlessly, Harry pulled back and put his hand into his cloak pocket. "I need to do something, Hermi," he said as he pulled his hand back out, now holding the rings.

Harry lifted Hermione's left hand and placed one of the rings on her middle finger. Then he placed the other ring on the middle finger of his own right hand. Harry didn't know why he did it this way - it just felt right, somehow.

They both saw the silvery light return and envelope them both. They looked on wide-eyed with wonder as they began to sense each-others' innermost thoughts and emotions. Any remaining doubt was completely dispelled as they saw what each felt for the other.

But Harry's face contorted with remorse as he saw the pain that Hermione had gone through these past few months. He hadn't realised before that all her ills were caused by him - his inability to see what he could clearly see now. He couldn't believe how insensitive he'd been. How could he have caused this beautiful girl so much hurt?

Then he heard Hermione's thought push past the remorse, 'Hush, Harry. That's all in the past. Feel how I feel now - not then. It more than makes up for those months before we really knew each other.'

And he felt those emotions and his face regained its serene look.

He reached down with his right hand, and held her left hand gently. As he did so, the rings touched.

There was a sudden shimmer, and the silvery light that surrounded them changed to a sparkling blue. Then they heard a powerful, but gentle voice in their minds, speaking to them as if they were one. It was the voice they'd heard back in the secret chamber. It was the voice of Jesus.

'THIS IS THE POWER OF THE RINGS. HEAR ME.'

Dumbledore was in the middle of a meeting with his close aides when Ginny and Ron burst into the room. Snape tutted in annoyance, while Sirius, Ceri, Remus, McGonagall and Flitwick, who had now been included in the circle for the first time, looked up expectantly.

Ginny and Ron hesitated as they saw their professors staring at them, then Dumbledore got up and walked around his desk, "By the expression on your face, Ginny, it seems that something has happened at last, am I right?"

"Yes, Professor. It happened a few minutes ago in the common room."

"What's happened?" the professors shouted as one.

"Oh, I think your all going to like this. Come and sit down you two. Ginny - tell us exactly what happened please."

"It's Harry. He's found his Anima Summa. It's Hermione."

There were gasps all around the room, and then Ginny related the sequence of events leading up to Harry and Hermione going out of the common room together. She also told them, at Dumbledore's nod, about Hermione's premature birth.

"Where are they now?" said Ceri, unable to keep the excitement from her voice.

"I think they went outside, Ceri," said Ron.

"Yes, they're down by the lake under the oak tree," said Remus who had gone over to look out of the window.

There was a mad rush as everyone in the room crowded around the window, looking at the couple down by the lake. There were gasps as they saw Harry put the rings on their fingers, and the silvery light covered them. There were even louder gasps as they saw the silver change to sparkling blue.

Ceri suddenly staggered back from the window and would have fallen if Sirius hadn't reached out to steady her, "The emotions," she gasped, "They're so strong. Even at this distance."

She went back to the window, with Sirius' help, and they all continued to look.

WELCOME ANIMA SUMMAS. YOU HAVE A GREAT AND AWESOME TASK AHEAD OF YOU, BUT YOU ARE NOT YET FULLY MATURE - BOTH PHYSICALLY AND EMOTIONALLY - I WILL HELP YOU WITH THAT.

DO NOT FORGET THAT THE RINGS YOU NOW WEAR MUST BE RETURNED FROM WHENCE THEY CAME. FUTURE GENERATIONS MAY BE NEEDFUL OF THEM.

I MUST WARN YOU THAT THERE IS GREAT DANGER AHEAD. DO NOT BE APART - YOU MUST REMAIN AS ONE. ONLY THEN WILL YOU BE ABLE TO OVERCOME THE ORDEALS THAT AWAIT YOU.

THERE ARE TWO MORE QUESTS FOR YOU TO COMPLETE BEFORE YOU WILL BE ABLE TO FACE THE DARK FORCES WITH IMPUNITY. THE FIRST OF THESE TASKS WILL BE GIVEN TO YOU SHORTLY. BUT BEFORE YOU CAN EMBARK ON IT, YOU MUST LEARN TO GROW AND DEVELOP YOUR NEW POWERS - SEEK OUT THIS KNOWLEDGE WISELY AND PRACTICE IT.

THE ANCIENT WISDOM AND SPELLS I GAVE YOU IN MY SECRET CHAMBER ARE NOW AVAILABLE TO YOU. USE THEM WITH DIGNITY AND SELFLESSLY.

I WILL NOW LEAVE YOU FOR THERE IS MUCH FOR YOU TO DISCOVER.

REMEMBER, DO NOT BE APART AND ALWAYS WEAR THE RINGS.

BE ASSURED THAT I WILL REMAIN WITH YOU ALWAYS.

The voice of Jesus trailed off to a whisper as he spoke the last few words. The blue light disappeared and the two seemed normal once more. They quickly found, however, that they could still sense each-other's emotions whenever they touched, and could still hear each-other's thoughts if they tried hard, even if they weren't touching.

"I think I must be dreaming," said Hermione, "I can't believe this is happening. If you only knew how much I've longed for this, Harry."

"But I do know, Hermi - don't I?"

"Yes - of course you do," she replied as she pulled him towards her and held him close.

They stayed like this for the next five minutes, immersed in their love - a love of such quality and intensity not experienced by anyone since Merlin and Morgana over a millennium ago. They were, simply, ecstatic as they felt the full force of their love for the first time.

At the edge of the Forbidden Forest, Margot watched with increasing excitement. Her vivid green eyes shone and her face lit up with a sunny smile.

'It's happened at last,' she thought to herself, 'I must now return to Rennes-le-Chateau and prepare.'

Hermione passionately kissed Harry before they broke apart, gasping. After a little while, they put their foreheads together and whispered to each other.

"This sensing of emotions, Harry. I wonder if it only works between us, or if we can make it work with other people?"

"Why do you ask that, Hermi?"

"Because there are a couple of people with whom I'd like to share what we have. And I want them to feel how I feel about them too."

"Yes, I'd like to try it on Ron and Ginny, too"

"Are you scared at all, Harry? With what's just happened, I mean"

"Not really scared, Hermi. There was nothing frightening about it, was there? But I am a bit awed by it all. How about you?"

"I feel the same. Jesus told us we've got to learn to develop our powers, and he told us to seek out the knowledge wisely. What do you think he meant by that?"

"I don't know, Hermi. Perhaps we have to go back to the secret chamber to get more instruction? I don't know. I think we'd better ask Professor Dumbledore. After all, Jesus did tell us to listen to his advice."

Back in Dumbledore's office, everyone had returned to their seats after the silvery blue light disappeared. They were all reluctant to intrude on the couple's privacy longer than was necessary.

When he spoke, Dumbledore's voice was stronger and more vibrant than it had been for many a long year. The sparkle was aglow in his eyes once more.

"Right, everyone. We now need to plan our next actions. We've got a lot to do now that Harry and Hermione have bonded and we have to make plans to help them. Ron, Ginny - go down to the grounds and wait for your friends. Don't interrupt them, but when they come back up to the school, will you ask them to come to see us please?"

"Yes, Professor," said Ron, and he and Ginny then made their way down to the Entrance Hall.

Harry and Hermione ambled back up to the school, holding hands, when they heard a rustle from one of the bushes alongside the path. They looked and saw Draco Malfoy emerge and walk towards them.

"Well, well," said the sneering Malfoy, "What do we have here then? Found yourself a new girlfriend, Potter? I'm surprised at you, Granger - I thought you had better taste."

The two looked at each other; distaste clearly showing on their faces. Then Harry lifted his right hand, Hermione her left, and they pointed them, palms outwards, at Malfoy.

"PA HENKYT MALFOY" they both said together.

A silvery-blue light shot from their palms, the streams of light joining a few yards in front of the pair, and then shot straight at Malfoy.

Malfoy's eyes went wide and his mouth dropped as he shimmered, floated up above the ground, and then vanished with a loud 'pop.'

"Bloody hell!" gasped Ron as he and Ginny ran down to their two friends, "That was incredible. What did you do to Malfoy?"

"Oh nothing much," said Hermione, "We thought he'd be better off back in bed."

Down in the Slytherin dungeon, Draco Malfoy blinked several times and looked down at himself. He patted himself all over, but could feel nothing out of place. In fact, he felt as good as he'd ever felt - physically that is. He looked around and saw that he was sitting on his bed in the Slytherin dormitory. He gave a shudder and whispered to himself, "What the hell was that? Wand-less magic! Granger must be Potter's Anima Summa, and it looks like they've joined together. I've got to tell father about this straight away."

Crabbe and Goyle, who were sitting in the Slytherin common room munching on two very large cakes, looked up in surprise as their friend shot down the staircase, quill and parchment in hand, and rushed out of the room.

"I'll be back later," Draco shouted over his shoulder, "I've got to go to the owlery."

Back at the steps outside the school, Ginny rushed to Hermione and caught around her in a tight hug.

"I'm so glad, Hermi. I thought you two would never get together. I've been waiting for ages for this to happen."

"What do you mean, Ginny? You knew all along that Hermi was my Anima Summa?" asked Harry incredulously.

"Yes, Harry. Well, I was pretty sure it was Hermi, but I couldn't be one hundred percent sure."

"But how, Ginny?" asked Hermione as she gently eased Ginny away from her. "I mean, my birthday's 19th September. Jesus told us that the Anima Summa was born exactly three months after Harry. How is it possible? Jesus can't be wrong, can he?"

"No, Hermi, he wasn't wrong. But think carefully - he said you had to be *conceived* three months after Harry, not necessarily *born* three months after him. When your mother told me you were born six weeks prematurely, I just knew it had to be you."

"I .. I was born prematurely?" said Hermione quietly, "They never told me."

"They didn't think it was important, Hermi. You were very ill back then, and I don't think they wanted to be reminded of the pain they went through, not knowing if you'd survive."

"I wish I'd known," said Hermione.

"Me too," said Harry, "It would have made things so much easier."

"I was sworn to secrecy by Dumbledore. I couldn't tell you. But it would have been easier for me too if I could have," said Ginny, "You don't know the agonies I've been through keeping this to myself. Watching you being so hurt and sad, Hermi, and you, Harry, wracked with worry about finding the right one. You don't know the number of times I wanted to go up to you and beat some sense into your head."

"I wish you had, Ginny," he replied.

"Kristen knew too, even before she was aware of the Anima Summa prophecy. She knew you were in love with someone else, Harry, and she confided in me that she thought it was Hermi. Like me, she saw the way you looked at her. But I had to make her swear she wouldn't tell you. That's why she split up with you, Harry."

"Uh," said Ron, "Professor Dumbledore wants you to go up to his office. He wants to speak to you both. But tell me, what was that spell you did on Malfoy? You didn't use your wands. What language was that? I haven't heard anything like it before."

"It was just there - in our heads," said Harry shrugging helplessly, "It must have been one of those ancient spells Jesus told us about. I don't know why we didn't use our wands - what we did just felt like the right thing to do."

"Well it looked pretty awesome from where I was standing," said Ron.

"Come on then," said Harry, "Let's all go up."

"Uh, I think he wants to speak to just you two," said Ginny.

Harry looked at Hermione and they smiled and nodded to each other, "Where we go, you go too - for as long as you want, that is," said Harry.

"Before we go up, there's something we want to try," said Hermione.

"Ginny," whispered Harry, "Come and hold my hand."

"And you come and hold mine, Ron," said Hermione.

The red-haired pair looked puzzled, but did as they were asked. Harry and Hermione closed their eyes and concentrated. As they connected, they once again felt their innermost emotions, their love for each other and for their two friends. As one, they slowly pushed their thoughts and feelings out through themselves and into Ron and Ginny.

"Oh it's so beautiful and wonderful," cried Ginny as the tears ran down her face.

Ron just stood, glassy-eyed, unable to voice what he was feeling - there just didn't seem to be the words that would do it justice.

Harry and Hermione were surprised when they were able to feel the thoughts and emotions of their two friends. They had only intended to show Ron and Ginny what they felt - they hadn't expected a three-way interaction. Ron - Ginny - Harry/Hermione as one.

They stood like that for only about five minutes, but the bond between all four was strengthened immeasurably within that short time.

As they broke contact at last, the four just stood and looked at each other. There was nothing to be said. They now knew far more than all the words in the world were capable of expressing.

As they walked up to Dumbledore's office, Ron suddenly stopped and turned around, causing the others, who were behind, to bump into him.

"Uh, Hermi?" he said tentatively, "This thought transference thing - telepathy - do you think it'll work if we're not physically in contact? I mean, like across a classroom - say, for instance, when we're taking our OWLS and the classroom's very quiet."

"Ron!" said Ginny as she slapped his arm.

"Honestly, Ron!" said Hermione.

Harry just laughed.

"Well, it was worth a try, wasn't it?" said Ron.

Ron and Ginny smiled at each other as they approached the headmaster's office. They were both pleased to see that their two friends had not changed in the slightest - at least not when

they weren't mentally linked together - but even that was not really a change. It was just something new, and very, very special.

Chapter 12 The Attack

Ron and Ginny pushed Harry and Hermione in front of them as they went into the headmaster's office. Dumbledore's inner circle was still sitting around the desk, and looked up expectantly as the four walked in. Everyone was beaming at them - even Snape managed a grudging smile.

Ceri was the first to approach, and she caught around Hermione and whispered, "I'm so glad Hermione. I can't tell you how pleased I am for you."

"Thanks, Ceri," she replied, "I .. I can't believe this is happening."

"Come on, you four," said Dumbledore, "come and join us. We've got a lot to discuss. But first let me congratulate you both, Anima Summas. I know everyone around this table is really pleased that you're together at last. From what Ginny said, and having observed you both over the last few months, I think I can safely say that the bonding was completely spontaneous - you both still have that look of surprise on your faces. So you should be able to achieve full powers - whatever they may be."

"Thank you, Professor," said Harry as the four sat down, "I don't think it's really sunk in yet."

"Ginny told us what happened up in the common room," said Sirius, "But can you tell us any more? I mean, we all saw that silvery light surrounding you both, and then it changed to blue. What was that?"

"It was the rings, Sirius," said Harry, "The silvery light came when I put them on our fingers. Then when the rings touched, the light changed. And the rings spoke to us."

Dumbledore looked up suddenly, "They spoke to you? Can you tell us what was said?"

"Well they didn't really speak, Professor," said Hermione, "There was no sound or anything - we just, well, sort of felt the words inside our heads. It told us that we'd receive details of the first of the remaining two quests very shortly."

"And it told us that we had to develop our new powers," Harry continued, "We have to seek out the knowledge wisely and practice it. I think we need to get your advice on that, Professor Dumbledore."

"Oh," said Hermione, "And it warned us of great danger ahead. It said we mustn't be apart. We have to remain as one."

Hermione and Harry looked deeply into each other's eyes as she finished. The professors sat spellbound as they listened.

"And that's not all," said Ron, "Tell them about that spell with Malfoy."

"Draco saw you?" said Snape animatedly, "Does he know about you two?"

"Yes, Professor," said Hermione, "We saw him as we walked back to the school. Even if he didn't see us together under the tree, he'll know something strange is going on because of what we did to him."

"When he made some snide remarks about us," said Harry, "We - well we sent him back to his dormitory."

"How did you do that?" asked Remus.

"The spell just came into our heads," replied Harry.

"But that's not all," said Ginny, "they didn't use their wands. They can use wand-less magic, now"

All the professors in the room gasped, and just stared.

"We don't know if we can do it individually," said Hermione, "or whether we have to be physically touching for it to happen. I suppose that's something we have to find out."

"What was the spell you used?" asked Dumbledore.

"It was PA HENKYT," said Harry.

"What's that?" asked McGonagall, "I've never heard anything like that before. What language is it?"

"We don't know Professor," said Hermione, "It just came into our heads - or to be more accurate, our collective conscious."

"Pa Henkyt," said Dumbledore, "That's not a language I've heard before. How do you think it's spelt? Is it P-A H-E-N-K-Y-T?"

"I don't know, sir," said Hermione, "but that sounds about right, I think."

"Hang on a minute," said the headmaster as he got up from his chair and walked to the large bookcase at the back of his office. He rummaged around and then came back to his desk carrying a very large, leather-bound book. He turned the pages over, searching, and then stopped.

"Pa - it means 'fly to,'" he turned several other pages over and then looked up again, "Henkyt - it means 'bed.' You told Draco Malfoy to, literally, fly to bed."

