

Anima Summa Book 2

As Above So Below

By

Anima Summa

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Chapter 1 The Quest

"She's a very nice girl, Harry," said Hermione as she and Harry walked alongside the river, which ran close by The Burrow.

"Yes, she is," replied Harry, "But I had a bit of a job to understand her - her accent's pretty strong."

They were talking about Margot Denarnaud, the beautiful young French girl who had just given them details of the first part of their second quest - their quest to find the second store of ancient wizarding knowledge, which would help them in the fight against the Dark Side. After she had delivered her message, Margot had left, saying that she had to return to her home in Rennes-le-Chateau, but that she would speak to them sometime in the future.

"Yes, but wasn't it strange that when she gave us the message, it was in perfect English, there wasn't a trace of her strong French accent. And I wonder what she meant when she said she'd speak to us again. Do you think that she's got a part to play in the remaining two quests?"

"I don't know, Hermi, you may be right. I wonder where the dreams she's been getting about us are coming from?"

"Well she does live right above the secret of Rhedae. Perhaps Jesus is speaking to her when she sleeps. Oh, I don't know - so many strange and mysterious things have happened over the last few months."

"I still don't know what her message means though, Hermi," said Harry, "It doesn't make much sense to me at all."

"Perhaps we should speak to Professor Dumbledore," said Hermione, "After all, Jesus did tell us to listen to his advice. Perhaps he's heard of a God that has your name."

"Yes, I think you're right. We have to speak to Dumbledore, and we need to see him quickly."

The two stared at each other fondly, and they instinctively held hands. The two rings touched and ...

... They suddenly found themselves standing in Professor Dumbledore's office at Hogwarts. Dumbledore looked up, startled, as Harry and Hermione appeared before him.

"How the devil did you two get here?" he asked.

"P... Professor," stuttered Harry, "How did we get here?"

"That's what I asked, Harry. Hermione? Do you have any answers? Harry and I certainly don't."

"I... I'm as surprised as you are, Professor," she replied, "We were just talking - saying we needed to speak to you urgently. And then when we held hands, and the rings touched, we just found ourselves here. We didn't say any spell or anything."

Dumbledore grinned fondly at the two youngsters, "I think it must be some of the ancient wizarding knowledge coming to the surface, possibly activated by your mutual desire to get here. And it must be very powerful - you know that the magical protection around the school prevents anyone Apparating here, so you clearly didn't Apparate. Hmm... I'm not personally aware of any other form of instantaneous transportation, other than a Portkey, of course. I think this is one aspect you can concentrate on in your development as the Anima Summas. You need to practice this - you never know when it may come in handy."

"But Professor," said Harry, "We didn't do anything. How can we practice something if we don't know what to do?"

"Well, Harry, it seems that you wanted to see me urgently, and the rings must have picked up on this when they touched. It may well be that the rings transported you. Try it out when you get back to the Burrow. Use your imagination. Now, why do you want to see me?"

"It's the second quest, Professor," said Hermione, "Margot Denarnaud - that's the name of the French girl that's been watching Harry - came to see us a short time ago. She's a Seer, and she's had a message about the quest. We wanted to ask you if you can make any sense of it."

"And the message... ?" asked Dumbledore.

Harry nodded for Hermione to tell the headmaster what Margot had told them. She took a deep breath, "She said, '*Seek out your eponymous deity. There you will start to uncover the place of the second store of ancient knowledge. As above, so below*'. She couldn't tell us any more, and she doesn't know what it means, herself. What do you think, Professor?"

"Well I think - and don't take this the wrong way - that you have to solve this yourselves. I can't help you because I'm not an integral part of the quest. You solved the riddles of the first quest yourselves, with the help of Ron and Ginny, of course, and I believe that you four have to solve this on your own as well. You see, you'll get a far better insight into things if you work on a problem without any help - a far better insight than if you were told the answer by someone else. Do you understand what I'm getting at?"

"I think so, Professor," said Harry, "We'll find out a lot more about the quest if we work out the clues ourselves."

"Exactly, Harry. But when you unravel the message, be sure to tell me. I may be able to help then - especially if you need to do some research. Don't forget, the facilities of the school library are at your disposal whenever you need them."

"Thank you, Professor," said Hermione, "Have you been able to get any Aurors to help us from the ministry?"

"I'm afraid not, Hermione. Although there's a big Auror recruitment drive going on since Voldemort's return was announced, it's going to take time to train them all. Fudge has had to take quite a few of his existing people off active duty to do the training, and the rest of them are fully stretched keeping tabs on the Death Eater recruitment that seems to have been on the increase since the attack on the school. I can sympathise with his position - he's got a very difficult job on his hands. But he's promised to try to release some Aurors when he's able."

Harry frowned, "When we work out what Margo's message means, we'll probably have to go chasing around the country, or even further afield. Who knows where the second quest will take us."

"Hmm. I know, Harry. It's important that your remaining two quests are completed as quickly as possible. You already have Sirius, Remus and Ceri to help with your protection, and I'll ask Professor Flitwick if he can help during the summer holidays. I can't release Professor Snape, though. I need him to continue his spying at some of the Death Eater meetings that are taking place lately."

Both Harry and Hermione let out a sigh of relief that they wouldn't have to put up with Snape during the holidays. They had quite enough of him during the school year.

"Thanks, Professor," said Hermione, "I think we'd better get back to the Burrow now. Sirius and the others must be frantic wondering where we've got to."

Dumbledore smiled, "Are you going to try your new - or should I say ancient - method of transportation to get back?"

Harry looked at Hermione, "Shall we try?"

They both thought about getting back to The Burrow and then reached out and held hands, making sure that the rings touched. And...

...Nothing happened.

"What!" exclaimed Harry, "We did the same things as before. Why didn't it work this time?"

"Oh, I don't know, Harry," said Hermione with a pained expression on her lovely face. She looked pleadingly towards the headmaster.

"Don't be discouraged," said Dumbledore, "This is very new to you, don't forget, and you need to practice. I have noticed one thing, however, something that may help you. It seems that a feature of your joint magic is spontaneity. Your bonding was spontaneous, the ancient spells you've used up to now were completely spontaneous, and from what you've said, the way you arrived here today was spontaneous. But when you tried to force the issue, as you just did, nothing happens. Think about it, and try to change the way you approach this. Try not to have any expectation or pre-conception in your minds - just try to let the power within you take over for that split second. Keep practicing and I'm sure it will all fall into place. Come on, you can get back to The Burrow by Floo Powder."

The headmaster walked over to the fireplace and picked up a small pot from the mantelpiece. He pulled out a small handful of powder and threw it into the flames. With a loud rushing noise, the flames turned blue, and Dumbledore motioned with his hand for the two youngsters to step into the flames.

A short while later, Harry stepped from the fireplace into the kitchen at The Burrow, closely followed by Hermione.

"Where the bloody hell have you been?" shouted a very distraught Ginny as she saw her two friends appear from the fireplace, "Do you know how frantic we've all been? When Ron

couldn't find you to tell you lunch is ready, we feared the worst. Sirius and all the others are down by the river looking for you. We thought you'd fallen in and drowned, or been captured by Death Eaters or something. I was just about to contact Dumbledore by Floo Powder."

"Sorry Ginny, but it wasn't intentional," said Harry, "We've just spoken to Dumbledore and he sent us back here through the Floo network from Hogwarts."

"What? But how did you get there?"

"Later Ginny," said Hermione, "But I think we'd better get the others to call off their search first."

As the three rushed out through the kitchen door, they almost collided with Arthur and Molly Weasley, who were just about to enter. "Oh, thank God," breathed Molly, her relief clearly showing, "Where did you two get to?"

"We'll tell you later, Mum," shouted Ginny as she rushed past her parents, "We'll fetch the others."

Half an hour later, everyone sat around the magically enlarged kitchen table, eating a late lunch. Arthur and Molly sat at the top end of the table, with Ron, Ginny, Harry, Hermione and Percy along one side, and Sirius, Remus, Ceri, Fred and George opposite them. At the bottom end sat Charlie and Nadine, who had decided to stay at The Burrow for a few more days before going back to France to stay with Nadine's brother, Demont.