"What language is it, Headmaster?" said Remus, "I must say I've studied a lot of them, but I've never heard anything like that before."

"No, I don't suppose you have, Remus," replied Dumbledore, "And neither has anyone else - at least not for the last three thousand years. It's Middle-Kingdom Egyptian. I thought the spellings were familiar. I studied Egyptian hieroglyphics at University. There are a number of different transliterations available today - but they all only guess at what the words would have sounded like."

"And this is only the start," said Flitwick, "When you begin to develop your powers, who knows how much ancient knowledge will become available to you."

"Awesome. Really awesome," said Ron.

"Is there anything else you've found?" asked McGonagall.

"Yes Professor," said Hermione, "We're able to feel each other's emotions when we're in contact, and we can also send those emotions to other people we touch - and pick up what they feel as well. We did it with Ron and Ginny before we came up here."

"And we can read each other's thoughts," said Harry. "We even did that when we weren't touching."

"Phew!" exclaimed Sirius, "This is incredible."

"Sorry to bring everybody back to earth," said Ceri, "but what are we going to do now? Are we going to try to keep this quiet - I mean not just the Anima Summas, but also the fact that Harry and Hermione are together as a couple? What do you think, Professor Dumbledore?"

Dumbledore thought for a few moments, then, "I don't know if that's possible. I mean, we can't tell Harry and Hermione to keep their distance from each other can we - I doubt they'd be able to even if they tried. And it's as plain as the nose on your face how they feel about each other. We have to keep the Anima Summa quiet, of course, but when it gets out that they're an item, it's bound to attract the attention of the daily prophet - especially after those articles Rita Skeeter wrote about them back last year."

"But I don't think we can keep it from 'You Know Who' Professor," said Snape, "When Lucius Malfoy hears about this - and you can be sure that Draco will tell him about the wandless magic - he'll go running to the Dark Lord post haste."

"Do you think that Draco's the spy, Severus?" said Flitwick.

"There's no proof of that, Filius. And I'm not suggesting that he is for one minute. But I know he's in touch with his father regularly. There's nothing sinister in that, but he's bound to tell him what's happened."

"Yes, I'm afraid you're right, Severus," said Dumbledore, looking quite sad, "Voldemort is bound to find out. But I don't want Cornelius Fudge or the Daily Prophet finding out about the Anima Summa just yet - things will start to get out of hand when that happens. Perhaps we'd better sleep on it for now. Harry, Hermione - it's basically up to you two whether you want the rest of the school to know that you're a couple. We'll all meet back here after lunch tomorrow, and then you can tell us what you've decided. Thank you everybody, it's been a very eventful day, and I'm sure you want to get to your beds - without any help from the Anima Summas though, I hasten to add."

"This place is so beautiful, Nadine. No wonder you come up here as often as you can."

Charlie and Nadine were taking a break from writing the report on the magical creature activity, and were walking slowly up the little wooded valley above Demont's cabin. They were walking alongside the mountain stream, heading up to try to find its source.

"Yes, Charlie. This place is in my blood. Whenever I'm away from here I always feel as if there's something missing."

"Hang on, Nadine. I'll help you," said Charlie as he athletically leapt over a stile at the side of the stream.

"Thank you, kind sir," she replied as she climbed the stile and balanced precariously on the top step, holding her arms out towards Charlie.

Now if a soccer referee had been present, he would have immediately given Nadine a yellow card for the obvious 'dive' she then took. Charlie, however, didn't notice the subterfuge and just steadied himself as she crashed into him.

"Careful, Nadine," he whispered, their faces just inches apart and his arms holding her tightly.

"Sorry, Charlie," she replied quietly.

"I'm not," and he did what he'd been dying to do ever since he met her. As they kissed, everything around them seemed to dissolve - only the two of them mattered - everything else was forgotten. It was as if the beauty of the countryside had been transferred into their very beings. They didn't even see the grinning Demont as he stood watching them about 50 yards back down the valley.

Demont whistled happily to himself as he trotted back to the wine shed at the edge of the stream. He wanted to write a short note to his fellow conspirator at Hogwarts. 'Ginny is going to be so pleased,' he thought to himself as he tied the note to his owl and sent her on her way.

A while later, around lunchtime, Charlie and Nadine walked back to the cabin, and were pleasantly surprised to see that Demont had prepared lunch on the table outside. He was sitting on one of the chairs grinning broadly as they joined him.

"What?" said Nadine, looking at her brother.

"It's happened at last, hasn't it," he replied, "You've both finally seen the light."

"Demont .." Charlie started to reply.

"I saw you up at the side of the stream," continued Demont, "and I just had to make you lunch, by way of celebration."

"Oh," said Charlie.

"Don't look like that, Charlie. I'm pleased for you both. Really pleased. Come on, let's tuck in."

Nadine and Charlie looked at each other and then burst out laughing. Demont got up and kissed his radiant sister, and then caught hold of the grinning Charlie's hand and shook it vigorously.

"Oh, I'd better tell you both - I just sent Della to Hogwarts with a note for Ginny. She'll be really pleased to hear the news about you two."

"Oh no," said Charlie, "That means that mum will know about it too - that's the first thing Ginny'll do when she finds out. I can expect a plague of owls now. Mum'll want to know everything about you, Nadine. And she'll want to meet you. She won't rest till she does."

"Don't worry, Charlie," said Nadine, "It's just natural for a mother to want to know about the girl that's in love with her son."

Charlie looked at Nadine intensely, again lost in her beautiful deep blue eyes. Then he shook himself, "What about your parents? Have you owed them as well, Demont?"

"Not yet Charlie. I'll have to wait for Della to come back first."

As they ate their lunch, Charlie's expression suddenly changed from ecstatic to worried.

"What's the matter, Charlie?" said Nadine, "What's wrong?"

"Oh, Nadine. Just as we get together, I'm going to have to leave you for a few days. I've got to give my lecture at the ministry in London the day after tomorrow, so I'll have to go back in the morning to prepare my presentation."

"Oh," said Nadine, her smile fading slowly from her face.

"What's the problem Charlie?" said Demont, "As I see it, you can kill two birds with one stone. Why don't you take Nadine with you? She can give you moral support at your lecture, and then you can visit your parents together."

"Nadine?" Charlie lifted his eyebrows questioningly at her.

"Yes. I'd love to come, Charlie. Just as long as I won't be in the way."

"You can never be in the way, Nadine. And I'll be able to show you off to my friends at the ministry."

"Right, that's settled then," said Demont, "Come on. Let's get back to work. The sooner we finish this report the more time you'll have to yourselves."

Hermione, Harry and Ron sat in the Great Hall eating their lunch. The Anima Summas had made great efforts to act normally all day, trying to conceal their feelings for each other until they met Dumbledore before the afternoon classes started.

Suddenly, Ginny came tearing into the hall, clutching a piece of parchment and grinning all over her face. She quickly sat down beside Hermione, breathing heavily.

"What's the matter, Ginny?" said Hermione.

The three looked expectantly at the grinning redhead, waiting for her to get her breath.

"It's happened," she blurted.

"What. What's happened?" said Ron impatiently.

"Charlie and Nadine. They've got together at last. I just had an owl from Demont."

"Oh that's great," said Hermione, clutching her friend's hand.

"Oh is that all?" said Ron looking disappointed. "I thought that something important had happened - like the Chudley Cannons signing that star chaser everybody's talking about."

"Ron!" said Hermione and Ginny together.

Harry chuckled to himself, "That's great, Ginny. I know how much you've been wanting that to happen."

"Thank you, Harry," said Ginny, and then turned to Ron, looking hurt, "You should be happy for Charlie, Ron."

"Oh I am, Ginny. Honestly I am. But it wasn't exactly unexpected, was it."

"Well," said Ginny, "Mum's going to be so pleased about this. Ron, can I borrow Pigwidgeon? I've got to send her a note straight away."

"Yes ok, Ginny," he replied.

Ginny got up quickly and raced off towards the owlery. "Don't forget our meeting in fifteen minutes," Hermione shouted after her.

Ten minutes later, Ginny made her way towards Dumbledore's office. As she climbed the main staircase Parvati and Lavender, who stood right in front of her, looking determined, halted her.

"What's happening between Harry and Hermione Ginny?" asked Parvati, "Something's going on, isn't there."

"Wh .. what makes you say that, Parvati?"

"Come on Ginny. The Slytherins have been spreading rumours that they're an item all morning. But if anybody knows, you do."

"And we've noticed the way they've been looking at each other in class this morning," said Lavender.

"I .. I. Look, I can't stop to talk now. Dumbledore wants to see me - like straight away. I'll speak to you later, right?"

Ginny deftly sidestepped around the two girls and ran up the stairs to the headmaster's office.

"There's something going on all right," said Lavender.

"Sorry I'm late, everybody," said Ginny as she walked into the headmaster's office.

"Come and sit down Ginny," said Dumbledore smiling. Hermione had told everyone about Charlie and his new French girlfriend and Ginny's visit to the owlery.

"Right then," said Dumbledore, "Harry, Hermione. Have you decided what you're going to do yet?"

"Uh, sorry to interrupt," said Ginny, "But I don't think there's any point in Harry and Hermione trying to hide that they're an item. Lavender and Parvati stopped me on the way here - that's why I'm late. It seems that Draco Malfoy's been blabbing, and there're rumours about them coming from the Slytherins. But more importantly Hermione, Lav and Parvati have noticed the vibes coming from you and Harry. And you know what they're like. Once they get a whiff of something romantic, they won't stop until they find out about it."

"We've been trying our hardest to conceal it all morning," said Hermione.

"But there's no point any more," said Harry, "We've already decided to make it known, anyway."

"It was just so difficult trying to keep it concealed this morning," said Hermione.

"All right. I respect your decision," said Dumbledore, "Just keep your eyes out for Rita Skeeter. She's bound to come looking for a story sooner or later. So - how are you going to let everybody know?"

"Oh, we won't say a thing, will we Hermi?"

"No - not a thing. But everybody'll know before we eat dinner this evening."

"All right. Good luck," said McGonagall, "You four had better get to your classes now."

After they'd gone, Dumbledore called the meeting to order.

"It's best that they go public, I think," said Flitwick, "It would be too hard for them to keep how they feel about each other under wraps. But what bothers me is that they may show something, well, unusual when they're together. I mean, they don't even know themselves what they're capable of, magically, and what they may find 'normal' may be seen as quite startling to everyone else. Can you see what I'm getting at?"

"Yes, I think we do, Filius," said Dumbledore, "It's only a matter of time, really, that strange things will start to happen when they're together. And you can be sure that it'll get back to Fudge, eventually."

"I just hope that he won't start snooping around until they've sat their OWLS," said McGonagall.

"Yes, Minerva. That's what concerns me. We're just going to have to do a bit of stonewalling until the exams are over."

"What about 'You Know Who,' Headmaster?" asked Remus, "What do you think he'll do when he finds out that Hermione is the Anima Summa?"

"I don't know, Remus. I think he'll try everything to get at them now. He might even try to attack Hogwarts itself."

There was a gasp from everyone in the room.

"Surely you don't think he'll go that far, Headmaster?" said McGonagall aghast.

"Minerva, Voldemort is capable of just about anything. And if he can see his dream of world domination being threatened, he may just do that. We'll just have to be as vigilant as we can."

That evening, the Great Hall was buzzing with the rumours about Harry and Hermione. Although rumours that came from the Slytherins were normally taken with a pinch of salt, Lavender and Parvati had wasted no time in telling everybody what they thought was going on. Everyone kept looking at the Gryffindor table, but although Ron and Ginny were there, there was no sign of their two friends. No one noticed that Kristen was also missing.

Then the Great Hall doors opened, and everyone turned to look, the room becoming quiet. And Kristen walked in. She was smiling as she walked to her usual seat at the Gryffindor table. The buzz of chatter started up again as Kristen sat down. Parvati and Lavender started quizzing her about why she was late.

"Where've you been, Kristen?" asked Lavender, "Have you seen Harry and Hermione?"

"Just wait, Lavender," she replied, "They'll be here in a moment."

"What? Have they said anything to you?" asked Parvati.

"Just wait," said Kristen. She was still feeling the wonderful emotions shared with her by Harry and Hermione after they'd told her that Hermione was the Anima Summa. Although she was still a bit fragile about losing Harry, she was really glad that Hermione had been the one. And she was glad that they'd taken the trouble to tell her everything before the rest of the students found out.

Then the doors opened again. Once more, every head turned around and the room became very quiet.

First, Hermione entered and then waited as Harry followed and closed the doors behind him. Then, not taking their eyes from each other, they held hands and walked towards the Gryffindor table.

The room erupted with excited chatter, and there were some jealous looks among some of the girls. Most of them, however, were grinning broadly, and the Gryffindor girls rushed to the pair, firing questions. Lavender was the first to arrive, quickly followed by Parvati.

"It's true then? You're really together - as a couple?"

"Yes, Lavender," said Hermione.

"And about time too," said Parvati. "We've had our suspicions for a while now - ever since we caught you watching ...Uh, so when did this happen then?"

"Only yesterday evening, Parvati," Hermione looked gratefully at her.

"Well we're really pleased for you both," said Lavender, "Come on, come and get something to eat."

Everyone went back to the table, except for little Clare Bryant, who tugged Harry's cloak and gestured for him to lean close to her.

"I'm glad you're together with Hermione, Harry. She's nice, and I'm sure she'll be able to cheer you up."

"Well thank you, Clare," said Harry grinning as Clare walked back to her seat.

Harry and Hermione sat opposite Ron and Ginny, who were grinning widely. "Well there's no going back now," said Ginny.

The following evening, Charlie and Nadine stood nervously outside the Burrow. Charlie had given his lecture on the Romanian Longhorn dragons, and it proved to be a great success. Now he anticipated a more harrowing time as he prepared himself mentally to introduce Nadine to his mother.

"Well are we going in, Charlie?" asked Nadine.

"Yes, in a moment Nadine. Look, my mother can be a bit, well, overpowering at times. And she's going to be pretty excited at meeting you. Are you going to be ok?"

"Yes, Charlie, of course I am. Come on - let's go in. You really should have told them we were coming, you know."

Charlie grinned nervously, "They like surprises, Nadine."

They walked up to the door and Charlie opened it cautiously. They walked into the kitchen to see Arthur sitting at the table reading the Daily Prophet, Molly over by the stove preparing dinner, and Percy sitting in a chair by the fireplace reading a ministry report. As they walked in, all three heads shot up and just stared at them for a few moments.

Then Molly let out a loud shriek, the pan she was holding clattering into the sink. She ran over to Charlie and threw her arms around his neck.

"Why didn't you tell me you were coming?" she said as she looked across at Nadine with tearful eyes, "I'd have prepared a special meal."

"Uh, mum. This is Nadine - she's from France. She's my girlfriend."

"Oh, Charlie," said his mother, "I know who it is. I got everything out of your sister yesterday. Hello, Nadine - you're very welcome at the Burrow. Come and sit down by the table and meet the others."

She caught under Nadine's arm and eased her over to the kitchen table.

"Very pleased to meet you, Nadine. I'm Charlie's father - call me Arthur"

"And I'm Percy, Charlie's brother," said Percy smiling as he walked over and sat next to Nadine.

Nadine shook hands with the two men, "I'm pleased to meet you all. I hope you don't mind me dropping in like this?"

"Mind? Of course we don't," said Molly, "I've been looking forward to meeting you for days."

"Hello. Who's this then?"

Everyone looked to see Bill Weasley come into the room. "Nadine," said Charlie with a wide grin, "the cool-looking dude who just came in is my elder brother, Bill. Bill this is Nadine."

Bill smiled and walked over to the table. He lifted Nadine out of her chair and hugged her.

"So you're the girl who's captivated my little brother? When I spoke to him last month, he couldn't stop talking about you."

"Hello, Bill. Pleased to meet you," said Nadine, laughing.

"Bill Weasley," shouted Molly, "You mean to say you knew all about this a month ago and you didn't tell me?"

"No Mum," said Bill defensively, "I knew Charlie was in love with a girl, but I didn't know the feeling was mutual back then." He looked slyly at Charlie and Nadine, "And for the sake of Charlie's sanity, I thought it best not to mention it until he did something about it. You know what you're like."

"Well really!" said Molly, trying to suppress a smile.

"So Bill, what are you doing here? Shouldn't you be in Egypt?" asked Charlie.

"Oh just a lightening visit, Charlie. I had to come over for a meeting at the bank in Diagon Alley, so I thought I'd drop in for dinner."