"I bet Dumbledore had a shock when you just appeared in front of him," said a grinning Remus.

"Yes," replied Hermione, "but he wasn't the only one. I think Harry and I were even more surprised."

"So what did Margot say, Harry?" asked Ron, "You haven't told us what the quest is yet."

"That's why we wanted to see Dumbledore," replied Harry, "We wanted to see if he could make any sense of it. But he told us that only us four should be involved in working it out - like we did with the Rhedae mystery."

Hermione told the attentive gathering what Margot had said, *'Seek out your eponymous deity. There you will start to uncover the place of the second store of ancient knowledge. As above, so below.'*

"Phew!" exclaimed Ron, "What do you think that means?"

"I think we'd better start to work on it after lunch," said Harry, "The sooner we find out what it means, the sooner we can start the quest."

"Dumbledore told us that Fudge can't give us any extra help," said Hermione, "Everybody's tied up either keeping track of the Death Eaters or training new Aurors. But he did say that Professor Flitwick will be able to help over the summer. But as soon as school starts, he'll have to go back to Hogwarts."

"As will you four," said Sirius sternly, "I know the quests are important, but you can't miss out on your schoolwork, and in any case, Remus will have to go back to Hogwarts as well for his DADA classes. We'll just have to fit your quest around that, somehow."

"I can help," said Charlie, "The ministry hasn't given me a new assignment yet, so if you, Sirius, can persuade them and Dumbledore to second me from my dragon job to your team, you'll have an extra pair of hands."

"I don't know, Charlie," replied Sirius, "It's going to be very dangerous, probably more dangerous than it was in Rennes-le-Chateau. Are you sure you know what you're getting yourself into?"

"Of course I do, Sirius. And you know what I can do - you'd have been pretty hard pressed to keep Wormtail and his mob at bay in France without my help."

"*Our* help, Charlie," said an indignant Nadine; "You're not getting into this without me."

"No way, Nadine," Charlie retorted, "It's too dangerous. You were hurt back in Rennes-le-Chateau and I won't see you put in that position again."

"You're not my keeper, Charlie Weasley. I can look after myself. And in any case, the kids may well find my ability to detect psychic vibrations very useful."

Everyone couldn't help but grin as the two lovebirds had the first argument of their relationship. They were stopped in full flight by Ginny, "Hey you two - isn't there a bit of déjà vu here? Charlie, you tried to stop Nadine helping us back in France but you were outvoted. What makes you think there's any difference now? If Nadine wants to help us, then I for one will be glad of it."

"Me too," said Harry, Ron and Hermione all at the same time.

"Well that's settled then," said Nadine, "What do you think, Sirius. Can you arrange for *both* of us to be added to your team?"

Sirius looked towards the top end of the table, "Arthur, Molly - what do you think?"

Arthur looked at Molly and she nodded, "I can't say I'm wild on the idea of Charlie and Nadine getting into this," said Arthur, "But Molly and I will be happier knowing that they'll be there to look out for Ron and Ginny. No, we've got no objections."

Sirius looked at Charlie and shrugged his shoulders, "Thanks, Charlie, Nadine, I'll speak to Dumbledore straight after lunch. I'm sure he can persuade Fudge to allow you to join the team."

"What does eponymous mean?" asked Ron.

"It means 'named after' or 'the same name as'," replied Hermione.

Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ginny were sitting in the garden discussing Margot's message, trying to make some sense of it.

Ron thought for a few moments, "So we have to seek out the god who has the same name as the Anima Summa?"

Ginny giggled, "I haven't heard of a God called Harry before."

"Nor James," said Ron, "I've heard of kings called Harold and James, but not a God."

"I know," said Hermione, "That's what's so puzzling. And that's not all, of course. Even if we do identify the right god, how do we find him? Can you think where a god, any god at all, can be found?"

"And what's more," Hermione continued, "Even when we do find him, the message says that will only be the *start* of the quest. So there are probably going to be more puzzles to solve after that!"

"And what about that last bit?" asked Ginny, "As above, so below. That's weird!"

"I think it's something to do with that statue of Jesus we saw in the church at Rennes-le-Chateau," Hermione answered, "Remember - he had one hand lifted to the sky and the other pointing at the ground. That's the mystical sign of the Tarot Magician - the re-creation of heaven on Earth - As above, so below."

Ron looked confused, "So we've got to find heaven on Earth?"

The four looked blankly at each other, trying to find a way through the mystery.

"Do you think we should do some research?" asked Ron, "We can go back to Hogwarts and look in the library - there may well be a god called Harry or James that we haven't heard about."

"Hang on," breathed Ginny with a twinkle in her eye, "We're missing the obvious here. Margot didn't say the god has Harry's name. She just said *your* eponymous deity. And there are two Anima Summas, aren't there, so she may have been referring to Hermione!"

"Of course!" exclaimed Hermione. But then the smile that lit up her beautiful face faded, "But I haven't heard of a goddess called Hermione either."

"No, neither have I," said Harry, "But you have to admit that your name is a damned sight more divine than mine. Ron's right - we've got to get back to Hogwarts and do some research in both the wizarding and Muggle sections of the library. We've got to find out if there's a goddess called Hermione."

"Let's go and tell the others," said Ginny as she lifted herself up from the grass.

"Look, I know you need to get back to the school but you can't go just yet," said Molly. She looked at the crest-fallen faces of the four youngsters, knowing that the call of the quest was

pulling at them and they were full of the impatience of youth, "You know Hermione's parents are coming here tomorrow, and you can't let them down. Hermione, they haven't seen you since the last day of school and they gave up a lot to let you stay here with us."

"I know, Mrs. Weasley," said Hermione, "You're right, of course." She looked at her three friends, "We can go there the day after tomorrow."

"Hey, in the meantime, maybe Ron and I can help you with your ancient spells", said Ginny, "With your telepathy and your instantaneous method of transportation. What is that called, anyway?"

"We don't know, Ginny," said Harry.

"Well we've got to call it something," said Ron, "We can't refer to it all the time as 'instantaneous method of transportation' - my tongue might fall out of my mouth if I say it too many times."

"How about ZAPPARATE?" asked Ginny.

"I think I like that, Ginny," said Ron, "How about you two?"

Harry looked at Hermione and smiled, "ZAPPARATE it is - provided we can do it again, of course. Come on, let's go out to the garden and try."

The four walked towards the far end of the garden, and Harry told Ron and Ginny what Dumbledore had said about practicing Zapparate. Ron picked up a red-coloured stone from the path and walked towards the middle of the lawn where he placed it on the grass, "Concentrate on this stone and see if you can Zapparate there", he shouted.

Harry and Hermione closed their eyes and held hands, making sure the rings touched. They merged their thoughts and visualised the stone, trying to build the desire to reach it. After about four minutes, nothing had happened, and they gave up.

"Perhaps it has to be a person you want to reach," said Ginny, "You thought of Dumbledore when it happened before. I'll go and stand with Ron and you try to reach us."

Again, Harry and Hermione joined hands and thought of their two friends, trying to generate the need to reach them. Again they could feel that nothing was happening, but Ginny let out a yell, "I saw you shimmer, just then. Come on, try it again - you nearly did it."

"Let's try to relax a bit more, Harry," said Hermione, "Perhaps we're trying to force it too much, like Dumbledore said."

Again they tried, but this time they helped each other to relax, easing each other's natural instinct to force it to work. They felt something, the strangest thing; they felt as if they were in two places at the same time. They opened their eyes and saw their friends standing in the middle of the lawn, but they hadn't been able to reach them.

"That was bloody incredible!" exclaimed Ron.

"What?" said Harry, "We're still here - it didn't work."

"Maybe not, but you're not far off doing it," said Ron.

Ginny ran back to the pair smiling, "You were there," she said, "For a few seconds you seemed to flash between the two places. You sort of blinked into existence beside us and then back again. All you need is practice, and I'm sure you'll be able to do it."

"Give it a break, for now," said Ron, "Why don't you try out your telepathy, and we can get back to Zapparate later."

"Right," said Harry, "Last time we tried it we could read each other's thoughts at a distance of fifty yards. Let's go for seventy yards this time. Measure it out, Ron."

Hermione went and stood just inside the line of trees that grew alongside the riverbank, and Ron followed. He then paced out the seventy yards, walking to the far end of the garden, where Harry joined him. Hermione closed her eyes and concentrated, '*Harry, can you hear me?*' she thought.

'Yes, Hermi, You're thoughts are quite weak but I can hear you'

The four walked back to the centre of the garden, where they flopped onto the grass, "We can't do much more practicing that," said Ron, "The garden's not big enough. We'll have to try it again when we get back to the school."

"Where is he, Lucius?" hissed Lord Voldemort. He, Lucius Malfoy, Wormtail, Travis and two other Death Eaters had just arrived by Portkey at a spot about fifty yards from an impressive wall of reddish-coloured cliffs, which shimmered in the bright sunlight of the Southern Jordanian desert.

"He should be here, my Lord," answered Lucius, "This is the right place, I'm sure."

They looked around at the stark barren wasteland, which stretched away from the cliffs as far as the eye could see. They looked for any sign of movement, which would herald the arrival of the Arab guide who would show them the way to the ancient ruined city of Petra. Suddenly, they saw a tall figure approach from the direction of the cliffs. He was dressed in sand-coloured robes, the traditional dress of the Dark Wizards of the desert region. The robes were excellent camouflage in the desert; the man had stood no more than twenty yards away, but he hadn't been spotted by the six black-cloaked figures.

The man walked up to Voldemort and fell onto his knees, "Greetings Great One," he said, "It is a great honour to have been chosen to help you find your way to the ancient city."

"How far away is it?" asked Voldemort.

"It is but a short distance from where we stand, my Lord. Please follow."

"Are there any Muggle tourists about?" asked Travis.

"No," replied the man, "There will be no tourists here today. Fifty of my most trusted Death Eaters patrol these cliffs and will make sure that you will not be disturbed for as long as you remain here"

Travis looked towards the cliffs, "I can't see anyone there," he said.

"They are there. They know how to blend into the rock."

The Arab rose to his feet and started walking back towards the cliffs. When they reached the massive stone walls, he turned to his right and walked for a further thirty yards and beckoned towards a narrow fissure in the cliff face. He then led the six into the dark opening, which meandered into the rose-red rock. The sunlight was abruptly cut off as they entered the fissure, and Lucius looked up to see only a narrow strip of sky at the top of the cliffs that towered above them. He could see that the cleft in the rock completely bisected the two cliff walls as they walked into the gloom. There was no sound as they walked along the sandy floor. They walked for about two hundred yards, the way twisting from right to left and then back again, before they came to the end of the narrow passageway.

As they walked into a clearing, they were faced with one of the most impressive sights of the ancient world. Hewn from the living rock of the cliff that faced them, was a magnificent ornate temple about fifty yards high, the entrance fronted by six huge stone pillars.

"This is the Khazneh, my Lord," said the Arab, "The Treasury."

"Thank you," said Voldemort, "You have done well. Now go - wait at the entrance at the fissure in the cliffs in case I need your services later."

As the Arab walked back through the cleft in the rock cliffs, the six approached the Treasury. Wormtail walked past the pillars and up the stone steps into the temple. After a few minutes he came back out, "My Lord. Inside is a large square room and it's completely bare. There doesn't appear to be any doorways leading off it."

"Don't be stupid, Wormtail," growled Voldemort, "There won't be a signpost announcing the entrance to Irem."

Voldemort went over and stood at the side of the second huge stone pillar on the left, the one that Aleric had written about - the one that would point the way to the City of Pillars. He looked up at the massive red sandstone structure, looking for any indication where the key to the entrance to the fabled city of Irem could be found. He walked around it, but the pillar appeared to be completely smooth, with no markings. Lucius, who was scrutinising the pillar from some distance away, shouted over to Voldemort.

"My Lord, there seems to be a section of the pillar which is a lighter colour than the rest of it - at the front about twenty feet from the base. Do you think that's where the key is?"

Voldemort grunted and walked back towards Lucius and looked up, "You may be right, Lucius. I can't see any other markings."

Voldemort went back to the pillar and muttered a few words. He slowly rose into the air and stopped when he came to the lighter coloured section of rock. He examined it closely, but could see no writing or any other kind of mark on its stark surface. He reached into his cloak,

pulled out his wand and held it directly on the light red section of rock, "*ALOHOMORA*" he shouted.

Travis, who was standing directly beneath Voldemort at the base of the pillar, hurriedly stepped back as the step on which he was standing began to shimmer. Voldemort floated back to the ground and watched with the other five as the step turned bright red and lifted a few feet into the air. Voldemort knelt on the sandy floor and peered into the space beneath the shimmering stone. He could just make out the shape of something, which rested on the floor of the small chamber. He reached in and pulled out a strangely shaped black coloured object. It was about ten inches in length, very light, and was cold to the touch. It looked like a long, narrow arrowhead, the top ending in a sharp point and the bottom about three inches across, both sides rising slightly towards the middle to form a sort of inverted V shape.

"This must be the key," said Voldemort, "It looks as if it must fit into a similarly-shaped recess to activate the entrance to Irem."

He looked up at his five followers, "Lucius, Travis - come with me into the temple. We must search inside for the place where this key fits. Wormtail, you and the other two search on the outside of the temple, and make sure you miss nothing."

For the next two hours, the six Dark Wizards made a thorough search of the temple but could find nothing that resembled the shape of the black key. Voldemort growled with frustration as he walked back out of the temple into the sunshine, and looked again at the key, turning it over and over in his hands. Then something caught his eye. As the sunlight reflected off the key, he thought he could see the outline of a shape at the broadest end. He angled the object so that the sun shone directly on the key, and he saw the faint outline of some kind of drawing.

"Lucius," he said, "Come and look at this. What do you make of this outline?"

Both Lucius and Voldemort looked closely at the key, trying to make out what the drawing represented. They saw that the outline resembled a sort of urn, perched atop a broad, flared column.

"This must be the place where the key fits," said Voldemort, "See if you can see anything that looks like it on the temple front."

After a few minutes of scrutiny, nothing could be found that matched the drawing, "Perhaps it's somewhere else in the city, my Lord," said Lucius.

"Perhaps so, Lucius. Wormtail - fetch the Arab. Maybe he can recognise this."

A few minutes later, the Arab Death Eater bowed before Voldemort, "Do you know this city well?" asked the Dark Lord.

"Yes my Lord," replied the man, "We sometimes stay in the old abandoned places of residence towards the centre of the city."

"Look at this drawing. Do you know of any place that bears this structure?"

The Arab peered closely at the drawing on the key, and thought for a few moments, "Yes, I think so my Lord. It looks like the very top section of the central column of one of the temples - the temple is called El-Deir; it means 'The Monastery'.

"How far away is this place?" asked Voldemort.

"It is about two miles away, my Lord. It is at the highest point of the city."

"That's strange, my Lord," said Lucius, "Do you think it can be the right place? It seems odd that we have to go to the highest place to get down to the city underground."

"Hmmm," said Voldemort, "How better to hide the entrance to an underground city than at the highest place. No, I think we're on the right track." Voldemort turned back to the Arab guide, "Take us there now."

"As you wish, my Lord. Please follow," said the Arab as he turned and started along a broad track that led from the Treasury to the centre of Petra. They passed many crumbling ruins, and some that were in a far better state of preservation, as they walked through the city. When they reached the far northwest end of ancient Petra, the guide stopped and pointed to a rough path that led up into a high massif of sandstone rock.

"The way to El-Deir lies here, my Lord," he said, "The path up is fairly smooth to start, but gets much steeper as we reach the top."