"Charlie, I didn't know you had two other brothers," said Nadine, "I thought it was just Ron and Ginny."

"Uh, I've got two more as well, Nadine. Fred and George are in their seventh year at Hogwarts. I suppose you'll have to meet them at some time."

"Why do you say it like that, Charlie? Don't you want them to meet me?"

"Oh no, you misunderstand Nadine. Well, just ask Bill and Percy what they're like. They're an experience all on their own. Believe me, once you've met them you won't be the same person again."

"Oh Charlie," said Arthur, "Now you're exaggerating. I know those two can be a bit, well, inventive on times, but they'll just adore Nadine, I'm sure."

"Inventive is not the word, Dad," said Percy, "Remember that time last year when they nearly blew up all the Slytherins?"

"Yes, Arthur," said Molly, "I've had to send more howlers to those two than all the other kids put together."

"Blew up the Slytherins?" said Nadine, laughing, "I think I'm going to like them a lot."

"Nadine was at Hogwarts for her final year - the year after I left," explained Charlie, "So she knows what the Slytherins are like."

"So how long can you both stay?" asked Arthur.

"Only overnight, Dad," replied Charlie, "We've got to get back to France to finish the report on the magical creature disturbances."

"What happened, Charlie? Did you find out the cause of it all in the end?" asked Bill.

"Uh, yes we did. But I can't really tell you, I'm afraid. Professor Dumbledore has sworn us to keep it secret."

"Dumbledore? How's he involved?" said Bill, his interest peaked.

"We saw Ron and Ginny in France," said Charlie, "They were with Harry and Hermione. It seems they were on a quest, which happened to be the cause of all the disturbances. So we sort of joined forces with them."

"And how are you feeling now, Nadine?" asked Molly, "Ginny told me you were hurt in that fight with the Death Eaters."

"Oh it was nothing, Mrs. Weasley. Just a cut from some splintered wood."

"Death Eaters?" shouted Bill, "What were they doing there?"

"Bill, I can't tell you any more details - let's just say that the four kids are involved in some pretty heavy stuff. Don't worry - they're well protected. But 'You Know Who' is involved."

"'You Know Who'? In anybody's language, that means that Ron and Ginny are in great danger. Can't we do anything to help?"

"I don't think so Bill," said Arthur, "Try not to worry too much - Dumbledore is looking after them. He won't let anything happen to them."

Everybody's attention was drawn to the fireplace as a rush of blue flame shot up the chimney. Then Ginny's head appeared, grinning widely, "Mum?" she shouted.

Molly walked over to the fireplace, "Ginny. I didn't expect you to call me tonight. What's the matter?"

"Just a quick call, mum. Just to tell you that Harry and Hermione have got together - you know, as a couple."

"Oh that's great, Ginny. They're a lovely couple of kids - well matched." There was a hint of disappointment in Molly's voice - she had secretly hoped that Harry and Ginny would have got together one day.

Charlie looked at Nadine and walked over to the fireplace to stand beside his mother, "Did I hear right, Ginny. Harry and Hermione?"

"Charlie!" Ginny shouted, "Is Nadine with you?"

Nadine walked to Charlie's side, "Hello Ginny. How are you?"

"Oh Nadine. I was so glad to hear about you and Charlie. I can't wait to meet you both again. I've got so much I want to ask you - and I want to know everything!"

"We'll probably see you over the summer holidays, Ginny," said Charlie. "But what about Harry and Hermione?"

"Look, I've got to go now. Everybody's coming back from dinner. Charlie, Nadine - Hermione's the one. You know what I mean. See you soon - 'bye."

Ginny's head disappeared in a burst of blue flame, and Charlie and Nadine just stood grinning.

"What did she mean, Charlie?" asked Percy, "She's the one - what was that about?"

"I can't tell you, I'm afraid. It's all part of the thing we've got to keep secret."

"Well I'm sure we'll be told when Dumbledore thinks we need to know," said Arthur.

Molly let out a yell at the sound of water boiling over on the stove, "The dinner," she said as she rushed over, "It'll be ready in ten minutes."

"I'll just show Nadine around the garden, Mum," said Charlie as he led Nadine out of the kitchen door.

"She's a very nice girl, isn't she?" said Arthur.

"Yes she is," said Molly, a dreamy look in her eyes, "You could tell straight away, couldn't you? And did you see the way they look at each other?"

"I like your family, Charlie," said Nadine as they walked around the garden, "and I can't wait to meet Fred and George."

Charlie grinned, "They like you as well. I could tell straight away."

"Do you think that Hermione's Harry's Anima Summa, Charlie?"

"Yes, that's what Ginny meant, all right. I just hope that 'You Know Who' doesn't find out."

"I'm so glad for them. I could tell that she was in love with Harry, and she was really hurting back in France - Ceri told me. It's so romantic, isn't it?"

"Yes, I guess it is, Nadine. Talking about romance, come here for a minute."

Nadine squealed with delight as Charlie pulled her to him and kissed her passionately. After five minutes, Bill, who shouted from the kitchen door, interrupted them.

"Put her down, Charlie. There's something else to eat in here. Come on."

After they had finished dinner, they sat at the table talking, finishing off the four bottles of wine that Bill had brought over from Egypt.

"So, what are you going to do when the report's finished?" asked Arthur.

Charlie and Nadine appeared startled as they looked at each other.

"Uh, I don't know, Dad," said Charlie, "We haven't really talked about it. And I don't know what the ministry's got lined up for me next - I suppose they'll let me know after my holidays. They've given me six weeks off - the first break I've had for a year. We're going to spend most of that time back in France with Nadine's brother - and we'll pop back here for the odd visit, of course."

"Be sure you do, Charlie," said Molly darkly.

"So Granger's the other Anima Summa," said Voldemort reflectively. Lucius Malfoy had just given his report after receiving the message from Draco. Wormtail looked at the Dark Lord with trepidation, expecting him to go into a rage. But his master just sat on his throne deep in thought.

"And you're sure he's got it right? They did wand-less magic on him?"

"I'm sure, my Lord," said Lucius, "He said the spell they used wasn't in any language they'd come across at Hogwarts."

"Hmm. I wonder how strong they are? And from what Lupin told us, they can now only get stronger. We've got to do something, and do it quickly."

"What do you suggest, my Lord?" asked Lucius.

"I can see no alternative, now," said Voldemort darkly, "We'll have to attack Hogwarts. It'll be dangerous with Dumbledore there, but perhaps we can arrange a few surprises. Wormtail - go and summon my inner circle. I want them here, now!"

Wormtail rushed out of the cave while Voldemort tapped the arm of his throne impatiently. Five minutes later, six more black-cloaked figures stood in front of the throne.

"There have been developments," said Voldemort, "Potter has found his Anima Summa - the Granger girl. We have to act soon to capture them - they can't be allowed to develop their powers. I have decided that I will lead the attack on the school myself."

"But my Lord," said Lucius hurriedly, "You'll be seen by everyone at the school. The ministry will be forced to admit that you have returned, and that's going to set back your greater plan by months, if not years."

Voldemort reflected on his chief lieutenant's advice, "Perhaps you're right, Lucius. I still need to be there to control the Dementors and to weaken the protection spells around the grounds, but it may be better if I remain hidden. I don't want you seen either, Lucius, nor the rest of you - your positions at the ministry will be compromised if you're spotted. Like me, you will have to remain hidden and direct operations from inside the Forbidden Forest."

"But who'll lead the attack, my Lord?" asked Avery, "It won't be that easy to capture Potter and Granger now they've joined together. And you can be sure that they'll be well protected."

"What I have in mind will draw off that protection, Avery, and leave them exposed. Wormtail - you and Travis will lead the main attack to capture the pair. I want all of you to get together and choose one hundred of your best Death Eaters for the main attack."

"Yes, my Lord," they all said in unison.

Voldemort shifted his position on his throne, and pointed his wand at the floor. As they all watched, a plan of the school grounds appeared in the dust. He then looked up, "Now this is what I plan to do ..."

It was the dead of night at Hogwarts, and all the students were sleeping soundly - except for two of them who crept silently through the corridors, each carrying a heavy sack over their shoulders. Peeves was floating about the empty hallways that night, but the two easily managed to evade him. They'd had plenty of experience at doing that during their seven years at the school.

They moved stealthily into the Entrance Hallway and then went into the corridor that led down into the dungeons. They were heading for the Slytherin common room.

"Did you get the password, Fred?"

"Yes George. I put a bit of pressure on that first year Slytherin - I told him that I'd tell Snape about his little midnight jaunts unless he gave it to me. No problem."

They tried hard to contain the fit of giggles that bubbled inside them as they approached the entrance portal to the Slytherin common room. Fred stood in front of the stone snake and said the password.

"Vampire bites."

The stone snake hissed and the portal opened. They both let out a sigh of relief as they silently crept inside.

The following morning, Harry, Hermione, Ron and Ginny went down to the Great Hall early for breakfast. A few Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs were there, but the four were surprised to see two red-haired figures sitting at the Gryffindor table - Fred and George were grinning like Cheshire cats as they each tucked into a mound of bacon and eggs.

"Uh oh," said Ginny, "Something's up. They're never down this early."

"What have you two been up to?" asked Ron as the four sat opposite them.

"You'll just have to wait to find that out," said George.

"Let's just say that this is our big-bang farewell to Hogwarts," said Fred.

"What have you done?" asked Harry, "I suppose we'd better keep our eyes peeled on the Slytherin table?"

"Spot on, Harry," said George.

"Pass the word when the others come down," said Fred.

Ten minutes later, almost all the Gryffindors, Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs sat tucking into their breakfast. But there was no sign of the Slytherins yet. The word had been spread and everyone was chatting excitedly, wondering what was going to happen.

The teachers looked puzzled at the top table, wondering why no Slytherins had appeared, and what all the animated chatter was about.

"Severus," said McGonagall, "Where are your lot this morning?"

"I don't know," replied Snape, "I think I'd better go and find out."

As Snape rose from his seat, Malfoy came into the Great Hall, closely followed by Crabbe and Goyle. Then more Slytherins appeared and walked over to their table. Two minutes later they were all there. The room had become very quiet, with all the other students watching the Slytherin table expectantly.

"Something's up," said Malfoy to his two friends, "Look at the way everybody's watching us."

"What's gone wrong, Fred?" asked Ron, "Nothing's happening."

"Just wait for five minutes," Fred answered.

Three minutes later, there was a buzz of disappointment around the room as nothing untoward had occurred at the Slytherin table. They were just wolfing their breakfasts as they normally did, and talking among themselves. Two minutes after that, something started to happen.

Crabbe, who had stuffed himself silly with five helpings of bacon and eggs, opened his grease-covered mouth to tell Goyle to pass him some more toast, but no words came out. Instead, something that resembled a balloon issued from his mouth, floated up to the ceiling, and then exploded with a loud `BANG.'

There was silence in the room as everybody stared. Then Malfoy opened his mouth to ask what was going on - and the same thing happened. The balloon almost reached the ceiling before it exploded. Then, all the Slytherins started talking at once - except they didn't talk. Hundreds of balloons started rising into the air and exploding. The noise was deafening.

Meanwhile, Fred and George were congratulating themselves on their best prank yet, while all the other Gryffindors, Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs fell about with uncontrollable laughter.

As the Slytherins got angrier at what was happening, they started shouting - aiming their ire at the Gryffindor table. But the bubbles just got bigger and the explosions got louder. As a consequence, the mirth of the rest of the students increased in intensity - they were all now rolling about on the floor, holding their sides, as they failed to keep their giggling under control.

Even most of the teachers were laughing quite openly at the sight - except for Snape, who looked angrily at the Gryffindor table. Dumbledore's eyes were twinkling, and he had an amused grin on his face.

After five minutes, Snape brought the show to a close. He rushed over to his house table and herded the Slytherins out of the Great Hall and into the school grounds, where it was raining quite heavily.

After a further five minutes, the students started to recover their composure and some of them walked up to Fred and George, patting them on their back.

"Really cool, George," said Lee Jordan.

"Your best one yet, Fred," said Seamus Finnegan.

"Wicked - really wicked," said Katie Bell.

"That was hilarious - I can't remember when I've laughed so much," said Angelina Johnson.

Hermione leaned over the table towards the proud-looking pair, "So you've really managed to go out with a bang then?"

This brought a further bout of giggling from the Gryffindors, who then started to rush out of the Great Hall, wanting to see what the Slytherins were doing now.

"What did you do?" asked Ginny.

"Well," said Fred, "We've been working on this for a few weeks, now. We played on the Slytherins well-known aptitude for greed."

"Yes," continued George, "We made about three hundred fake gold coins - they look exactly like the real thing. Except that we spiked them all with this new charm we invented last month - a variation of that Donkey charm we did on them."

"And we planted them in the Slytherin common room last night," said Fred.

"We knew they wouldn't be able to keep their hands off the coins," said George, "That's why they were late - I bet they were making sure there were no more coins hanging about."

"When you pick one up and put it in your pocket, the heat of your body eventually dissolves it, and it gets absorbed into your skin. It then makes its way into the stomach, where it waits. The effects - well you just saw that," said Fred.

"It's not activated until food or drink mixes with it," said George.

"So how long will it last?" asked Ron.

"That depends," said George.

"On what?" asked Harry.

"On how greedy they are," said Fred, "You see, the more coins they stuff into their pockets, and the more food they eat, the longer the effects will last."

"It can be from about an hour, right up to a full day," said George.

"That's brilliant," said Hermione, "Everybody can now see which of them is the greediest. "

"I bet the two greediest will be Crabbe and Goyle," said Ron.

Fred and George looked at each other, and started grinning. They each bent over the table and planted a big kiss on Hermione's cheek.

"You're brilliant, Hermi," said Fred, "We hadn't thought of that."

"We can make another killing, George," said Fred, "Like we did with Ginny's spell last year."

"I was thinking the same thing," said George, "We can take bets from all the students on who they think will be the greediest - we can't lose - especially if we give even money odds on each bet."

"Five sickles on Crabbe," shouted Ron as he handed the money over to his brothers.

"Three sickles on Goyle," said Ginny as she dug her hand into her cloak pocket.

"How about you two?" George asked Harry and Hermione.

They looked at each other and Harry said, "We'll have 10 sickles on Malfoy."

"Done," said Fred as he took the money, "Come on George, let's get round all the others before classes start."

"Just one moment you two - what do you know about what happened earlier?"

The six turned to see the angry face of Professor Snape glaring at the twins.

"Now now, Severus," said McGonagall as she joined them, "You don't know that Fred and George had anything to do with it."

"Come on, Minerva," he replied animatedly, "Who else would it be? This has Fred and George Weasley stamped all over it."

Just then, Professor Dumbledore joined the group.

"I want these two disciplined, Headmaster," said Snape, "I think that expulsion would not be too harsh a punishment."

"Come now, Severus," said the headmaster, "There's no proof that they were responsible. I think it would be best if the matter were dropped. And I really think it would be a good idea if you go outside to see if your house students are all right"

Snape made a strangled noise and stormed out of the Great Hall. Dumbledore then turned to Fred and George, "I must say that I haven't seen such hilarity at the school for many a year. I haven't seen anything like it since the time of Mooney, Wormtail, Padfoot and Prongs. This will go down in the annals of Hogwarts as one of the best pranks ever played on the Slytherins. Minerva, 10 points to Gryffindor for raising the morale of the school, don't you think? But not a word to Severus."

"I quite agree, Headmaster," she replied.

"Oh, before you go, you two," said Dumbledore, "Professor Snape was right in one respect. I wouldn't be doing my duty if I let you both go unpunished. Make sure that half of any profit you make is donated to school funds."

"Yes sir," they both said together, feeling relieved, wondering how Dumbledore found out about their betting plan. They then ran out to see the other students.

For the next two days, the prank was the talk of the school, and everywhere, students could be heard chuckling as they recalled the event. Fred and George duly handed over 6 galleons to a grinning headmaster, being fifty percent of their winnings.

Their profit margin was far greater than they'd hoped, so they didn't mind giving half of it to school funds. The reason for this was the unexpected winner of the 'greediest Slytherin' competition. Most of the students had bet on either Crabbe or Goyle. But the winner, albeit only by about five minutes, turned out to be Millicent Bulstrode. Crabbe was second and Goyle third. It turned out that Malfoy was way down the list.

The following Saturday turned out to be one of the warmest and sunniest days of the year so far. Most of the students were taking advantage of the kind weather that morning as they sat and lay on the grass in the school grounds. Most of them were revising for their imminent

exams. The fifth-years, in particular, were starting to get a bit panicky - their OWLS were now less than two weeks away.