The guide led the way up the path, and ancient rock tombs cut into the sandstone could be seen on both sides. After a while, the path became steeper, and finally passed through a narrow cleft between sheer walls of sandstone. The guide stepped to one side as they all emerged into an open area of white sand. Facing them was a massive structure, similar to the Treasury, but larger, cruder in construction and far more eroded by the desert winds that bombarded the temple with sand. It was about sixty yards wide and fifty yards tall, and like the Treasury, had been hewn from the sandstone cliff face.

"El-Deir, my Lord," said the Arab, "Look at the top of the central column - that is the shape of the drawing on the black stone."

Voldemort squinted up at the structure in the bright sunlight, and looked at the shape at the top of the temple. He looked back down at the black key and grunted, "Yes, you are right - this is the place. Is there a way to the top of the temple?"

"Yes, my Lord. There is an opening in the rock at the side of the temple. The top can be reached by some rough stone steps."

"Wait here. The rest of you come with me."

The six black-cloaked figures walked slowly across the white sand and stood in front of the temple, "Wormtail," said Voldemort, "Get up there and see if there is a shape that the key will fit."

"Yes, my Lord," said Wormtail as he walked to the left side of the monument. He had some difficulty with the first part of the climb, but after the initial part, the steps became easier to negotiate. After ten minutes, he emerged at the very top of the temple, and started edging his

way across, keeping as close as possible to the rock wall. Eventually, after enduring the angry urgings of Voldemort, he reached the central column and started climbing onto the eroded sculpture of the urn.

"Well, Wormtail," shouted Voldemort, "Can you see anything?"

"N... No, my Lord," stuttered the anxious Wormtail, who was clinging for dear life to the urn, "I can't see any depressions in the stone at all."

Voldemort turned to Lucius, "It must be inside somewhere. Come on - everybody - look inside the temple, " he looked back up at Wormtail, "Come down, Wormtail, and help us search inside."

The five walked through the twenty-five feet high entrance doorway into the gloom of the temple, where they had to light their wands. Wormtail followed a few minutes later, relieved to be on solid ground once more.

The six moved around the crude interior, examining the walls and floor. Lucius walked to the far end, where a slab of rock, about eight feet square, was slightly raised above the floor. It appeared to be a natural aberration in the rock floor, but Lucius thought it could have been used as some sort of altar in the past. He slowly walked around the rock, peering closely at the top and sides. As he neared the centre part of the back end of the rock, he stopped and looked closely at a small ledge, some six inches above the floor. He bent down and felt all around the ledge with his left hand, holding his illuminated wand close to the rock floor.

"My Lord," he shouted suddenly, "I think I've found something."

Voldemort and the others walked quickly over to Lucius, who stood up in triumph, "I felt a depression just underneath that small ledge. I think it's the same shape as the key."

Voldemort quickly knelt on the floor and felt underneath the ledge. He looked up at Lucius with an evil grin on his face, "Well done, Lucius."

Voldemort took the black key from his robes and held it beneath the ledge, turning it until the shapes matched. Then he pushed the key firmly into the depression. The key fitted perfectly. He then stood back up, took out his wand, and bent down to place it directly on the key, "*ALOHOMORA*" he shouted.

All six stepped back from the rock as it started to shimmer, then turned a bright red colour, and finally disappeared to leave a gaping hole in the floor, eight feet square.

They all edged to the hole and looked down into its dark depths. At one side of the hole, the side nearest the front of the temple, was a narrow flight of stone steps leading down into the gloom below. Voldemort extended his illuminated wand into the hole and saw that the steps went down only about ten feet, where they ended at a black stone floor. No exits could be seen; it just looked like the bottom of a large rock tomb.

"Come on," said Voldemort, "Let's see if there's anything down there." He led the way to the black floor below, and was soon joined by the other five. They all looked around at the rock walls, using their wands for illumination, but could see no sign of an exit.

"What's this?" said Voldemort suddenly as he looked down at the rock wall. At about chest height, and protruding slightly above the surface of the wall, was a black object, the same shape as the key he'd used earlier. He reached out to touch the object, which appeared to be firmly attached to the wall, "I wonder," he breathed quietly.

He again held his wand against the black object and shouted "*ALOHOMORA*."

All six black-cloaked figures were at once bathed in a bright red light, which shimmered around them. Then, just as suddenly as it appeared, the light went out. Voldemort blinked and looked around him. They were all still standing on the black stone floor, but the walls of the chamber had disappeared. He looked above him, but the entrance hole in the floor of the temple was also nowhere to be seen, just an empty, gloomy space.

"What?" shouted Travis. His voice echoed and then finally faded into the distance of the dark, dusty place in which they found themselves.

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 thoughts 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.

At the same instant, the rings on both their fingers started to become warm. They looked up with surprise and gazed into each other's eyes, the all-consuming desire that threatened to overwhelm them now plain to see. Their hands, the ones on which the rings lay, reached down and touched.

Then they allowed the rings to touch.

"ANIMA SUMMAS," they both heard the voice of Jesus in their heads, "THE TIME HAS ARRIVED FOR ME TO GIVE YOU COUNCIL. IN ORDER TO ACCOMPLISH YOUR TASKS YOU MUST REMAIN PURE IN MIND AND BODY. YOU MUST REMAIN COMPLETELY IN CONTROL AND BE UNCLUTTERED BY THE ALL CONSUMING DESIRES OF THE FLESH.

ONLY WHEN YOU HAVE COMPLETED YOUR TASKS CAN YOU ENJOY THE FRUITS OF YOUR LOVE.

I WILL HELP YOU WITH THIS."

The warmth in the rings faded, as did the voice of Jesus, and they sat looking at each other in wonder. They were surprised to feel that all vestiges of lust and desire had been driven from their minds. The love, affection, deep respect and the need to protect the other still remained, remained as strong as it had ever been. But the mind-crippling emotions that had threatened to mask their powers of reason and logical thought had now disappeared.

They both felt that a veil had been lifted, and they could now think more clearly.

"Harry?" said Hermione tentatively, "It was so confusing, what I was feeling before. It felt so wrong, but at the same time so right. Do you understand what I'm trying to say?"

"Yes, Hermi. I wanted to, but I didn't want to... you know... we're both still very young."

Hermione sighed deeply and reached out to Harry, clinging to him desperately.

"Perhaps you'll be able to work out what the message is all about now, Hermi," Harry whispered into her ear, "I think you were - we both were - a bit preoccupied before."

"Yes, I just couldn't seem to think things through - whenever I tried to concentrate on the message, those thoughts and desires would keep intruding. But I think that Jesus has put paid to that. And I do feel a bit relieved that we'll be a bit older, and more mature, before we... well, you know."

They broke apart and grinned as they looked at each other, "I don't think we'd better say anything about this to anybody, Hermi."

"No Harry - it would be dreadfully embarrassing anyway."

"So, Hermi, do you know what the message is all about now? Now that your mind is free again?"

Hermione thought for a moment, "No, we've got to research the names of deities first. But it's a good thing Ginny was thinking on all four cylinders when she pointed us in the right direction."

Before breakfast the following morning, Harry and Hermione were walking in the garden. As they reached the far end, where the rickety gate led out to a path that meandered down to the village, they heard voices. They walked towards the gate and smiled as they saw Mr and Mrs Granger looking very confused. Mr Granger was holding a small package in one hand and scratching the top of his head with the other, "It must be here somewhere, Millie. I'm sure we followed Arthur's directions correctly."

"Then where's the gate, Arbuthnot!" said the impatient Millie, "We must have taken a wrong turn somewhere."

The Grangers, of course, couldn't see the gate, which was right in front of them, because of the wards that had been set up to protect The Burrow. Hermione ran up to the gate, opened it, and stepped onto the path, "Mum! Dad!" She shouted as she skipped over to her parents and wrapped her arms around her mother.

"Where did you come from, Hermione," said her father, now looking even more confused.

"There's magical protection covering the house and garden, Dad," said Hermione as she hugged her father, "Come on; follow me."

Hermione led her mother and father into the garden where they were greeted by Harry and then led over to the cottage. As they entered, they were met by the wonderful aroma of breakfast and freshly baked bread. Ron sat at the enlarged kitchen table tucking into a huge pile of scrambled eggs on toast.

Millie grinned, "I see you haven't lost your appetite, Ron."

Ron looked up, "Hello Mrs. Granger, Mr Granger, nice to see you both again. Uh, Mrs Granger, would you mind giving my mum the recipe for that pizza you made for us in France?"

Millie laughed, "Of course I will, Ron."

"Millie, Arbuthnot - come and sit down and have some breakfast," said Arthur as he and Molly came into the kitchen, "The rest will be down shortly. What have you got there, Arbuthnot?"

Arbuthnot glanced down at the small package, "Oh, just something for you to look at Arthur. I thought you might be interested in seeing one of the latest things to come on the market in the Muggle world."

Arthur's eyes lit up with excitement, "That's great! We can go over to my shed after breakfast - there's loads of things there I want to show you."

After breakfast, Molly gave the Grangers a tour of the cottage, which was an architect's nightmare and made even more bizarre by the extra rooms Arthur had added to make space for everyone. There were hardly any straight lines in the house and the magical world obviously hadn't heard of a spirit level. However, The Burrow positively oozed charm and homeliness, qualities that were not lost on the Grangers.

Later, Millie grabbed her daughter and led her out into the garden, "Hermione, I... we, your father and I, have talked a lot about you and Harry over the last couple of weeks."

"Yes, Mum?" said Hermione, wondering what was coming next.

"Well, it's obvious that you're both deeply in love with each other, and... oh this is so difficult!"

"Mum! You're not going to start talking about the birds and the bees are you?"

"Look, Hermione. You didn't get out much when you were younger, and you weren't really close to kids your own age. I know that you and Harry are very responsible, but we're worried about whether you'll be able to cope if... when... you start to feel certain things."

Hermione laughed at her mother's obvious discomfort, "Don't worry, Mum. I know what you're trying to say." She lifted her left hand and pointed to the ring on her middle finger, "The rings are helping us. They've said that we must remain pure until our tasks are completed, and they're helping to curb our natural urges. So there's no need for you to worry - you won't become a grandmother for some time yet!"

"Hermione!" Millie's initial indignation soon vanished and a gentle smile spread over her face as she held her daughter's hand, "I'm relieved, Hermione, and I know your father will be too. We're not so old that we can't remember the things we felt when we first fell in love you know, and the love you and Harry have must be so much more powerful than that."

"Yes, Mum. Come on; let's go and see what Dad is doing."

They walked over to the side of the cottage, where Arthur had his large shed, and heard hoots of laughter coming from inside. They went in to see Arbuthnot and Harry holding onto the side of the shed, tears streaming down their faces, giggling uncontrollably. Arthur was looking puzzled, wondering what was causing their mirth. As Hermione and her mother looked around the interior of the shed, they couldn't help but grin. Two large tables were overflowing with every-day Muggle items - electric can openers, Walkman radios, quartz clocks, an old telephone and many other similar things. But around the sides of the shed were stacked hundreds upon hundreds of old batteries, in all shapes and sizes.

"No, there's nothing *wrong* with the batteries, Arthur," said Arbuthnot finally, "They've just run out - they've lost their electric charge."

"Oh," said Arthur, "I thought they were all faulty. They'd work for a short while and then stop. I kept getting more and more when I had to go out into the Muggle world with my job, and I thought that the magic at The Burrow was affecting them somehow. I've tried a load of spells to get them working again but I've failed up to now."

"They need to be recharged, Arthur," said Arbuthnot, "but I don't suppose you can do that here since The Burrow hasn't got any electricity supply. Don't worry; I'll bring you a supply of new batteries when I visit next, but I think you'd better get rid of these old ones - they'll start to corrode eventually and make a mess."

"Right. Thanks, Arbuthnot. Eh, when are you coming here next?"

"I don't know, but I've got a few spare packets back at the car in the village. I'll get them for you later; they should keep you going till we come next time."

The Grangers left soon after dinner that evening, having spent a very interesting and enjoyable day at The Burrow. Everyone now sat around the kitchen table, drinking steaming hot cups of tea, talking about Margot's message.

"We'll go to Hogwarts straight after breakfast," said Sirius, "I've spoken to Professor Dumbledore, and he's expecting us to arrive by Floo Powder. Are you and Hermione coming with us, Harry, or are you going to Zapparate?"

"Uh, no - we'll come with you. We haven't managed to perfect it yet."

"How's your telepathy coming along?" asked Ceri.

"We've managed seventy yards so far, but we need the wide open spaces of Hogwarts to try for greater distances," answered Hermione.

"Any more thoughts on the name of the god or goddess yet?" asked Remus.

"No," said Hermione, "But I know just the book to look at in the school library. I noticed it there when we were doing our research on Rhedae. It gives a list of names and their meanings, so we should find something."

"I'm sure you will," said Remus, smiling.

"What are we going to do when we find it, though," said Ron, "That book may well tell us who the god or goddess is, but how are we going to find out where he or she lives?"

"First things first Ron," said Sirius, "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

Professors Dumbledore, McGonagall, Flitwick and Snape sat around the headmaster's desk in his office waiting for Harry and the rest to emerge from the fireplace. A rush of magical blue flame shot up the chimney and Harry stepped out, grinning at the headmaster and his other professors. He was closely followed by Hermione, then Ron, Ginny, Sirius, Remus, Ceri, Nadine and finally Charlie.

"I must say," said Dumbledore, beaming at the new arrivals, "it's very satisfying to see some of our old students back at Hogwarts. How are you Charlie, Nadine, and welcome to our little inner circle. Minister Fudge approved your addition to the team earlier this morning."

Charlie grinned, "That's great, Professor. Nadine and I are glad to be aboard."

He and Nadine shook hands with their old teachers, but with just a hint of apprehension when they came to Snape.

"I suppose you four will want to go to the library," said Dumbledore, "We can all meet in the Great Hall for lunch at about one o'clock."

Hermione grinned with excitement, "Yes, Professor, we want to start as soon as we can."

"Oh by the way," said Dumbledore, "You may look in the restricted section if the need arises, but be sure to call one of us first. You never know what's lurking in some of those books."

"Thanks, Professor, we will," said Harry over his shoulder as the four made their way out of the office.

"It's a bit eerie in here, isn't it?" said Ginny as the four slowly walked into the empty library, "It seems strange with no other students about and Madam Pince not at her desk."

"Don't worry, Ginny," said Ron, grinning, "Just think - we can make as much noise as we like."

"Honestly Ron," said Hermione, "we should treat the library with some respect, like we always do. Come on, you sit down and I'll get that book I told you about last night."

Hermione walked over to the Muggle section of the library and searched along the second row of books. After a few minutes, she pulled a smallish book from the shelf and sat down with her friends. They all looked at the title, *The Etymology and History of First Names*.

"Before we look at Hermione," said Ginny, "Can we look at what our names mean? Come on, turn to Ginny - let's see what it says about me."

Hermione grinned and thumbed through the *English Names* section until she came to the right page. She read out to the others what the book said about Ginny, "'Pet form of Virginia'.

Hang on a minute," she turned the pages until she came to the entry for Virginia, "Feminine form of the Roman family name Virginius. Possibly derived from the Latin virgo, meaning maid or virgin. According to legend, she was a Roman woman killed by her father to keep her a virgin."

Ginny's face went bright red as the other three smirked, "Uh oh, Ginny. You'd better not tell Dad what your name means."

"Shut up, Ron. Hermi, look up Ron's name."

Hermione turned the pages, "Ron - short form of Ronald or Veronica."

"Hah!" shouted Ginny, "I bet Mum meant to call you Veronica."

It was Ron's turn to scowl at his sister, "Look up Ronald, Hermi."

"Ronald - Scottish form of Ragnvald, a name introduced by Scandinavian settlers and invaders."

"Oh," said Ron, "Look up Harry next."

"Harry - Medieval form of Henry. Also an Anglicised form of Hari. Hang on a minute," Hermione turned the pages and looked at the entry for Hari, "Hari - an Indian name. This was another name of both the Hindu gods Vishnu and Krishna."