Even Ron had started to get down to some real work. He, Ginny, Harry and Hermione were lying on the grass, reading their textbooks. They were lying on their stomachs under a tree, not far from the Forbidden Forest. They had gone there to get away from a group of first-years students, who had congregated by the lake. Their incessant chatter was ruining their concentration.

Ceri, Remus and Padfoot were patrolling just inside that part of the Forbidden Forest nearest to the four friends.

They knew that something was wrong from Harry's behaviour. He was quietly reading his Potions notes, when he suddenly jumped to his feet, clutching his forehead. Hermione and the other two looked up, startled.

"What's the matter, Harry?" said a concerned Hermione.

"It's my scar," Harry replied, "It just started to hurt."

His face was screwed up in pain as he sat back down on the grass, still holding his hand to his head.

Ron turned towards where Ceri and the others were sitting and shouted to them, "Come quick. Harry's scar is hurting."

Remus, Ceri and Padfoot rushed over, looking about them all the time, trying to spot anything unusual.

"My scar suddenly started to hurt," he told Ceri, "Voldemort is close - I can feel it."

"I'll go to get Dumbledore," said Remus, "Ceri - you'd better get these four back up to the school."

Before anybody could move, they heard a commotion coming from the far end of the grounds. Students were screaming and running back across the Quidditch field towards the school. As they looked to see the cause of the panic, a feeling of coldness and despair shot through their minds. Just at the far edge of the Forbidden Forest, they could see about twenty Dementors, the ghoulish forms heading directly towards them.

"I can't see 'You Know Who' with them," said Ceri.

"Oh he's there all right, Ceri," said Harry, "My scar's telling me that. He must be hidden in the trees somewhere."

As they started up to the school, they saw the teachers rushing out of the main doors, quickly followed by Dumbledore. They ran to head off the Dementors, preparing to repel them from the grounds. The charms they'd put in place earlier had given them advance warning of their approach, so they'd had time to plan their defence.

Ceri and Remus started to run to join the teachers, but Dumbledore waved them back, "We'll take care of those," he shouted, "You keep close to Harry and the others."

Most of the students were now watching the action, having been joined by the ones that had run from the far end of the grounds. Some of the seventh-years, including Fred and George, rushed to help the teachers with the Dementors.

Ceri and Remus ran back to the group and started to direct them up to the school. But at that moment, they saw a sight that filled them with fear.

From five points around the grounds, opposite where the Dementors were attacking, poured about a hundred Death Eaters, their faces covered by their black hoods. Ceri could see that the attack had been carefully planned, one of the groups of about twenty, were moving quickly to cut off their retreat to the school, while another was headed to cut off any possible escape into the forest. The other three groups were converging on their position, the ones in the lead already starting to throw curses, although they were still too far away to achieve any sort of accuracy.

The students started screaming in panic, and rushed back to the school, trying to get away from the black-cloaked demons. Most of them were close enough to get into the school fairly quickly, but some - including the group of first-years - had quite a distance to run.

Ceri looked back at the other end of the grounds, and could see the teachers and some of the students producing their Patronus to fight off the Dementors. They hadn't seen the Death Eaters attack yet.

Padfoot suddenly transformed and Sirius grabbed Ceri and shouted, "Come on. We're cut off from the school - lets get these kids behind the tree. At least we'll get some protection there. We'll try to hold them off until we get some help from the other end of the grounds."

Ceri complied as she helped get the four friends behind the cover of the tree, but she knew it was hopeless. The Death Eaters were closing fast and there was no chance that they'd get help in time.

As they all crouched behind the tree, curses started to pepper their position. Despite the spells they threw in return, they could all see that it was only a matter of time before they were surrounded.

Then Harry and Hermione stood up and joined hands, Harry's right hand clasping Hermione's left. The others looked on in surprise as they lifted their other hands, palms upwards above their heads, and shouted out two strange words.

"DADEX MER."

A beam of silvery-blue light shot from their upraised hands and met about ten feet above their heads. Where the beams met, an emerald green shimmering light appeared. It then spread outwards in all directions for about twenty feet, and then cascaded down until it met the ground. All seven of them were now encased by the emerald green light.

"What's that, Harry?" shouted Sirius, "What have you done?"

"We're just protecting you, Sirius," Hermione replied.

Just then, the three closest groups of Death Eaters came around both sides of the tree and pointed their wands at the seven. One of the Death Eaters stepped forward and spoke.

"It's all over," said Travis, "Your position is hopeless. We can kill you all in a second."

Another of the Death Eaters stepped up alongside him, "You can all go free if you put down your wands and hand over Potter and Granger to us. I'll give you 5 seconds to decide."

A low growl came from Sirius, "Wormtail!" he said, "You can go to hell."

He lifted his wand to fire off a spell at his enemy, but was restrained by Harry placing his hand on his arm.

"You won't be able to penetrate the protective shield with any spells," said Harry, "But we can."

"I think you'd better transform, Sirius," said Hermione, "The teachers and some of the seventh-years will be here soon."

Back at the other end of the grounds, a huge and powerful Patronus, generated by Dumbledore, forced the remaining five Dementors to retreat back into the Forbidden Forest. They joined the other Dementors who had been banished from the grounds a little earlier.

"Headmaster. Look," shouted Flitwick as he stared at the other end of the grounds.

The teachers and seventh-years turned to see a large number of Death Eaters standing in three groups. One of the groups - of about sixty - was surrounding Harry, his three friends, two adults and a large dog.

"Come on, quick," shouted Dumbledore, panic clearly showing in his voice, "We've got to help them."

They all took off for the other end of the grounds in a mad sprint, Fred and George in the lead. The sight of their little brother and sister being in such a hopeless position spurred them on.

Harry and Hermione turned back to the Death Eaters after Padfoot appeared. They again lifted their arms and pointed their palms at Wormtail.

"*SHAJ HER*," they shouted together.

A beam of silvery-blue light left each of their hands and again met in front of them, before continuing through the protective shield to strike Wormtail directly on his head.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then Wormtail's black hood disappeared to reveal his rat-like features. Then, incredibly, his head expanded to about five times its normal size.

Wormtail turned around in panic, shouting to the other Death Eaters for help. But they all stood transfixed at the sight, not knowing what to do.

Dumbledore and the others were now getting close.

"Look," said Professor Trelawney, "It's Peter Pettigrew! Harry was right. He's still alive."

Everyone else was able to see Wormtail, drawn to his features by the size of his head - even the students who had gained the protection of the school and were peering out from the windows on the ground floor couldn't really miss him.

Then, suddenly, Wormtail's head resumed its normal size.

"Quick," said Travis, "Grab them - Dumbledore's getting too close for comfort."

Five of the Death Eaters advanced to grab hold of Harry and Hermione, but were brought to a sudden stop. They couldn't get through the barrier that the pair had erected. Again they tried, aided by another ten Death Eaters, but they couldn't penetrate through to the pair.

Wormtail and Travis howled in frustration, "Kill them. Kill them all," shouted Wormtail.

Sixty Death Eaters lifted their wands and aimed them at the group of seven.

"*AVADA KEDAVRA*," they all yelled at the same time. Sixty deathly-green beams of light struck the emerald green barrier. And sixty beams of green light were deflected away, leaving everyone inside the shield untouched.

"Kill them," roared Wormtail. Again the Death Eaters flung their killing curses, and again they were deflected. This time, however, some of them rebounded back and struck some of the Death Eaters. Six of them fell to the ground dead. Unfortunately, one of the beams rebounded and missed Wormtail's group, travelling straight between a gap in their ranks, and continued up to strike into the midst of the last group of students who had just arrived, breathless, at the school doors - the first-years.

"Noooooo!" wailed Harry and Hermione as they saw what had happened.

"Let's get out of here," shouted Travis as he saw the rapidly approaching teachers and seventh-years.

All the remaining Death Eaters took flight, flinging curses wildly behind them. Some just grazed some of the nearest seventh-years, although no great harm was done.

"Ten of the fleeing hoard were stunned by the spells flung by Dumbledore and the teachers and dropped to the ground, immobile, but the rest of them escaped back into the forest.

Harry and Hermione had remained linked together ever since they had erected the protection barrier. Now they again raised their hands and ended the spell, the emerald green field dissipating into the air.

"Are you all ok?" shouted Dumbledore anxiously as he went up to them.

"Yes, we're all right, Professor," said Hermione, and then pointed up towards the school, "But there's someone up there who isn't, I'm afraid."

Everyone rushed up to the main entrance doors of the school, where they found the group of first-years crying and looking down at the ground, where a small form lay unmoving.

"Oh no!" said Dumbledore as he hurried over. But Harry got there first and looked stunned as he saw Clare Bryant lying on the floor. Her face was white and her eyes stared sightlessly at the sky above her. She bore the unmistakable mark of the killing curse.

"On no," cried Harry, "not Clare!"

Harry knelt on the ground beside her and lifted the still form gently in his arms. He hugged her to him as he cried unashamedly. "I'll get them, Clare," he whispered, "I'll make them pay for this."

Everyone felt completely helpless and inadequate at that moment. All they could do was just stand and stare, unwilling to believe that the popular little girl had been taken from them.

Harry raised his tear-stained face to the headmaster, "She didn't deserve this, Professor. She wouldn't harm a fly."

Hermione approached Harry, her eyes ablaze, and touched his shoulder.

"Harry, quick. Join with me."

Harry stared at Hermione, and then something dawned in his mind. He quickly got up and took hold of her hand - his right and her left - the rings touched.

"Get back, everyone - please," he said softly.

Harry and Hermione closed their eyes and concentrated hard. Then they extended their free hands over Clare's body and spoke two words softly.

"MESNEH MWT"

Everyone gasped as the silvery light shot from their hands and joined just above the little girl's body. Then it spread in a silvery blanket and covered her.

The still form rose slowly from the ground and then turned until she was standing upright on her feet. Then the silvery glow faded. Clare let out a loud gasp and opened her eyes, staring around her in confusion. Ron and Ginny caught her as she staggered, and sat her back onto the ground

They both comforted her as she started crying. "What happened?" she whispered. "I thought I was dead!"

She looked up and saw Harry and Hermione standing over her, their hands still extended over the spot where she'd earlier laid. And she knew - she understood - she felt their beautiful and comforting aura, which still lingered in her soul.

She shot up and grabbed them both, clinging to them desperately. "Thank you," she said, "Thank you Harry, Hermione."

The hushed spell that everyone had been under then broke, and a thousand questions were uttered.

"How did you do that?" asked Fred.

"What did you do?" asked George.

"What sort of magic was that?" asked Lee Jordan.

"I've never seen anything like it," said Katie Bell.

Even Snape stood transfixed, looking at Harry and Hermione with a look of deep respect on his face.

"Come on, everyone," said Dumbledore, "Back into the school, quickly. We need to check that there aren't any more Death Eaters and Dementors hanging about."

Professor McGonagall, her eyes wet, caught hold of Harry and Hermione and fiercely hugged them both, "Thank you so much," she said.

Professor Trelawney then came up to Harry, "I'm so glad you've found your destiny Harry. What you both did was so beautiful."

Then she walked back into the school, a serene look on her face.

Dumbledore walked up to Harry and Hermione, "That was incredible," he said, "I never thought I'd see the killing curse overcome like that. Thank you both from the bottom of my heart for saving Clare. Come up to my office in an hour - all of you - we've got plenty to discuss. But first, I'll take Clare up to Madam Pomfrey to make sure there's no lasting damage. Come on Minerva, bring Clare with you, if you please."

Clare was very reluctant to relinquish her contact with the pair as McGonagall gently eased her away from Harry and Hermione.

"It's ok, Clare," said Harry, "We'll see you later."

"Professor Dumbledore," said Harry as McGonagall and Clare went into the school. "Can I see you for a moment?"

"Yes Harry?"

"Voldemort - he was here. I knew because my scar started hurting. But he's gone now. My scar stopped hurting when the Death Eaters started running away."

Dumbledore looked surprised, "I didn't see him Harry. He must have stayed at the edge of the forest - probably directing the Dementors or the Death Eaters. Obviously, he still doesn't want to make it known that he's back. But after this, we should be able to persuade Fudge to tell the wizarding world about his return."

Before he went into the school, Dumbledore turned to Ceri, Remus and Padfoot, "You'd better check that they've all gone before we hold the meeting - but be careful!"

Only Ceri, Remus, Padfoot and the four friends were left in the grounds after the headmaster went up to the hospital wing.

"You four had better come with us," Ceri said smiling ruefully, "We might need some protection."

"That was great back there wasn't it?" said Remus, equally ruefully, "The protectors having to be protected by the protected!"

"Huh?" said Ron, confused.

"No wonder `You Know Who´ tried to get you two," said Ceri, "you're very, very powerful now. He must be feeling a bit vulnerable."

"I don't know about that," said Harry, "But there's one thing I *do* know. That spell we put on Wormtail - when we made his hood disappear and inflated his head. We wanted to make sure everybody saw him. There's no way that Fudge can keep Sirius' innocence a secret now, is there?"

Padfoot nuzzled his wet nose into Harry's hand, and Remus said the words that Sirius was thinking.

"Of course he can't Harry! How can he be guilty of killing Wormtail if everybody's just seen him alive and well. We'll force him to go public with it now - and Sirius can get his official pardon."

Back in his cave, Voldemort was deep in thought as his inner circle stood nervously in front of his throne. He'd seen the wand-less magic done by Harry and Hermione, although he was not aware yet that they'd saved the little girl from the killing curse.

"This is serious," he said to his group, "I never thought that they were so strong. And they'll only get stronger as time goes on." He banged his hand down on the arm of his throne in frustration. When he saw the pair perform the protection spell, even from a distance, a tendril of fear had started to worm itself through his brain.

"There must be something I can do to stop them!"

He suddenly stood up, "Go now. Continue your recruitment campaigns. I'll summon you all when I need you. Lucius, make sure our friend keeps his eyes peeled until the end of term. I want to know if he spots any weaknesses in them. Anything at all. Now go."

After his initial rage and frustration had subsided, Voldemort started thinking more rationally about the problem he faced. And a chink of light started to grow in his mind.

'If there are ancient spells to aid the Light side, why can't there be something similar to aid the Dark?' he thought to himself. 'I wonder .. I need to do some research to see if there's anything I can use.'

He got up and walked over to the back of his cave where he kept his Dark Arts library. He looked through the ranks of forbidden books on the shelves and stopped at one.

"This looks promising," he said to himself as he heaved the large tome off the shelf.

He went back over to his throne, sat down, and started to read ...

The usual group sat around Dumbledore's desk that afternoon. The four friends were also there as they started to review the events of the morning.

"What were those spells you used this morning?" asked Sirius.

"The first was 'Protect friends,'" said Harry.

"The second was 'Reveal face,'" said Hermione.

"And the last, that saved Clare, was 'Reverse death.' Thank goodness that Hermione was thinking clearly - I was too caught up in my grief to call it to mind," said Harry.

"What you two did this morning," said McGonagall, "was nothing short of miraculous. We all owe you a debt of gratitude for what you did for that lovely little girl."

There was a general murmur of approval from around the room.

"She can't stop talking about you, you know," continued the deputy-head, "I think she must have sensed your inner feelings and emotions when you did the spell. She was quite overcome with the beauty of it all."

"I think she must have felt it, Professor," said Hermione, "We had to put everything we had into that spell."

"How is she coping with it all, Minerva?" asked Remus.

"Physically, there's no problem. But Poppy wants to keep her in the hospital for a few days. She's a bit worried about the psychological effects as the reality of it all hits her. She did die, after all. I've been in touch with her parents - I think that talking to them will help. They should be here in the morning."

"So what do you think 'You Know Who' will do now, Headmaster?" asked Snape.

"I don't know, Severus. He must have been desperate to try an attack on Hogwarts - it must have been his last-ditch attempt to get at the Anima Summas. I've got a feeling that we won't be hearing from him for a while - he's got a lot to think about now."

"Uh, Professor," said Ginny, "Everybody saw Peter Pettigrew this morning. Won't Sirius be officially cleared of the charges now?"

"I think so, Ginny. I've had to make a report to the ministry, and the Minister for Magic is coming here himself tomorrow to lead the investigation into the attack. I'll make sure that enough teachers and students testify that they saw Wormtail to make it impossible for him to keep quiet about Sirius' innocence. And since Voldemort wasn't spotted, he needn't tell the world that he's back if he's so inclined. So I don't see any problem at all. I will, of course, press him to go public about Voldemort as well"

The four youngsters grinned at Sirius - which was returned by him in kind.