"What!" said Harry, "That must be it, what we're looking for."

Hermione thought for a few moments, "I'm not sure. It's all a bit tenuous don't you think?"

"Well I might do if I knew what tenuous means," said Ron.

"Ron!" breathed Hermione, "I mean it's all a bit vague. And there are two gods with the name Hari. No, I don't think that's it."

"Well look up Hermione then," said Ginny.

"Hermione - In Greek mythology, she was the daughter of Menelaus, the king of Sparta and Helen of Troy," Hermione stared at the rest of the entry for a moment, then exclaimed, "That's it! Listen to this - the feminine form of the name of the Greek god, Hermes. That's got to be it!"

"Look up the name Hermes. Let's see what it says," said Harry.

Hermione quickly turned to the *'Mythological Names'* section of the book, "Hermes - Son of the main Greek god Zeus and Maia. He was the cleverest of the Olympian gods and messenger to all the other gods. He is often depicted as carrying a magic wand."

"I don't think there's any doubt about it," said Ginny, "Especially after the references to the magic wand and how clever he is. Sounds like your kindred spirit, Hermi."

"So Hermes it is then," said Harry, "But where do we go from here?"

"I don't know about you, Harry," said Ron, "But I'm going down to the Great Hall. Lunch will be ready in a few minutes, and I'm starving."

"You three go on down," said Hermione, "I want to see what more I can find on Hermes. Bring me a sandwich when you come back up."

The three friends knew better than to try to drag Hermione away when she was hot on the trail of more information, so they tramped out of the library, leaving Hermione as she went back to the Muggle bookcases and started looking through the Mythology section.

One hour later, they walked back into the library to see Hermione with a pile of books in front of her, hastily scribbling some notes onto a piece of parchment. Ginny went up to the table and placed a plate of sandwiches in front of her friend, "Eat, Hermi. You can tell us what you've found in between the mouthfuls."

"There's loads about Hermes in these Greek Mythology books," she said, "Listen to this. He was the cleverest of all the Greek gods, and legend says that he invented the lyre, the panpipes, the musical scale, astronomy, weights and measures, oratory and literature. Being the herald, or messenger of the gods, it was his duty to guide the souls of the dead down into the underworld. He was also said to bring dreams to mortals. Hermes is usually depicted with a broad-brimmed hat or a winged cap, winged sandals, and the herald's staff, or magic wand. He was the favourite of the ruler of the gods, Zeus."

"That's fine, Hermi," said Ron, "but how are we going to find him?"

"Patience, Ron," said Hermione as she looked back down at her notes, "There were many temples dedicated to Hermes in ancient Greece, and also in many other countries."

"So we've got to go to one of these temples?" asked Harry.

"You're as bad as Ron, Harry," said Hermione, "Now listen. I found these lines in a copy of *'Homer's Odyssey'* and I think they may be the key to finding Hermes.

'So saying, Minerva, goddess azure-eyed, rose to Olympus, the reputed seat eternal of the gods, which never storms disturb, rains drench, or snows invades, but calm the expanse and cloudless shines with purest day. There the inhabitants divine rejoice for ever.'

"What the hell does that mean, Hermi?" asked Ron, a pained expression on his face.

"It was the name Minerva that drew me to this piece. That's Professor McGonagall's first name and I felt it was a sign. Homer is describing the seat of the main Greek gods on Mount Olympus. So I did some more digging." Hermione paused to hastily chew on a chicken sandwich.

"The summit of Mount Olympus was considered the meeting place of the twelve most important gods and the central point of all the earth. Those gods, and Hermes was one of them, were called the Olympians. A gate of clouds, patrolled by the goddesses called The Seasons, protected the entrance to it. Every day, the gods would gather in the great hall of the palace of Zeus and feast on ambrosia and nectar, and discuss the affairs of heaven and earth."

"Heaven and Earth!" exclaimed Ginny, "As above, so below!"

"So you think that we'll find Hermes on Mount Olympus? You think that perhaps there's a place on the summit that's the re-creation of heaven on Earth?" asked Harry.

"Yes, I do," Hermione replied, "The references to Minerva and it being the meeting place of the gods seem to point to this place. It can't be one of the temples; there's simply too many of them. So where better to meet Hermes than the meeting place of the gods?"

"But surely," said Ginny, "This is all myth, and Mount Olympus is myth as well. Remember you told us in France that myth is the product of a fertile imagination."

"You're right, Ginny. But perhaps it isn't all myth - the message is telling us to search for Hermes, so he must have existed at some time in the past, perhaps he still exists. And I've found that Mount Olympus is a real mountain; it's in northern Greece, near the Aegean Sea on the boundary between Thessaly and Macedonia."

"So you think we've got to climb up this mountain to the summit," said Ron, "How high is it, Hermi?"

"It's just under ten thousand feet Ron," she replied. Ron let out a loud groan.

"Don't worry Ron," said Hermione, "One of these books says that although the mountain is in a remote part of Greece, many young people climb to the summit and back down again in a day. So it shouldn't be too bad."

"That's all very well, Hermi. But did the book say what sort of state they were in when they came down? Ten thousand feet - ughh."

Harry laughed and then pushed his seat back and stood up from the table, "So Mount Olympus it is then. Thanks Hermi - brilliant as usual. We'd better go and see Professor Dumbledore and the others. We've got to work out how we're going to get to Greece."

As they walked back towards the headmaster's office, Ginny turned suddenly towards Hermione, "Hermi. If loads of people have climbed the mountain, surely we would have heard about this meeting place - there'd have been a big splash about it in the Daily Prophet wouldn't there?"

"I don't think so, Ginny," Hermione replied, "I think it must be magically hidden from Muggles, like Hogwarts."

Professor Dumbledore and the others looked up as the four youngsters walked into the office, "Have you found something already?" asked the headmaster.

"Yes sir," said Harry, "Hermione has built a very strong case that we'll find Hermes on the summit of Mount Olympus in Greece."

"Ah Greece," said Remus, his face breaking into a smile, "That was one of my old stamping grounds just after I left University. I travelled around there visiting many of the ancient sites, and learning the language. It'll be great to go back."

"Did you go to Mount Olympus Professor?" asked Harry.

"No, Harry, I'm afraid not. It's in a fairly remote part of the country you know."

"Professor Lupin," said Hermione, "We've got to go there, and the sooner the better. What's the best way to get there?"

"I know a wizard in the north of the country. He lives in Thessaloniki, about seventy miles north of the mountain range. I'm sure I can get him to arrange for a Portkey to the base of the mountain."

"Uh, Professor," said Ron, "Can't you get him to place the Portkey at the *top* of the mountain?"

"Ron! This is a very magical and spiritual place," said Remus, "We can't miss the chance to experience the mystery and ethos that lies all around the base of the mountain. Thousands of years ago, many hermits took up residence in the caves and forests that surround the peak to soak up the unique atmosphere that lives there. And in any case, I can't ask my friend to climb to the top to place the Portkey there. No, I think it best if we pitch camp in the forests below. Hopefully, the Portkey will be in place by tomorrow evening and we can walk up to the summit early the day after. Look on it as a labour of love, Ron You'll enjoy the experience, I'm sure."

His three friends laughed as they ruffled Ron's hair, finally managing to make a smile appear on his face.

"I can just about hear her," said Harry as he glanced at Ron. The two boys were standing at the far end of the Quidditch field, looking towards Hermione and Ginny who were over by the lake, about three hundred yards away. Harry closed his eyes and concentrated, willing his thoughts towards Hermione's mind.

"Yes, she can hear you," said Ron who saw that Hermione was waving her arm in the air, "Let's try a bit further away."

Ron paced out another fifty yards and then stopped. Harry again concentrated and forced his thoughts to Hermione. He smiled as he heard the faint answering thoughts in his head.

They spent the rest of the day trying to extend their range until they could hear their thoughts at a distance of seven hundred yards. They had earlier tried again to Apparate, but they couldn't quite manage to materialise permanently at their friends' side. Eventually they had given up and concentrated on extending their telepathic abilities.

At dinner that evening, Remus announced that he'd made arrangements with his Greek friend, and the Portkey would be in place the following afternoon.

"I wonder where we'll have to go after we meet Hermes," said Ginny, "We know that this is only going to be the start of the quest."

"Maybe he'll lead us into the Greek underworld," said Ron, "That was one of his jobs, wasn't it - leading the souls of the dead there?"

"Yes, Ron," replied Harry, "But if that's where we have to go, I hope we won't have to die first!"

The six Dark Wizards held their illuminated wands high, trying to see into the gloom of the sinister place in which they found themselves. A squeak of fear escaped from Wormtail's mouth as his wand lit up a hideous gargoyle perched on a short marble pillar. It seemed to look right into his soul as it stared at him angrily with blank, stone eyes.

They found themselves in a smallish cave, with one side open to the dark emptiness beyond. The cave walls were adorned with twelve pillars, each topped by a stone gargoyle.

Voldemort walked a short way into the darkness and raised his wand above his head. He muttered a few words and the light increased in intensity. The other five stepped up alongside him and raised their wands. Voldemort sucked in a breath of air, tasting the dank mustiness of the place. The floor was covered with the dust of eons, sprinkled with sand that had found its way down from the desert floor above.

The place that opened up before them was huge, the bright light from their wands not managing to cut through the gloom to the furthest reaches of the place. Voldemort looked up and could just make out the rock ceiling above. He also saw that countless marble pillars, which stretched from the dusty floor to the heights above, supported the ceiling. The pillars were huge, measuring about fifteen feet across.

"Irem," hissed Voldemort, "The city of pillars. At last!"

"Where do you think the Necronomicon will be, my Lord?" asked Lucius, staring into the vast expanse of the underground city.

"I don't know, Lucius," he replied, "Aleric's book only gave directions to Irem. I think we'd better split up and search for it. Wormtail, you and Travis go to the left. You other two search on the right, and you come with me, Lucius, towards the middle of the city. If you find anything, wave your wands above your heads and magically enhance your voices and shout. Now go."

The three pairs of black-cloaked figures walked into the long-abandoned city, looking intently at their surroundings. Voldemort and Lucius followed a broad avenue that seemed to lead towards the centre of the city. As they went, they passed many temple-like structures, some showing the decay of millennia, but others looking as sturdy as the day they were built.

"Who do you think built this place, my Lord?" asked Lucius as he gazed at a square stone alter, covered with strange markings.

"I don't know, Lucius. But whoever they were they followed the Dark Side - I can feel it all around." Voldemort again sniffed the air, revelling in the evil that infused it.

Lucius nodded as he pulled his cloak tighter around his body, feeling the unsettling auror of ancient and long-lost Dark Arts in the musty air. He shivered involuntarily as he picked up his pace to follow Voldemort, who was now striding with purpose along the dusty avenue.

Travis smirked as Wormtail let out a squeal. The large bluish-coloured lizard that was walking across his foot looked up at him with disdain, and then ambled slowly into a ruined house. "What's the matter, Wormtail, don't you like lizards?"

"Shut up, Travis." Wormtail looked around at the ruined structures. The path they were following seemed to be leading into a residential part of the city, "I wonder what caused all this destruction? The buildings back by the cave seemed to be intact."

"Look at some of these stones, Wormtail. I think there must have been one almighty battle here a long time ago. You can clearly see the marks of curses on them."

"Do you think we should go into some of these places and look?" said Wormtail.

"I don't think so," Travis replied, "These are just houses. If the Necronomicon is anywhere in this city, I don't think we'll find it in any of these places."

After a while, they came to the edge of the left-hand boundary of the city. The residences at the very edge, where they met the stark rock walls, seemed to grow directly out of the rock. They saw the narrow road branch to the right, and they stared up at the partially destroyed houses on their right as they made their way along it.

"There's nothing in here, Plonger," said one of the two Death Eaters who had taken the right-hand path. Findus Plonger, a thick-set bear of a man and the father of Grimus, expelled from Hogwarts for his attack on Hermione during the last school year, grunted as he took a final look at the inside of the curious building they had just searched.

"Let's look at the next one then, Prink. I want to find the Necronomicon before any of the others can get their hands on it."

"If we do find it, don't forget what Lord Voldemort said. We can't look inside it. He has to be the first to do that," said Prink.

"Don't be stupid, Prink. How will he know if we take a little peek at it? They say that the spells in that book can give you great power and wealth, and I don't want to miss out on that."

Prink shook his head, but held his tongue. He didn't want to antagonise Plonger too much; one or two other Death Eaters had done that and ended up with a few broken bones for their trouble. They had reached the right-hand perimeter of the city a short while ago, after walking through a residential area, but the broad avenue they now followed held some very impressive structures. They couldn't guess what their purpose had been all those long years ago, but their size and architecture certainly pointed to some important purpose.

The next building, although filled with many statues and alters, showed no sign of the Necronomicon, and the thick dust on the floor suggested that no one had entered the structure for thousands of years. They went back out into the avenue and continued on their way, passing an open area with the rubble of ruined buildings strewn around. After another hundred

yards, they came to a row of smaller structures, but just as impressive in their decoration as the earlier ones.

"Look over there," said Prink pointing to the fourth building along, "Look at the ground at the entrance."

The dust on the floor outside the entrance of the building seemed to be less thick than anywhere else, as if it had been used much later than the rest. "Let's look inside," said Plonger as they walked over and extended their wands through the gloomy entrance.

Voldemort and Lucius stood in front of an impressive column, which stood in the middle of the broad avenue. Eight slightly smaller avenues led up to the column, each from a different direction. The base of the column bore a black stone plaque, which held the same strange markings, probably a long-lost ancient form of writing, as some of the structures they had seen earlier.

At the top of the column was the huge statue of a man, and Lucius could just make out the hideous features of the broad face. The ears were a revelation - it made the man look like a fat Mr. Spock, but with heavier brows.

"I wonder who that is?" said Lucius.

"Who knows," replied Voldemort, "I think we've reached the centre of the city. See how these roads all lead to this spot? That must be a statue of one of the city's rulers."

"Well the Necronomicon is not here, my Lord. Where shall we go next?"

Voldemort looked at each of the avenues in turn, then pointed towards the right, "Down this way - I sense that the dark auror of the city is stronger in that direction."

Prink and Plonger slowly entered the building, looking around with awe at the statues and frescos it contained. The chamber in which they found themselves was circular, and the walls and floor were made of pink marble, shot through with black and shiny pieces of some unidentifiable material. The frescos depicted various scenes, which showed a number of hideous-looking figures performing some unfathomable ritual. The fresco at the far end of the room showed the figures standing in front of a bright circular light, holding their arms towards it in a display of reverence and worship.

These scenes were forgotten, however, when they looked towards the very centre of the room. There, rising about six feet from the floor, was an inky black altar. The two men couldn't identify the material it was made from, its black sides seemed to suck the light from the air as the illumination from their wands got close to it. Prink shuddered as he looked at its evil beauty.

But the thing that drew their attention, the thing that drove everything else from their minds, was the object that sat on top of the altar. It was a large, black-covered book - could it be the long-lost Necronomicon?

Prink gasped and then turned back towards the entrance, intending to signal Voldemort and the others. He shouted with fear as Plonger put his beefy arm around his neck and held him back, "Just one moment, Prink, I want to look at the book first. And if you breath one word to any of the others, I promise it will be your last. Do you understand?"

Prink hurriedly nodded and backed away as Plonger released his hold. He edged back towards the entrance, all the while keeping his eyes peeled on Plonger, who turned and approached the black altar.

Plonger's eyes were wide and bright as he slowly walked towards the altar. He walked up the few small steps that led up to the altar and stopped at the top step, holding his wand high. He gazed with rapture at the book - on the black cover was one large letter etched in gold - a stylised 'N'. He grinned with anticipation at the fabled tome and reached out his hand to stroke its ancient binding.

"No don't!" shouted Prink from the entrance doorway, "It might be dangerous."