"What about the Anima Summas, Headmaster?" asked Remus, "Everybody saw what Harry and Hermione did today. And Fudge and his team are bound to find out about it. What are we going to say to them?"

Dumbledore sighed, "I don't think there's much we can do to cover it up. It would be silly to even try. Fudge is not stupid - he didn't become Minister for Magic for nothing. Just tell them the truth. But don't say anything about the prophecy or the Anima Summas - I'll take care of that myself."

"They seem to be getting stronger, Headmaster," said Flitwick as he grinned at Harry and Hermione.

Dumbledore thought for a moment, "I'm not sure about that, Filius. Don't get me wrong - they're powerful, very powerful. But if the prophecy and what we've learned is anything to go by, they've still got a lot of learning and developing to do. Don't forget, they've still got two more quests to complete to reach their full potential - and the rings told them they have to learn and grow. No - what we've seen is nothing compared to what we will see, at some time in the future. And they still need our protection. I know it looks as if they can protect themselves without any problem, but you know how devious the Dark Side can be - and they can't watch their backs twenty four hours a day."

"Does that mean we're still in a job, Professor?" asked Ceri.

"Oh, most certainly you are," Dumbledore replied, "I've been in touch with your superiors in the States, and they've seconded your services to me indefinitely. You'll continue to work with Sirius and Remus, and I'll try to get a couple more of the ministry's best aurors out of Fudge when he visits tomorrow."

"That's great!" said Sirius as he smiled at Ceri. Then coloured slightly as he saw Harry's grinning face looking directly at him.

"So what do you make of it all, Headmaster?" asked McGonagall as her face took on a look of reflection, "I mean, there are things at work here that none of us even guessed at before. What do you think it is?"

"Ah, Minerva. If only I knew," Dumbledore replied, "But there's certainly some spirit, or force, active. And it's obviously a part of the Light Side. Think about it. I believe that you, Hermione, have been guided by this force right from the start."

Hermione looked startled, "What do you mean, Professor? I haven't felt anything at all."

"Well I may be wrong, but just think. You've probably been acting as Harry's Anima Summa right from the start of this mystery - even though you were unaware of it. First, you made sure that Sirius sorted him out when he was in the depths of despair. Then you purchased the amulet that contained the message - although I know the Priory of Sion was involved in that - but it was you they contacted. Then you were the brains behind solving the riddle of the amulet's message. You've given unflinching support to Harry in the face of great personal pain and danger. You've even been willing to sacrifice your own happiness to make sure that Harry met the right girl."

Hermione's face was bright red with embarrassment as she heard Dumbledore singing her praises, and Harry held her hand tightly.

"That's only my personal opinion, Hermione," the headmaster continued, "But everything fits. Let's just say that there are far more things in heaven and earth than we know about. We may never know what's behind it all, but it's definitely the Light Side in some shape or form. But we can't, of course, rely on speculation to protect them. We have to be vigilant. I get the feeling that we'll have to be on our toes to make sure that these two reach their ultimate goal."

The following day, Cornelius Fudge and his team arrived from the ministry. Fudge went straight up to Dumbledore's office, while his team prepared one of the classrooms as their temporary office.

"This is a bad business, Albus," he said, "The school coming under attack from Death Eaters, for goodness sake. I'm under a lot of pressure to get some answers, you know. And the media are on to it now. I've managed to keep them quiet for the moment, but they'll be straight back at me when I return to London."

"I understand, Cornelius," said Dumbledore, "You are welcome to speak to whoever you like - most of the students saw the attack, and all the professors were right there in the thick of it. Perhaps we can meet up for lunch in my office later and we can discuss your findings. And I'm sure you'll want to talk to me after you've interviewed everyone."

"Thank you, Albus. Right, we'd better get started."

Later that morning, one of the first-year Gryffindors came into the common room. "Harry, Hermione - Professor McGonagall would like to see you both in her office."

Five minutes later, Hermione knocked on the office door, and the professor came out and closed the door behind her. "Clare's parents are inside," she said quietly, "Clare's told them all about what happened yesterday, and they know that you saved her life. They want to see you. I haven't told them any details, but they're clearly puzzled. I leave it to you to be as discreet as you can."

McGonagall walked away down the corridor, and Harry opened the door and led Hermione into the office.

"Mr & Mrs Bryant?" she asked, "I'm Hermione Granger and this is Harry Potter. You want to speak to us?"

Mrs Bryant rushed over and hugged them both, while her husband slowly walked towards them and shook their hands.

"I can't tell you how grateful we are," said Mr Bryant, "Clare told us what happened yesterday - she said that you two brought her back to life. How did you do that? Everybody knows that you're special, Harry, but how was that possible?"

"We're trying to come to terms with it all," said Mrs Bryant, "but, quite frankly, we didn't believe Clare until Professor McGonagall confirmed what she told us."

"Uh, we can't tell you everything," said Harry, "but, well yes - Clare was hit by the killing curse and she died - I held her in my arms myself, swearing that I'd make those Death Eaters pay for what they'd done - you see, Clare's a very popular girl, and we'd become good friends, despite the difference in our ages.

But it's Hermione you really need to thank. She was the one who first thought of the spell to save her."

"But how is it possible?" asked Mr Bryant, "No one has survived the Avada Kedavra curse - except yourself, of course Harry."

"Mr & Mrs Bryant. What we're about to tell you must remain between us four. Will you agree to that?" asked Harry.

"Of course, Harry," said Mrs Bryant, "We just want to understand what happened to our little girl."

"Hermione and I - we .. uh .. Well, we're able to join together mentally - it's all part of an ancient prophecy that's come to light. We are now able to access some very powerful ancient magic, given to us by the Light Side. When we join together, we can perform that magic. Until we stood over Clare, we didn't even know we could bring her back. It's all very new and we don't know the extent of it yet - we only found out ourselves a matter of days ago."

Mr Bryant gasped, "This is incredible. I haven't heard anything about it at the ministry."

"They don't know about it yet, Mr Bryant," said Hermione, "Look, it's bound to be made public sooner or later and then you'll know the full details of it all. But for now, we have to keep it secret."

"Don't worry, Hermione," said Mrs Bryant, "It's safe with us. I'm just so grateful to you both - I don't know what we'd have done if we'd lost her."

"She couldn't stop talking about you both," said Mr Bryant, "I think she sees you as - well, some sort of divine beings. And after speaking to you, perhaps she's not far off the mark."

"We're hardly divine," said Harry, "Although something of a higher order does seem to be guiding us - we just don't know. All we can do is try to follow the path that's been set out for us."

Clare's parents left the office to spend some time with their daughter shortly after. They were content that they at least knew something of the forces that saved Clare, and they were relieved that it was clearly the Light Side.

Fudge and the ministry team spent the rest of the morning in endless rounds of interviews with the students and teachers, listening with interest to all they were told. By lunchtime, they still hadn't finished. They still hadn't spoken to Harry and his friends. What they had heard, however, got them buzzing with excitement, and it was an animated Fudge that joined Dumbledore in his office for lunch.

"I can't believe what I've heard this morning," he said, "Strange spells, bringing people back from the dead - what's been going on, Albus?"

Dumbledore sighed deeply, knowing that he'd have to tell the minister about the Anima Summas. But first he wanted to get Sirius officially cleared. "I'll tell you about that later, Cornelius. But first, were you told about Peter Pettigrew leading the Death Eaters?"

"Yes, I was. It seems that everyone saw him. The students recognised him from that article the Daily Prophet ran two years ago about Sirius Black. I suppose you'll want me to give him an official pardon now?"

"Of course I will," replied Dumbledore, "There isn't a problem is there? You won't have to say anything about Voldemort to clear him."

Fudge winced as he heard the dreaded name, "No, I suppose not. Ok, Albus, I'll see to it when I get back to London. And I'll make sure the Daily Prophet carries an article about it."

"Thank you, Cornelius. He deserves no less than that. He's done some excellent work for me spying on Voldemort and protecting Harry Potter and his friends. If I may suggest - perhaps you can officially employ him as an auror and second him to my team?"

"No problem, Albus. Now talking about Harry, what was that all about yesterday?"

"Firstly, Cornelius, Harry felt that Voldemort was close by - his scar told him he was there. I don't think you can hold off much longer in telling everyone about his return."

"No - I don't want to do that yet, Albus. Now what about Harry?"

Dumbledore then told Fudge about the prophecy, the quest, and the Anima Summas. He also urged him to keep it quiet.

"This is incredible, Albus. I don't know if I can keep something like this quiet - the whole world is going to want to hear about it."

"Think about it, Cornelius. If we tell them about the Anima Summas, we'll have to tell them why they're here at this moment in time. They're bound to guess the reason - the rise of the Dark Side, and Voldemort in particular. So if you tell them about Harry and Hermione, you'll have to tell them that Voldemort is back."

Fudge stroked his chin, deep in thought, "You're right of course. I'll keep it quiet as long as I can, but news of these strange spells they've been doing is bound to get out sooner or later. We'd both better prepare for the announcements we'll have to make at some stage. How does Harry and Hermione feel about being thrust into the limelight - I mean, Harry's always in the news, but this is different."

"I haven't really spoken to them about it yet. I thought it best that they come to terms with it themselves before exposing them to the world's collective scrutiny. After all, they've only been the Anima Summas for a few days. We've got to give them time and space to develop. And don't forget - they've got their OWLS in just over a week and I don't want them to have any distractions. "

"Yes, you're right, of course. We don't want to do anything to hinder that development. They're our best chance - our only chance - of beating the Dark Side. I shudder to think of what it was like fifteen years ago, when 'You Know Who' was at his prime," said Fudge.

"Voldemort's found out about them, of course. That was the reason for the attack yesterday - he wants to get hold of them - or more accurately, he wants to get hold of the ancient knowledge and spells they have."

"Oh Lord, Albus. We can't let that happen. He'll be unstoppable if he gets his hands on that."

"Quite. So I was thinking. Can you spare me a couple of your best aurors to add to my protection team?"

"I wish I could, but it's impossible, Albus. We're fully stretched trying to keep tabs on all the new Death Eater recruitment that's still going on. I'm afraid you'll have to make do with what you've got - why don't you think about some of your seventh-year students? Perhaps a couple of them could join your team?"

"No, Cornelius. A few of them are showing excellent potential, but they won't have the necessary experience they'll need. I'll just have to try to juggle my resources to make sure the kids are given the best protection."

"Right. We should be finished by late afternoon. I'll see you before I go."

The following morning, Ginny rushed down the common room stairs clutching a newspaper in her hands. She was clearly excited as she ran over to her three friends, who were sitting by the window.

"Look at this! Errol just delivered it from Mum," she said as she thrust the copy of the Daily Prophet at them.

Harry grabbed the paper and stared at it with a wide grin on his face. The front page carried a large banner headline - 'SIRIUS BLACK INNOCENT,' and his grinning photograph, clearly taken quite a while ago, stared out at them.

Harry read the first few lines of the article aloud, which had been written by Rita Skeeter

'Sirius Black, who caused great consternation in the wizarding world by escaping from Azkaban last year, has been officially cleared of all charges by the Ministry of Magic.

In an exclusive interview, Cornelius Fudge - the Minister for Magic - stated that Peter Pettigrew, previously thought to have been murdered by Black, had made an appearance at Hogwarts School on Saturday. He led a group of black-cloaked figures in an attack on the school.

Details of this are still sketchy, but this reporter will be investigating, and will bring you the latest news as soon as possible.

The minister further stated that Sirius Black has now been employed by the ministry as an Auror. It is understood that he will be working directly for Professor Albus Dumbledore, the headmaster of Hogwarts, and will be in charge of security there.

"This is great," said Ron, "He'll be able to walk around the school without having to change into Padfoot."

"I'm going to make sure everybody sees this before breakfast," said Ginny, "I'm going down to pin this up on the doors of the Great Hall."

The other three grinned as Ginny raced through the portrait hole, "Sirius will be so pleased," said Hermione.

"Yes, he will," said Harry, "But there's a down side as well - Rita Skeeter'll be snooping around. She's bound to find out about those spells we did - you know what she's like - a dog with a bone - she won't stop until she finds out about us."

"Well she may well find out, Harry," said Hermione, "But you heard what minister Fudge told us yesterday - he doesn't want it broadcast yet. And neither does the headmaster. I'm sure that between them, they'll be able to keep her quiet."

"Let's hope so, Hermi," said Harry.

There was an excited chatter at breakfast. Everyone had seen the newspaper that Ginny had pinned to the Great Hall doorway. The question on everybody's lips was when they'd get to see the famous Sirius Black.

Half way through breakfast, the headmaster stood up and rapped the table in front of him with a spoon. The room went quiet, and every head turned towards the top table.

"This morning, I had a surprise announcement to make," he said, "But a certain someone has put paid to that." He looked directly at Ginny, who coloured up, but still managed to pretend that she was not the focus of everybody's attention.

"You all know by now," he continued, "that Sirius Black is completely innocent of all charges made against him nearly fifteen years ago. And you will also know that he'll be working at the school. His main job will be to protect you - the student body - from any more despicable attacks like we saw last Saturday. He will be joined in this task by Ceri Jones, our visitor from the United States. I'm sure you've all seen her around the school these past few months.

"Now I know you're all anxious to meet them. They'll be in the school grounds during the lunch break, so if you have any questions, you can speak to them then." Dumbledore then spoke more loudly, "Sirius, Ceri - would you like to join us at the top table for breakfast?"

The Great Hall doors opened, and Sirius and Ceri walked in. They stood side by side as they looked around the room at the students, wondering what their reception would be. Then Harry, Ron, Ginny and Hermione stood up and started to clap. Soon, all the Gryffindors, quickly followed by the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs, were standing, clapping and cheering. The Slytherins remained seated - most of them were scowling. The two walked self-consciously up to the top table, relieved grins on their faces, and sat at two spare seats between Remus and Hagrid. All the professors, including Snape, shook their hands and welcomed them to their ranks.

After breakfast, Harry and his friends rushed up to Sirius and Ceri. Draco Malfoy hurried up to the owlery.

"This is great, Sirius," said Harry, "I've waited for this for ages."

"And it's thanks to you two," he replied affectionately as he looked at Harry and Hermione.

"So we'll be seeing more of you both now then?" asked Ron.

"Yes, you will," said Ceri.

"It'll be a relief to walk about the school on two legs instead of four," said Sirius. "But we'll still be doing the same job as before. The only difference is that I'll be paid for it now."

"Will you have to register as an Animagus now, Sirius?" asked Hermione.

"Yes - I spoke to Fudge about it yesterday. I've got to go to the ministry this afternoon to do it - and they'll need some other details, you know, where to send my pay cheque each month, and such things."

"Where will you be staying now?" asked Ginny.

"Oh. At the school," he replied, "I've got the guest room next to Ceri."

"I hope there isn't an adjoining door?" said Ginny grinning slyly.

"Ginny!" exclaimed Hermione as she looked sternly at her friend.

The others just laughed, albeit not without some embarrassment.

Voldemort was in a foul mood, as he had been for the last two days. Wormtail and Nagini had long since been banished to a much smaller cave about a hundred yards from Voldemort's main residence - the Dark Lord wanted as much space as possible to display the pile of books opened at likely-looking pages. He had not stopped reading since the previous Saturday evening, and had followed a myriad of cross-references in the various Dark Arts volumes in his library. But all to no avail.

He flung a large tome to the other end of the cave, as the latest thread he was following yet again proved to be a dead end.

"There's got to be something here!" he shouted, his sibilant voice echoing from the damp walls.

Once more, he walked over to his bookcases, and started looking at the titles. He came to one exceptionally large book and pulled it impatiently from the top shelf to read the title. As he supported the heavy tome in both hands, a much smaller, insignificant little book fluttered to the floor of the cave.

'What's that?' he thought, 'It must have been hidden behind these large books, pushed to the back of the shelf years ago'

He dropped the large book and picked up the smaller one. He read the title - 'Memoirs of Aleric the Dark.'

'Hmm,' he thought, 'Aleric - I remember reading about him a while ago. He was one of the most respected Dark Arts practitioners of the seventeenth century. I didn't know I had this book.'

Voldemort walked back to his throne, and started to thumb through the brown-stained pages. It was written by Aleric himself, telling the story of his celebrated travels throughout Europe and the Middle East. He settled down to read, his foul mood lifted by his discovery of the little treasure.

One hour later, Voldemort stared at the heading of the last chapter in the book. He couldn't believe his eyes - 'The True Location of the Necronomicon.'

"What!?!!" he gasped.

Before he read the chapter, he thought about what he knew about the fabled Dark Arts book ...

'The Necronomicon - the lost treasure of the Dark Arts. The literal translation is 'Book of Dead Names.' Written by Abdul Alhazred around 735 AD - he was known as 'The Mad Arab.' He died, or disappeared in 738 AD. The story goes that he was seized by an invisible monster in broad daylight, and was devoured horribly. No one really knows what was contained in the book - but there are tales that those who have read it either died terrible deaths, or went mad from what they learned. It is said that the volume contains details of an ancient race that pre-dated humans, dark and powerful magical spells, and how to summon powerful beings from another realm. There have been several fake copies of the book in circulation since those times, some of which are thought to contain some of the original text - but many of them were burnt by the Church.'

Voldemort knew that he was on the verge of a great discovery. If he could get hold of the book, he would be able to master the world - Anima Summa or no Anima Summa. He started to avidly read Aleric's account ...

'It has long been believed that the Necronomicon was lost soon after Abdul Alhazred died. But I know the truth of it. I know this from a letter the mad Arab sent to his brother just before he went missing. I was able to obtain this letter, which was never known to exist before, during my explorations in the ancient city of Damascus. Read closely and learn.'

Abdul did not die - he went to the city of IREM - the fabled City of Pillars. Many people have heard of this place and thought it to be a myth, supposedly hidden beneath the shifting sands of the Arabian Desert. But it was discovered by Abdul, and I now know where it is located.

He said in his letter that he was taking the Necronomicon with him - and would lay it to rest in that strange city - after he had found the portal into another realm. He gave instructions in his letter for his brother to make the information available to any true follower of the Dark Arts. But his brother was afraid. He knew what was contained in that book, and he did not want it made known to anyone. He knew that only great evil would come of it.

IREM lies below the ancient rose-red city, half as old as time. Its entrance can be gained outside the Treasury - go to the second pillar from the left and open it. There will be found the key to the underground metropolis, and the way to the Necronomicon.

Be warned - the Necronomicon is only for the eyes of those who truly follow the Dark Arts. If there is a shred of the Light in you - you will perish as soon as you look on its pages.

I wish you well, if you dare to take up the challenge and seek out the great book. I am now too old, so I leave it to one who will come after me to uncover its secrets.

"Yes!" Voldemort exclaimed. "WORMTAIL," he roared, his voice thundering out through the cave entrance and over the surrounding countryside.

A few moments later, Wormtail ran into the cave, "You called, my Lord?"

"Wormtail. I have an important task for you. Make use of your rat form and gain entry to the British Library in London. I want to know where I can find an ancient city. It is called 'The Rose-Red City - Half as Old as Time.' Go immediately - and don't come back until you've found something. When you return, you can clear up these books and stack them neatly on my bookshelves.

"Yes, my Lord," Wormtail replied and hurried out of the cave.

Ron looked terrible as he slowly made his way down to the common room from his dormitory. His face was pale, and he felt very, very sick. He saw Harry and Hermione sitting by the window, feverishly thumbing through their Potions notes.

Hermione looked up as Ron approached. Unlike Ron she was supremely happy and full of the vigour of youth. Harry's health appeared to be half way between the two extremes displayed by his two friends

"Ron. What's the matter?" said Hermione, a look of concern clouding her earlier brightness.

"How can you be so happy, Hermi?" he replied, "You *do* know what day it is, don't you?"

"Yes Ron. The first day of our OWLS - exciting, isn't it?"

"Ugghhh," was all Ron could say.

"Oh come on, Ron," she said, "You'll be ok. You'll feel better when you get some breakfast inside you."

"I feel sick, Hermi. I can't eat any breakfast this morning. Dumbledore's a sadist, I swear. How can he make Potions the first OWL we have to do?"

"Look on the bright side, Ron," said Harry, "At least we'll be getting the worst one over with first."

"You think that's our worst one Harry?" he replied, "We've got History of Magic this afternoon, and Divination tomorrow morning! These are going to be the worst two days of my life."

"Well you've only got yourself to blame, Ron," said Hermione sternly, "I did try to get you to do some work before. This is what you get when you try to cram everything into two weeks before the exams."

"Oh take pity, Hermi," he whined, "I'm suffering."

"Yes," said Harry, "But not as much as Neville. Look at him!"

They followed Harry's gaze and saw poor Neville Longbottom barely able to put one foot in front of the other as he slowly made his way down into the common room.

"Oh, Neville," said Hermione as she trotted over to him, "Come on. Come and sit by us three for a moment."

"I know how you're feeling, Neville," said Ron as the pale-faced boy sat down.

"Do you?" asked Neville. "We've got two Potions exams this morning. The first two hours we've got the practical exam, followed by another two hours written one. I don't know if I'll survive this. Snape is going to make mincemeat out of me."

"Don't worry, Neville," said Harry, "We're all in the same boat. Just focus your mind on dinner tonight - it'll be over by then."

Neville made a sickly attempt at a grin, and then followed the other three down to the Great Hall.

At dinner that evening, the fifth-year Gryffindors looked exhausted. And it was only the first day - they had another four days of exams to go. Of them all, only Hermione and Kristen looked reasonably happy.

"Hermi?" asked Ron tentatively, "What answer did you get to question three, this morning?"

Hermione thought for a moment, "Oh that was an easy one - chopped dried nettles mixed with sliced caterpillar tails."

"Ohhhh," groaned Ron, "I put masticated frogs brains and chopped ginger root."

"Never mind, Ron. You can't get them all right. What did you get for number four?"

"You don't want to know, Hermi. Can we talk about something else?"

Things did get a bit easier over the next four days, and Ron started to look a lot better. Harry'd been right. The worst day had been the first one - Ron started to think that Dumbledore had some method to his madness, after all.

At the end of the fifth day, the exams were over and all the fifth-year Gryffindors collapsed into their usual chairs in the common room, exhausted, but happy that it was finished at last.

"Well, you lot," said Ginny as she sat next to her three friends, "what was it like? You've all managed to survive, I see."

"It was terrible, Ginny," said Ron, "Listen to the voice of experience - and don't do what I did. Make sure you start your revision early when you take your OWLS next year."

Hermione lifted her eyes to the ceiling in despair.

It was early the following day when Dobby entered the headmaster's office, "Professor Dumbledore," he said, "There's a lady downstairs says she wants to talk to you. She says she's from the Daily Prophet."

"Oh lord," breathed Dumbledore, "You'd better show her up Dobby." Dumbledore had banned all reporters from Hogwarts the previous week because of the exams, but he knew that he now had no reason to keep them away.

"Good morning Professor Dumbledore," said Rita Skeeter as she walked up to the headmaster's desk.

"Good morning, Miss Skeeter. Take a seat. Dobby, would you bring some tea for us please? Now, what can I do for you?"

"Firstly, I'd like to do an interview with Sirius Black. There's been great interest from our readers ever since he was cleared, and they want to know his side of the story - how he managed to stay sane in Azkaban, how he managed to escape, what he thinks about Peter Pettigrew. That sort of thing."

"I'll ask him if he wants to talk to you, of course, but the decision is his. He went through some pretty bad times, you know, and he may not want it all aired in public."

"Thank you, Professor. And secondly, we've been hearing rumours of strange goings on at Hogwarts. We've heard that Harry Potter and Hermione Granger have been doing some very powerful magic - I know it sounds incredible, but we've even heard that they managed to bring somebody back to life after the killing curse. What do you say about that, Professor?"

"The only thing I can say is that you shouldn't always believe the rumours you hear. You know how certain actions always seem to be blown out of all proportion."

"Yes - but not where Harry's involved. I'd like to interview him - and Hermione Granger. Especially since I've heard that they've become romantically involved."

"I can't allow that, Miss Skeeter. They're only fifteen years old, and they've only just completed their OWLS. I'm sure you remember how exhausted you were after you sat them?"

"Oh yes, Professor, I certainly do. Ok, if I can't have an interview with them, do you mind if I just ask around this morning? I want to find out more about the attack the other week - from the perspective of the students, that is."

"Be my guest. But please keep a sense of perspective. Young kids tend to exaggerate and embellish things when they know they're in the spotlight. And please come and see me before you go - I'd like to know what will be appearing in the Daily Prophet about my school."

"I will, Professor. And thank you."

Dumbledore sighed heavily as he watched the reporter walk out of his office. He knew that she had a very keen eye for a good story, and hoped he'd be able to prevent anything sensational being reported.

Later that morning, Rita managed to persuade Sirius to give an interview. He was reluctant at first, when Dumbledore asked him, but relented when he heard that she was asking the other professors and students about him. He decided that if his story had to be told, it would be the true one.

After that, she wandered around the school corridors, stopping students at random, asking them about the Death Eater attack. It was just by chance that one of the students he stopped was Clare Bryant.

"Tell me, Clare. I've heard that you were hurt in the attack. What happened?"

Now Clare had been asked by Harry and Hermione not to say anything about her resurrection from the killing curse. But that didn't stop Clare singing their praises. She thought that everyone in the country would want to know how good and powerful they were.

"Well I can't tell you a lot," she said slowly, "But I did see Harry and Hermione protecting their friends from hundreds of those dreadful men. They managed to erect a powerful force field, and it stopped every curse that was thrown at them - even the killing curse."

Rita looked stunned. At last she'd had one of the more unbelievable rumours confirmed. She already knew that Harry and Hermione had expanded Wormtail's head so that everyone could see him.

She looked thoughtful as she wandered down towards the dungeons and the Slytherin common room. She stopped as she heard voices just around a bend in the corridor, and hid herself behind a suit of armour. She peeked between the body and arm of the armour and saw three boys ambling along. She couldn't believe her luck when they stopped right opposite her.

"So what's happening with Potter and Granger now?" asked one of the boys, who was quite large.

"I'm making sure my dad knows everything," said one of the others, a much thinner, blond-haired boy.

"Tell me again," said the third, very large boy, "What's these Anima Summas?"

"Shhh. Nobody's supposed to know about it," said the second boy, "I told you before. You mustn't talk about it outside the common room. Now come on - let's go."

Rita was deep in thought as she walked back up to the Entrance Hallway, 'What the devil are the Anima Summas? And what's it got to do with Harry and the Granger girl? Hmmm. I think I may be onto something here. Let's see what Dumbledore has to say about it.'

Later, Dumbledore sat looking at the reporter sitting at the other side of his desk. He could see that she had something up her sleeve.

"Well I think I've got everything I need, Professor," she said, "Sirius Black was very cooperative. Our readers are going to be amazed at what the poor man has had to go through, and how he's managed to come through it all relatively unscathed. The wizarding community are going to be very proud of him."

"Well I'm glad. He deserves all the support and respect we can give him."

"There is one thing, however," she said slyly.

'Here it comes,' thought Dumbledore.

"Like you asked, I didn't speak to Harry Potter or Hermione Granger. But I have heard some very strange things about them. Like blocking Avada Kedavra and every other curse the Death Eaters threw at them. Has this got anything to do with the Anima Summas?"

Dumbledore's eyes narrowed, and Rita knew that she'd hit a raw spot.

"What have you heard about that?" he asked.

"Oh, I just happened to overhear a conversation. What are the Anima Summas, Professor?"

Dumbledore was angry, "I don't approve of anybody snooping around listening to private conversations. And I can't tell you anything about the Anima Summas. I would advise you not to print anything about it in your paper - speculation may well lead to things which could be very dangerous, and we wouldn't want that, would we?"

"You wouldn't be trying to threaten me, Professor Dumbledore?"

"Of course not. I'd never threaten the press. I'm merely pointing out that there are things which the wizarding world are not yet ready to learn about."

"So there is something, Professor. I thought so."

"Please heed what I say, Miss Skeeter. It's very important."

"Well thank you, Professor. Thank you for a very informative visit."

After she'd left, Dumbledore got straight in touch with Cornelius Fudge and told him what had happened.

"Don't worry, Albus," he said, "I'll summon her to the ministry immediately. I'll make sure that nothing appears in the Daily Prophet about Harry and Hermione."

The following day saw the end of year feast and ball. Gryffindor easily won the house cup, and everyone had a great time at the dance. Ten friends sat around one of the many tables spaced about the sides of the Great Hall. Harry and Hermione, Ron and Lavender, Ginny and Neville, Parvati and Lee Jordan, and Kristen and Seamus Finnegan.

They had a great time, the relief in the fifth-years faces now their OWLS were over clearly showing. Half way through the evening, another strange thing occurred that made everyone in the hall stand and stare.

The band played a slow, romantic song - Moon River, which had become something of a standard at the end-of-year balls. Most of the students were up dancing, when a gasp went up near the centre of the floor. Every one looked in awe at the sight that confronted them.

Harry and Hermione, oblivious that everybody else had stopped, were dancing very close together. There was nothing strange about that - everybody expected it. What was unexpected was they were dancing on air - quite literally. And not only that - as they danced about three feet off the floor, they were both enveloped in a silvery light, which made the pair glow.

It was only when the music suddenly stopped, the musicians also gaping at the pair, that they knew that anything was wrong. As they broke apart, they drifted slowly back to the floor and the silvery glow disappeared. Everybody then started talking to them at once, wanting to know what had happened. They were grateful when Dumbledore rescued them and led them out of the room.

"You really must try to control your feelings when other people are around," he said, smiling at them.

"Sorry Professor," said Hermione, "We didn't know that anything strange was happening."

"No," he replied wistfully, "I'm sure you didn't. Well, on with the ball. Let's go back in, shall we?"

"What are we going to say?" asked Harry, "They'll all want to know how we did that."

"Oh, I think I've got the answer to that. And I'm sure that Fred and George won't mind admitting to a final prank before they leave Hogwarts - I'll go and speak to them now."

"But won't they be suspicious about the cover up?" asked Hermione.

"Oh I'm sure they will. But they're going to find out about it in the morning, anyway. I've called a meeting with my close aids. You two, Ron and Ginny need to be there, as well as Fred and George. I've asked Molly and Arthur Weasley to come, as well as your parents, Hermione. I think it only right that they be told about what's going on. We also need to discuss where you'll be staying over the summer holidays, and how you can be best protected. Right, now where did I see Fred and George last?"

"What was that all about, Harry?" Lavender asked when he and Hermione went back to their table. Harry just pointed to the other end of the room, where Dumbledore had Fred and George in tow as they made their way out of the room.

"Oh - them two!" said Parvati, "We should have known they'd do something on their final night at Hogwarts."

Dumbledore's office was full the next morning. Arthur and Molly, Arbuthnot and Millie, Fred and George were looking particularly apprehensive, not knowing why they'd been summoned to see the headmaster.

Millie Granger couldn't take her eyes off her daughter. She didn't know that she was with Harry, but she could see how radiantly happy she appeared to be. She couldn't wait to speak to her later.

After the introductions were over, Dumbledore started the meeting. "I'm sorry to be so secretive about this meeting, but I need to tell you something that's known to only a very few people. It's about Harry and Hermione primarily, but it also involves Ron and Ginny - they've been just as much a part of this as anybody. Now what I'm about to tell you will seem incredible, especially to the Grangers. I'd better start with the prophecy we had from the centaurs at the start of the school year ..."

And so Dumbledore told them everything. At the end of his long talk, Molly sat thunderstruck, with her hands covering her mouth, and the Grangers just stared blankly at the headmaster. Only Arthur, Fred and George appeared relatively comfortable with what they'd been told.

"Do any of you have any questions? Anything you want me to clarify?" asked Dumbledore.

"Yes Professor," said Molly, "Why do Ron and Ginny have to be with Harry and Hermione on their next two quests. Surely, they've done enough?"

"Mum!" said Ron and Ginny together.

"Molly," said Arthur gently, "They're part of this. They were told at the end of the first quest that they have to be with them - it's been pre-ordained. And I'm sure that they'll get the very best of protection. Right, Headmaster?"

"Yes, Arthur. They'll have my best people with them. And don't forget - they'll also be protected by the power of the Anima Summas - we've already seen that happen when the Death Eaters attacked."

"Sorry, Professor," said Molly, "But they're all so young to be going through this."

"I know, Molly," said Dumbledore, "Mr and Mrs Granger - this must seem very strange to you both. Is there anything you wish to ask?"

"I can't get my head around my little girl being in so much danger, Professor," said Arbuthnot, "I know she'll be protected, but this Voldemort character seems to be the devil himself, from what you've said." Millie clutched her husband's hand, seeking comfort.

"I won't lie to you," said Dumbledore, "There is great danger - and what these four youngsters are trying to do is to save the whole world - not just the wizarding world. It's their destiny. And they've got our full support and help."

At that moment, Cornelius Fudge burst into the room, looking flustered, "Sorry to barge in, Albus. I need to talk to you urgently."

"Take a seat, Cornelius," said Dumbledore, "Everyone in the room knows about the Anima Summas, so you can speak freely."

"I'm under a lot of pressure from the press, and from some of the top men in my ministry - they've heard the rumours. I had to pull out all the stops to prevent anything appearing in the Daily Prophet and it's only a matter of time before they lose patience and publish something. There's only so much I can do. Look, I'll go public with the return of 'You Know Who' if you agree to release the Anima Summa story. The wizarding world will need to know that something is being done to fight the Dark Side, otherwise there'll be wholesale panic. What do you think?"

"I can see your dilemma, Cornelius. And I agree that we'll have to say something before long. Let me get the opinion of my team. Sirius? Harry's your godson, so your opinion matters perhaps more than anyone's. What do you think we should do?"

Sirius reflected for a few moments, "I agree that we have to make the story known some time soon. And rumour and speculation appearing in the press would only confuse everybody - and it won't stop reporters snooping around any place that Harry and Hermione happen to be. I also agree that everyone should be told about 'You Know Who' - I'm sure you'll agree, minister, that we'll be able to recruit more aurors as soon as that's known"

Fudge nodded his head in agreement.

"But we can't forget one thing," continued Sirius, "or should I say four - the four youngsters at the centre of it all. It's them that will be thrust into the limelight - I think the final decision on when we go public must rest with them. They'll need to prepare themselves for all the attention, and we'll need to prepare to make sure that attention is kept to a minimum."

There were nods of approval from all Dumbledore's team.

"You make a lot of sense, Sirius," said Dumbledore, "Well Harry, Hermione, Ron and Ginny. What thoughts do you have on this?"

The four looked at each other, then Harry spoke, "Professor. This has come as a bit of a surprise to us all, I think," he looked at his friends to see them nodding. "Do you think we could have some time to talk about it - amongst ourselves as well as with you, Sirius and the others?"

"Of course, Harry," said Dumbledore, "What do you say, Cornelius? I think it's only fair that they be given some time."

"Yes, Albus - I agree. I can keep the wolves at bay for a little while longer."

"Right," said Dumbledore, "School finishes today and you start your summer holidays. Now we don't know when you'll receive details of the next quest, but I think it will be very soon now. I think you should aim to get this distraction out of the way as soon as you can - let me know what you decide. And it goes without saying, of course, that you can speak to me, or any of my team, if you need any help or advice."

"Thank you, Professor," said Harry, "But we'll need to be together to decide. There's only a few hours before we have to catch the Hogwarts express."

"Ah - that brings me to the next item on the agenda - and one of the reasons I've asked the families to be here today. We have to decide where you'll be staying this summer. This is how I see it. First, the rings have told Harry and Hermione that they must not be apart. I don't think that the Dursleys will want an uninvited guest for the summer, so I don't think, Harry, you shouldn't go back there this year."

"Yes!" Shouted Harry. Then a quieter, "Sorry," as everybody looked at him.

"Second. Ron and Ginny have to be fully protected. Third, at the moment, it's impractical to split my support team between the four of them. This draws me to only one conclusion - all four of them have to be together for the summer."

The four friends grinned and nodded their approval.

"So that brings me to a difficult question - where should they all stay for the summer?"

"No problem," said Arthur, "They can all stay with us at The Burrow - I can easily add a few more rooms on the east side of the house. There'll be plenty of room, won't there Molly?"

"Yes, Arthur, of course there will," said a smiling Molly Weasley.

"And Ginny and I'll chaperone these two," said a grinning Ron.

"We'll help with that, Ron," said George.

"Yes - we've got this new creaking-floorboards charm we're working on," said Fred.

"Boys!" said an angry-looking Molly, "That's a terrible thing to say."

Harry and Hermione both blushed furiously.

"Mr and Mrs Granger," said Dumbledore, "You are the ones who'll be affected most by this. I'm afraid you won't have your daughter around for the summer. What are your thoughts on the matter?"

"I think I speak for Arbuthnot as well," said Millie as she looked for her husband's nod of approval. She also glanced at Fred and George. The high-pitched strangled sounds coming from them, and the way they kept their heads down, testified to their mighty struggle not to burst into laughter at Arbuthnot's name.

Millie continued, "The most important thing for Hermione is that she's kept as safe as possible. So we agree. But I would ask one thing, Molly - can we visit your home during the summer to see her?"

"Of course you can, Millie. You can come whenever you like - you can even spend your holidays with us if you so wish."

"That'd be great," added Arthur, "You can fill me in on all the things going on in the Muggle world, Arbuthnot."

Again, there were more strangled noises from Fred and George.

"Well that's settled then," said Dumbledore, "Molly, I won't ask you to make room for Sirius, Ceri and Remus - but can they stay in wizarding tents in your garden? They need to keep an eye on the kids over the summer."

"No problem," replied Molly, "we can just add a few more rooms to the west side of the house - it'll be great with so many people around."

"Thank you, Molly. Right, everybody - it's lunchtime. Let's all go down, shall we?"

As they all walked down to the Great Hall, Millie asked Hermione and Harry to stop. She went to them and looked her daughter directly in the eye. "Are you happy, Hermione?"

"Oh yes Mum," she said as she hugged her mother, "I've never been happier."

Millie smiled as she released her daughter, "I'm so glad you found each other - you looked perfect together in France. But please, be careful - both of you."

"We will Mrs Granger," said Harry, "I won't let anything happen to her."

That afternoon, the four said a sad farewell to Kristen. "With luck, we'll see you in the new school year," said Harry, "We've got that match with your school, don't forget."

"And where Harry goes, we go," said Ron, smiling.

"So long, you four," said Kristen as she held the Portkey, "It's been great knowing you all."

"Bye Kristen," they all said as the girl disappeared with a slight 'pop.'

"So, Ginny," said Fred as they all waited for the coaches that would take them to Hogsmeade railway station, "What have you got in store for Malfoy today?"

"Oh," she replied, "somehow, I don't think we'll be seeing him on this trip. I think he's learned his lesson. Don't you?"

Epilogue The Burrow

Harry lay awake in bed on his first night at The Burrow. He smiled as he thought about the previous evening spent with all his friends and Ron's family - it had been great - so different from Privet Drive.

He tried to ignore the snoring coming from the other end of Ron's small bedroom, but he just couldn't get to sleep. He thought of Hermione - she was in the next room, sharing Ginny's bedroom. They had been able to relax for the first time since they had discovered each other - since the wonderful shock of their joining, endless meetings with Dumbledore and his team, Voldemort's attack, their OWLS, and the involvement of the Ministry and the Press. It had been hectic, and he and Hermione had had precious little time to themselves.

At The Burrow, he looked forward to them being able to spend some time together and to explore the new powers they'd been given. The Burrow was pretty crowded now, but there were plenty of secret little spots in the garden and down by the river that was not far from the house.

He again smiled as he fingered the ring on his right hand, and tried to project his thoughts to the room next door - trying to make contact with the girl he loved.

'Are you awake, Hermione?'

There was no response. Harry sighed - she was either asleep or they had to be very close to be able to hear each other's thoughts.

Eventually, he drifted off to sleep.

The next morning, the four friends walked slowly through the garden after finishing their breakfast.

"Look," said Harry, "I've been thrust into the limelight ever since I came back to the wizarding world, and I've learned to ignore it. But what about you three - are you going to be able to cope? Seeing your photographs splashed all over the newspapers, complete strangers walking up to you and shaking your hands and wanting to know everything about you? It's like living in a goldfish bowl at times."

"Oh, I think I'll be able to cope with a little bit of fame, Harry," said Ron nonchalantly.

"But it's not only that," said Harry, "All the Death Eaters in the country will know what you all look like - not to mention Voldemort."

"But we're just as much a target for them now as you are, Harry," said Ginny, "Don't forget that Wormtail saw us with you in France, and Hermione's already been attacked. So I don't think it will change anything as far as the Death Eaters are concerned."

"And don't forget," said Hermione, "Fudge will tell the Daily Prophet that 'You Know Who' is back. They'll be able to recruit more aurors and be that much better prepared for any attacks that are coming."

Harry thought for a moment, his brow creased with worry, "I don't know, Hermi. I really don't know."

"Look, Harry," said Ron, "Us three think that Dumbledore should go public - why don't you? You know it makes sense, and anyway, it's only a matter of time before it comes out."

Any further discussion was interrupted by the sounds of scuffling coming from the bushes about ten yards in front of them. They stopped as Sirius and Remus backed out onto the path, followed by Ceri, who was firmly holding Rita Skeeter by her arm. The reported held a camera in her other hand.

"Let me go," shouted Rita, "I've got every right to keep the wizarding public informed of any developments in their world."

"Not when you're trespassing on people's private ground, and on their right to privacy," said Sirius sternly.

"Harry," shouted Rita, "What can you tell me about the Anima Summas?"

"Look. I thought I said .." started Sirius, but he was interrupted by Harry, who shook his head in resignation.

"It's ok, Sirius. Let her go. Look, Miss Skeeter, if you agree to leave and not come back, I'll ask Professor Dumbledore to tell you everything you want to know."

Rita stared at Harry. She hadn't expected this response, "Ok, Harry. When will that be?"

"I'll get in touch with him today, and then it'll be up to him when he tells you."

"Will you leave now please?" said Ceri.

Rita shot Harry a grin, and then turned on her heels and walked towards the rickety gate and out of the garden, back towards the village.

"Are you sure about this, Harry?" asked Remus.

"The others already thought we should go public. It was me who was a bit reluctant. But when I saw what just happened, I knew there was no use in delaying the inevitable."

"Ok, Harry," said Sirius, "I'll get in touch with the headmaster straight away."

That afternoon, Charlie and Nadine arrived for a week's stay at the Burrow. The reports had been finished, and Demont had agreed that he would present them to the French and British ministries himself and answer any questions that may arise.

"Nadine!" squealed Ginny as Charlie and the French girl opened the kitchen door. She ran over and hugged her warmly and then caught her hand, "Come on, let's go for a little walk around the garden, I've got loads I want to ask you. Oh, hello Charlie."

Charlie laughed as the two girls walked out of the kitchen. He was then greeted by his mother and Ceri, who had been trying to decide what to cook for dinner that evening.

"What are you going to do now the dragon thing is all done and dusted?" asked Ceri.

"I don't know, Ceri," he replied, "We haven't really discussed it yet. I think we're both a bit afraid to broach the subject. You see, I could be sent anywhere in the world. It all depends on which family of dragons they want me to study. I know that Nadine just loves Southern France, and I don't want to take her any place where she may be unhappy."

"Don't worry, Charlie," said Molly, "The way you two feel about each other, I can't see you being apart, wherever they send you."

"I hope so, Mum."

"Charlie!" Fred and George had just come down from their bedroom, and slapped their brother on the back.

"So where is she then?" said George.

"Nadine? Oh she's been collared by Ginny - they're out in the garden."

"Come on then, George," said Fred, "Let's go and see what she looks like."

"Hey, you two," said Molly, "Be nice - and no tricks. We don't want to frighten her away."

"I'll give them a couple of minutes, then I'll go and rescue her," said Charlie.

The twins spotted their sister and Nadine at the far end of the garden, and ran over to them.

"Nadine," said Ginny, "These two are my twin brothers - Fred and George."

"Uh, which is which Ginny. How can you tell?" said a stunned Nadine as she looked at the identical twins.

"Oh it takes practice," said Ginny.

"I'm Fred," he said as he hugged Nadine.

"And I'm George," he said as he pulled Nadine away from Fred and also gave her a big hug.

"So," said Fred, "How did a nice girl like you manage to tame the dragon man?"

"More to the point," said George, "How did the dragon man manage to attract such a beautiful girl?"

"Fred, George," said Ginny sternly, "Leave her alone. You're embarrassing her."

"That's all right, Ginny," said Nadine laughing, "I must say I was a bit in awe about meeting you two after the things everyone has said about you, but anybody who can make the Slytherins go bang can't be all that bad."

"Ah, so you've heard about our little farewell prank?" said Fred.

"Yes - Ginny told me. I'd only just stopped laughing when you two came over."

"It'll be nice to have another sister in the family, won't it Fred?" said George.

"Yes. When's the wedding, Nadine?" said Fred.

Nadine smiled at the two boys as she blushed prettily. "Fred! George!" shouted Ginny, "You're embarrassing her. Now leave her alone."

"I've arrived just in time, I think," said Charlie as he caught Nadine's arm and led her away from his two grinning brothers and Ginny.

"I hope they didn't pull any tricks or anything," he said as they walked.

"No, Charlie - they're a bit overpowering, but I'm going to like those two, I think."

"Charlie! Nadine." They turned to see Harry and Hermione approach.

"It's great to see you both again," said Harry.

"It's nice to be here," said Nadine, "And congratulations, you two. We were thrilled to hear about what happened. Come on Hermione, tell me all about it."

Charlie and Harry watched the two girls as they walked arm in arm, in front of them, chatting merrily.

"Ginny told us that you two are together at last, Charlie."

"Yes - I still can't believe it," said Charlie.

"I know the feeling," said Harry.

The kitchen was crowded at dinner that evening. Arthur had magically increased the size of the kitchen table so that everyone could sit around it.

The room was filled with the sounds of laughter and animated talk, Fred and George to the forefront of it all. Then Ginny nudged Ron, who nudged Hermione, who nudged Harry. The four sat grinning as Harry cleared his throat.

"Fred, George," he said, "you've both been full of surprises during the five years us four have been at Hogwarts. Now there's a little surprise we've got for you."

Fred and George looked at Harry, wondering what he was going to say.

"Do you remember the Marauders Map you gave me a couple of years ago?"

"Yes," said George.

"The one made by Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot and Prongs," said Fred.

"They've been your heroes haven't they?" asked Harry.

"Too true," said George.

"Their exploits at Hogwarts are legendary," said Fred, "They were the ones who inspired us - we wanted to follow in their footsteps."

"Did you ever find out who they were?" said Harry.

"Well no," said George.

"You're going to tell us who they were Harry?" said Fred.

Harry and the other three grinned in anticipation, and then Harry continued, "Let's get the worst bit out of the way first. Wormtail is Peter Pettigrew - Voldemort's sidekick."

Most of those around the table shuddered. Fred and George just stared.

"And Prongs was my father," said Harry.

"Whoa, cool - we didn't know Harry," said George.

"Now Moony and Padfoot," said Harry.

"Go on - go on," said Ginny, unable to contain her excitement.

"Well," said Harry, "Fred, George - meet Moony and Padfoot, also known as Remus Lupin and Sirius Black."

Fred and George were thunderstruck - they looked at the other end of the table where Remus and Sirius sat together, grinning. Then they erupted.

"What!" they both shouted together.

"You're kidding us," said George

"He's not, George," said Sirius, "I'm Padfoot."

"And I'm Moony," said Remus.

Fred and George both jumped from their seats and rushed over to their two heroes, shaking their hands and just staring at them. Eventually, Fred found his voice.

"You've got to tell us how you made that map."

"And we want to hear how you pulled that floating stunt on the Slytherins," said George.

"We've got loads of new stuff we're working on," said Fred, "Come and have a look - we'd value your opinion."

Moony and Padfoot were dragged from their seats and marched up to the twins' bedroom, followed by the laughter coming from the ones left at the kitchen table.

"That was so good," said Ron, "I've never seen them so gob-smacked before. That was a masterful performance, Harry."

"So, Sirius," said Ginny, "What's happening with you and Ceri, these days?"

The four friends and Harry's godfather were sitting in the garden while breakfast was being prepared.

"What do you mean, Ginny?" he answered, knowing full well what she meant.

"You're going to have to get used this, Sirius," said Harry, "She's looking for something new to focus on now that Charlie and Nadine are together."

"I think my sister's going to open a dating agency when she finishes school," said Ron, laughing.

Sirius was spared further embarrassment as they heard two owls flutter overhead. One headed into The Burrow with the morning post, but the other just hovered over them, and dropped three official-looking letters. It then hooted and flew off, heading north.

Hermione picked up the three letters, looked at them, and then drew her lips back in a grimace. "They're from Hogwarts," she said, looking at Ron and Harry, "One for each of us. I think they're our OWL results."

"Oh hell," said Harry. Ron just went a light shade of pale.

"Well go on then," said Ginny, "Open them."

"I can't Ginny," said Ron, "Mum'll kill me if I haven't done as well as Percy. And you know how many OWLS he had."

The three just sat looking at each other, and then Hermione ripped open her letter and read it.

"Ahhhh," she screamed, "I don't believe it - I've passed them all. I've got full marks in every subject except Potions."

She read a note on the bottom of the letter ..

'Congratulations, Hermione. You had the best marks in the whole of the fifth year. Only Kristen came close to you. I tackled Professor Snape about the five percentage points he deducted from your Potions result - he said that he just couldn't bring himself to give top marks to a Gryffindor - the cheek of it!

Minerva McGonagall, House Mistress, Gryffindor House.

"Well done, Hermi," said Harry and Ron as they both kissed her.

"There was never any doubt was there?" said Sirius as he added his congratulations.

"Come on you two," said Hermione, "Open them."

Harry was the next to open his letter, not without some nervousness.

"I've passed everything except Potions," he said, smiling. "The marks aren't bad, either - I'm pleased with that."

"Come on, Ron," said Ginny.

"I can't Ginny," he said as he passed his letter to his sister, "You open it."

Ginny took the letter and ripped it open hurriedly as Ron sat with his arms folded over his head. She had a serious expression on her face as she looked at Ron.

"I knew it," he said miserably, "I've failed everything, haven't I?"

Ginny's face then split into a grin, "Sorry to tease you, Ron. You've passed everything except Potions and Divination - your marks are very good. Mum'll be pleased."

They all shouted with delight, and then ran into the kitchen to tell everybody. They pulled up short as they went in. Everybody was gathered around Arthur, who had a copy of the Daily Prophet in front of him on the table.

Sirius and the four friends walked over and stared at the front page of the paper. Large banner headlines roared

'YOU KNOW WHO IS BACK'

And underneath, in equally large print,

'BUT THERE IS HOPE - ANIMA SUMMAS ARRIVE'

In the middle of the page there was a large photograph of Harry, Hermione, Ron and Ginny walking in the garden at The Burrow. Moving arrows pointed from 'Anima Summas' in the headline to Harry and Hermione in the photograph.

As Arthur turned the pages, it seemed that the entire paper was devoted to Voldemort's re-appearance and the story of the four's first quest in France.

"Well Percy," said Arthur, "I don't think we'll get much work done when we go into the office today. We'd better prepare ourselves for a grilling from everybody at the ministry."

"I suppose we'll be inundated by reporters now," said Molly.

"No Molly," said Sirius, "Dumbledore told me that a condition of making the story public is a ban on visits to The Burrow by the press. We won't be bothered by them."

"How do you feel about it?" said Harry to his three friends, "any regrets?"

"Well, only .." said Ginny as she stared at the photograph with a pained look, "I .. I don't think that photo's very flattering. If I'd known, I'd have combed my hair"

"Come off it, Ginny," said Charlie, laughing, "You look stunning, as usual"

Everybody laughed at the little redhead as her face slowly matched the colour of her hair.

Harry and Hermione spoke to Sirius as they were finishing their third cup of tea after breakfast.

"Sirius. Hermione and I've been talking. We want to pay a brief visit to Lara in Privet Drive. I haven't been able to write to her recently, what with everything that's been going on, and what we want to tell her is best done in person. What do you think?"

Sirius thought for a few moments, "It should be ok, Harry - as long as it's only for a few minutes. I don't want to leave The Burrow unprotected for any longer than that. Ceri, Remus and I'll have to come with you, of course, but we'll keep a discreet distance from the house. When do you want to go?"

"Right now, if it's ok," said Harry.

"I'll round up the other two," said Sirius, "We'll meet you out in the garden. You can hang on to us as we Apparate."

Five minutes later, Harry stood at the kitchen door of number 12 Privet Drive. Hermione waited just behind the house, at the edge of the garden. Harry could hear Lara talking to her mother inside. Harry knocked and stood back as Lara's mother opened the door.

"Hello, Mrs Smythe. Is Lara in?" asked Harry.

"Hello Harry," she said, "It's nice to see you again."

Lara looked over her mother's shoulder and then pushed past and hugged Harry briefly, "It's great to see you Harry. What brings you here? Are you back with the Dursleys?"

"Uh, no Lara. Not this summer. We can't stay very long, I'm afraid. We just wanted to see you for a few minutes."

"We?" said Lara.

"Hermione and I - she's just round the back of the house."

"I won't be long, Mum," Lara said to her mother as she closed the kitchen door and walked with Harry round the back of the house and into the garden.

Lara looked at Hermione and smiled, "Hello again. You two are together, aren't you? I can see it in your faces - just as I could see it back last year in that cave."

She hugged Hermione tightly and then did the same to Harry. "Is that why you came - to tell me about you two?"

"Yes - that was one reason, Lara," said Harry, "And we wanted to share with you what we feel - about each other, and about you. We wanted to see you now, when we had the chance. I don't think we'll be able to visit you again for a long time - things have become pretty complicated in the wizarding world."

"You mean it's become very dangerous, don't you?" asked Lara.

"I'm afraid so," said Hermione, "And Harry and I are - well - we're right in the middle of it."

Harry caught Lara's hand, and Hermione caught the other. Then they closed their eyes and let their feelings and emotions flow into the blond-haired girl. After a few minutes, they broke contact, and Lara staggered slightly. Tears were running down her face, but she was smiling.

"You two have something very, very special," she said quietly, "I've never felt anything like that before - never knew such feelings could exist. Is it something that only wizards and witches can share?"

"Well yes and no, Lara," said Hermione, "It's something that's very rare. We only found out about it - we only found each other - a few weeks ago."

"Well it's so beautiful," said Lara, "You're going to have a lovely life together."

"I hope so, Lara," said Harry, "When all the trouble is finished with, when times are better - we'll come to see you again."

"We have to go now, Lara," said Hermione.

"Please be very careful, both of you." Lara waved as Harry and Hermione walked away.

"What took you so long, Wormtail?" growled Voldemort as the rat-faced wizard entered the cave, accompanied by Lucius Malfoy, "I suppose you'd still be looking aimlessly through the library if I hadn't sent Lucius to get you?"

"There were millions of books there, my Lord," said Wormtail, "I'm sorry."

"Well - did you find what I sent you to get?"

"Yes, my Lord," said Lucius, "The rose-red city is in the Southern Jordanian desert. It was built by the Nabataeans and was once an important stopping place on the ancient trade route between the Far East and Egypt. It has long since been abandoned, and no one lives there - it's only visited by tourists these days. The city is ringed by mountains, and was hewn from the pink and salmon-coloured desert rock"

"What is its name?" asked Voldemort.

"Petra," said Lucius, "I've taken the liberty of contacting the Dark Forces of the desert region, and they will provide an Arab guide to take us to the city and to the treasury building."

"Excellent, Lucius. We can leave first thing in the morning - make the necessary arrangements. I want you, Wormtail, Travis and two of our best servants with me."

"Yes my Lord," said Lucius and Wormtail together.

They'd been at The Burrow for just over a week, and the four were just getting used to the idyllic life style.

A keen rivalry had been built up over the week. There were enough of them at The Burrow to form two teams of five, and they'd played several games of Quidditch in the garden. Harry and Charlie revelled in pitting their Seeker skills against each other, and Harry usually came out on top since Charlie was a bit stale. He still enjoyed the encounters, though.

Harry and Hermione, aided by Ron and Ginny, started to explore their new powers, and after a few days, they found out a few things - including Dumbledore's feeling that they still had a lot of developing to do.

They found that they couldn't do wand-less magic on their own. When they weren't physically linked together, their magical strength seemed about the same as it had been before they bonded. And even when joined, they could only do the force-field protection spell. They couldn't bring to mind any new spells - it seemed that they would surface only when the need arose.

They could still feel their emotions when they touched, and they could read each other's thoughts when they were close together. They spent a lot of time trying to improve that aspect of their powers.

They would concentrate very hard, and try to project their thoughts at increasing distances from each other. At the end of three days of trying, they found they could do it at a distance of about 50 yards. This was a marked improvement from the first day, and they knew that with a lot of practice and effort, they'd be able to extend the distance even further.

They couldn't read Ron and Ginny's thoughts, however, even when each of them was in close contact to their friends. They could only do it when the four of them joined hands.

"I don't know Hermi," said Harry one day, "We can improve our telepathy, but what about the ancient spells and knowledge that are buried deep inside us? It doesn't look as if we'll be able to find out any more unless we're put in the position to access the spells - and that usually means a position of danger."

"I'm not sure, Harry," replied Hermione, "There may be other ways to access all that knowledge - there just has to be. We'll have to ask Professor Dumbledore what he thinks."

The following day, Harry and Hermione were sitting by the side of the river on a lush area of grass and ferns. They were holding hands, and gazing into each other's eyes, revelling in the strong emotions that close contact brought. They were startled when a voice spoke behind them.

"I am sorry to intrude - please forgive me."

They turned to see the tall, white-haired, green-eyed girl standing just inside the line of trees that skirted the river.

"Margot!" exclaimed Hermione as she and Harry got up and walked over to the girl.

"Yes `Ermione. My name ees Margot Denarnaud."

"Denarnaud," said Hermione, "Are you belonging to Marie Denarnaud, Berenger Sauniere's house keeper?"

"Yes. I am zee great great granddaughter of Marie and Berenger. Eet ees not known to many persons zat zey `ad a son together - my great-grandfather."

"We've been puzzling, Margot," said Harry, "Why have you been watching me? We thought that you were my Anima Summa."

"No, `Arry. As soon as I met `Ermione, I knew eet was `er who was ze one. I was watching for a different reason. You see, I live in Rennes-le-Chateau, and when I first saw you at ze top of ze church tower - even though you were in your eagle form - I knew you were ze Anima Summa. I dreamt then - you see, I am a seer."

"A seer?" said Harry.

"She can see things the rest of us can't - she can see into the future," said Hermione quietly.

"Yes," said Margot, "But zat ees not why I am `ere. I received a message in my dream - a message for ze two Anima Summas. When I saw you, `Ermione, ze time was not right to deliver ze message. You `ad not yet joined with `Arry. But now, ze time ees right."

Harry and Hermione stared at the French girl, waiting.

"Eet is now time for you both to `ear your second quest. But eet ees only ze first part of your quest. More will be given to you by another after you `ave completed ze first part."

She stared at Harry and Hermione, making sure that she had their full attention.

"Now listen carefully"

End - of Book 1 - The Mystery of Rhedae.

Author's Notes (2)

Before I tell you a bit about book 2, just a few thoughts about book 1.

First and foremost - thanks to everyone who've taken the trouble to review, and especially to those of you who review regularly - you're my inspiration. You've given me the motivation to carry on with this project.

Secondly - You may be interested to know that when I first wrote the outline of the story, Hermione wasn't the Anima Summa - it was Ginny. When I reviewed it, reading it over and over, I could tell that something wasn't quite right and it took a while for me to put my finger

on the problem. Hermione's character was far stronger than Ginny's, who seemed to be far too docile by comparison. I could see that it was Hermione who'd contribute more to the concept of Anima Summa - it was her raging intellect. So I re-wrote the outline, making Ginny a far more spirited and compassionate person - ideally suited to support her friends. I hope you think it worked. But that left me with a problem - I originally intended to get Ron and Hermione together, so that left two loose ends in the romance stakes. But there's still books 2 and 3 to come!

Thirdly - I took a bit of a risk with the subject matter of the fic. I knew that religion was a touchy subject and that some readers may be alienated by it, but I was determined to write a fic that combined the amazing Harry Potter world with one of my other great interests. The mystery of Rennes-le-Chateau is not some figment of my imagination - it's a real-life mystery that still baffles the many authors and television filmmakers that cover it. And it's essentially a mystery with religion at its core - the man at the centre of the mystery was Berenger Sauniere - a Catholic priest - and the iconography inside the church at Rennes-le-Chateau is exactly as I've described it in the fic - and a lot more - it seems to be a map of some sort, urging the seeker to unravel the esoteric messages that abound within (and outside) its walls. Many commentators agree that the solution to the mystery is to do with Jesus - either that he's buried somewhere nearby or that his bloodline is perpetuated in the Merovingian dynasty, following the children produced by him and Mary Magdelene. Either of those scenarios would, of course, have devastating implications on Christianity today. What the true answer is, I just don't know, but my fictionalised solution to the mystery preserves both the belief in the resurrection and Jesus' presence around Rennes-le-Chateau. To those of you who were offended - my apologies.

If you want to find out more about the mystery - and I've touched on only the basics in my fic - just put 'Rennes-le-Chateau' into your search engine - you'll come up with loads of hits.

Now onto book 2 :

It's finished - it's a bit longer than book 1, with fourteen chapters and an epilogue. I'm just about to check it through for typos and also for any glaring mistakes in continuity etc. With any luck, I should start posting within one or two weeks - I'd like to get the outline to book 3 done first, just in case I have to backtrack and make any adjustments.

Book 2 is about two quests - one by Harry and his friends and one by Voldemort. There's an element of religion in it - but mainly those of pre-Christian cultures. I don't want to say too much about it at this stage though. It's far wider in scope than book 1, and it's also a bit darker - the storm clouds brewing at the end of book 1 are about to burst!

So, walk beside our four friends as they unravel the clues that lead them over half of Europe and beyond in their search for the second repository of ancient wizarding knowledge.

If you dare, join Voldemort in his search for the dreaded Necronomicon, and cringe when he opens its pages and finds out about the deadliest thing ever to threaten the human race.

And we'll meet a few of Harry's old friends along the way, some were mentioned in book 1, and some weren't, but most are from JK's world (apart from my own characters that are essential to the plot)

As for romance - it's there, but I won't say who it involves. There's also another 'Who-Is-It', which has a rather surprising outcome, although after reading the reviews for book 1, some of you will no doubt second-guess me!

As promised at the end of the last chapter, here's a snippet from chapter 1 of the new book...

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. .
. . .

Harry and Hermione were sitting quietly side by side on the bank of the river that flowed past the side of the garden at The Burrow. Their eyes were clouded, immersed in their own thoughts. They sat slightly apart from each other, each knowing that their emotions were at that moment hidden from the other. They were also careful to keep their thoughts guarded. They had learned that in order to hear their thoughts, they had to consciously project them.

They were both, however, thinking about the same thing - the thing that was becoming increasingly difficult to conceal, both from themselves and their friends - a raging and passionate desire. They were desperately in love, a love that seemed to be growing day by day, and they both wrestled with the consequences of what that love would inevitably lead to. They were red-blooded, healthy teens and over the last few days they had become more and more aware of their developing needs and urges.

Both were pure in mind and body, and their experiences of life up to this point did little to help them cope with the problem they now faced. They both knew, of course, where their love would eventually lead them, but they both felt that they were too young to enter into such full-blooded intimacy.

Although they both thought the same things, they had been careful to conceal it up to now, so they didn't know how the other felt about it. But Hermione knew that the situation had to change, she knew that if she kept her raging feelings hidden from Harry for much longer, it might just cause a rift between them.

She brushed a lock of hair away from the side of her face and looked at Harry tentatively, wondering what she should do. Then she spoke in a quite voice, "Harry?"

Harry jumped slightly, drawn away from the thoughts that mirrored those of his girlfriend, "Yes Hermi?"

"Harry... I... I think we need to talk."

"About what Hermi?"

"About... about what I'm feeling right now. Oh, this is so hard!"

"Hermi..." Harry reached over to touch her hand, but Hermione drew back slightly, denying the contact.

"No, not yet Harry. I want to say what I feel before you feel what I feel."

Harry smiled wryly, "Hermi, I think I know how you feel. I feel it too."

Hermione's eyes grew wider, "You do?"

"How could I not, Hermi? I mean, I'm in love with the most beautiful girl in the world and we're always together. It's torture Hermi, but I don't know what to do about it."

Hermione smiled and reached out her hand, lightly brushing the unruly mop of hair from his eyes. Then she dropped her hand and rested it on top of Harry's, letting her emotions flow, all thoughts of hiding her feelings now gone.

Harry sucked in a deep breath as he felt the love and raging passion enter his very being, and Hermione gasped as Harry exposed his own thought and emotions to her probing mind. They both reached out then and drew each other into a tight embrace, crushing their lips together in an outward pouring of their wild passion.