Plonger turned around and grinned at Prink, "I know what I'm doing Prink. Don't worry. Just watch - you'll be the first to witness a Dark Wizard open the Necronomicon for the first time in nearly thirteen hundred years."

Plonger turned back to the book and placed his hand on the edge of the cover. He drooled with anticipation as he lifted the cover and opened the book to his full scrutiny. He started to read the opening lines, his whole body now shaking with excitement.

Then his eyes grew wide as he absorbed the full meaning of the first paragraph.

Prink watched from the doorway and cringed as he saw the transformation that came over his colleague. Plonger seemed to grow an extra foot as his body seemed to stretch towards the ceiling. His wand dropped from shaking hands and he let out a piercing screech. An inky blackness seemed to come from the book and cover the unfortunate Plonger from head to foot. Then the blackness flowed back into the book and the cover shut with a loud slam.

Prink stared wide eyed as Plonger toppled backwards from the top of the altar and hit the floor with a crash. He lay unmoving as Prink slowly crept over to the prone figure and tentatively prodded his shoulder with his foot. There was no response. He again pushed with his foot and the whole of the huge man's body moved as if it was frozen. But it wasn't frozen - it was petrified. He leaned over the body then, and for as long as he lived he would not forget the look on Plonger's face, a look that drew Prink to the very edge of madness.

Chapter 2 Of Gods and Men

The protectors, including little Professor Flitwick, walked on either side of the four friends as they ambled slowly through the ruined city. They had arrived in the foothills of Mount Olympus that afternoon and had just come upon a large expanse of a partially excavated site on their way further up the mountain to find a good camping place for the night. Remus, who was in the lead, had a look of excitement on his face as he told the others about the place.

"Dion," he said in hushed tones, "The sacred city of the Macedonians. They worshipped Zeus and the other Olympian gods here over two thousand years ago. I remember reading about it when I was in Greece before."

Towards the centre of the city, he stopped and turned to the rest of the group, "Do you know that Alexander the Great of Macedon started out on his conquest of the world from this place in 334 BC? He came here to make sacrifices to the gods in the hope of a successful campaign. They must have liked what he gave them that day."

Ron had a tortured look on his face, "Professor Lupin. You sound like Hermione. Have you caught the same thirst for knowledge that she's got?"

Remus grinned at the redheaded boy; "I had it before it got hold of Hermione, Ron."

Hermione, meanwhile, had a look of rapture on her beautiful features, as she looked around the ancient site, soaking up everything that Remus said, "Shut up, Ron. Listen and learn," she whispered, "How did it get in such a ruined state, Professor?"

"It was destroyed by an earthquake in the fifth century AD," he replied as he led the group along a rickety paved street.

Suddenly, Sirius jumped to the front and held up his hand, listening intently, "What's that noise?"

They could all hear it now, a sort of low rumble, interspersed with higher-pitched creaking sounds. Ceri quickly moved up beside Sirius and pulled her wand from her robes, looking towards a ruined temple about a hundred yards away, "It's coming from the direction of that temple," she said.

The two aurors looked with surprise as little Professor Flitwick suddenly started giggling, "No need to worry," he said, smiling at the two as he passed them, "Come on, this is quite a famous sight in Dion."

He led the group into the confines of the ruined temple, still chuckling to himself, and pointed to a pool fed by a small stream, "Frogs!" he said.

All around the pool were hundreds of frogs, basking in the late afternoon sunshine, setting up a tremendous chorus of croaks. The group laughed with relief at their earlier display of apprehension, an apprehension born of the ever-present threat that Death Eaters could turn up at any time. Professor Flitwick continued, "I heard about it when I studied ancient Greece at University. This is the temple of Isis - the famous Egyptian goddess. Her cult was brought to Dion when the Romans took over the place." He pointed to several statues that still stood within the temple ruins, "Those are statues of the goddess, which survived the quake."

The group continued on and soon left the ruined city, heading up through the foothills of Mount Olympus as the sun dipped down towards the western horizon. Soon, they entered a forest of deciduous trees and started looking around for a good place to pitch their tents. Charlie shouted to the rest when he found a small clearing in the forest, beside a large rocky outcrop.

That evening, they all sat around a blazing campfire after finishing their meal, listening with interest as Remus and Flitwick told them about the myths and legends of ancient Greece. The tales from the Iliad and Odyssey never failed to produce a feeling of literary magic. Charlie and Nadine sat a little apart from the others, Nadine leaning back comfortably against Charlie's chest. Charlie had a glazed look in his eyes as he stared up at the brilliant display of stars overhead, "It's mind-boggling, Nadine," he whispered.

"What is?" she replied as she snuggled a little closer.

"The stars. The universe - it's mind-boggling."

"Yes, it's very beautiful isn't it?"

"No - well yes it is, of course," said Charlie, "But I didn't mean that. Just look out there, Nadine, try to look beyond the stars. What's there, do you think?"

Nadine smiled. She loved to listen to Charlie when he got into one of his contemplative moods, struggling to understand the mysteries of life. "I don't know, Charlie, you'd best ask the Centaurs that one, I think."

"I don't think the Centaurs will be able to tell me what I want to know. They just read the patterns and extract messages and portents from the heavens, but I want to know what's out there - beyond the stars. Just think about it, Nadine, everything we've been brought up to believe, all our experiences in life, everything is finite. We are born, we live and we die. Every road has a start and an end; everything we do has a start and an end; there's always an end to things. But up there, is there an end? We're told that space is infinite. We're taught about the 'big bang' theory of the universe, with the boundary of the stars and galaxies always in a state of expansion from a common starting point. We're told that there's nothing beyond that boundary, but there's got to be something, otherwise the stars wouldn't be able to expand into it. Oh I don't know."

Nadine laughed, "You're an incurable romantic and a dreamer, Charlie. Maybe that's why I love you so much." She turned her head and quickly kissed him on the lips, then turned back to nestle into the comfort of his arms.

After breakfast the next morning, they continued on their way through the forest, the ground always sloping upwards. Without warning, they emerged into a large clearing at the edge of the forest and stood transfixed as they saw the beauty before them. The magnificent panorama of Mount Olympus and its subsidiary peaks spread before them, the summit clearly seen against the deep blue background of a cloudless sky.

"Oh it's so beautiful," breathed Ginny.

"Yes but what worries me," said Harry, "is that I can't see any clouds at the top. If the gateway to the meeting place of the gods is through a gate of clouds then where is it?"

"What worries me, Harry," moaned Ron, "is how far away it is. It's miles away. And look at how steep and rugged it is towards the top. Who was the bloke that wrote that you could get up and back in a day, Hermi? Bloody Hercules?"

"Ron!" said Hermione, "I only told you what I read. But I must admit that whoever he is, he must be pretty fit to do it in a day."

"Well I can't see us getting to the top today," said Ceri as she visually mapped out their route to the summit, "We've got to go through that forest of pine trees about two miles away, and then we get to the difficult part. That terrain looks quite steep and difficult to me." She pointed up at the mountain, "Do you see that small rocky valley just before the final stretch to the summit?"

They all squinted into the distance and could just make out the place to which Ceri was pointing. She continued, "If we can reach that valley by this evening then we'll have done well. It looks a good place to set up camp."

Sirius nodded, "I agree, Ceri. We'll aim to get there before dark and pitch our tents. We'll have the whole of tomorrow to explore the summit."

"Until we get to that pine forest, we've got a couple of miles of open ground to cross, so we'd better take up protective positions around the four kids. You lead the way, Sirius. Charlie and Nadine can take the left flank, and Remus and Filius the right. I'll bring up the rear. Ready?"

Sirius stepped out from the cover of the trees and looked around him intently. After a few minutes he gestured to the others, "It's all clear. Come on, let's get started."

After another three hours of walking, they emerged from the forest of pine trees onto the rough terrain of the mountain. Ahead of them, they could see the rough outline of a path that wound its way towards the summit. "Right," said Sirius, "This is where the real climbing starts. We should get to that valley in about another four hours if everything goes well. What's the matter Ron?"

Ron wore one of his pained expressions as he looked at the rugged path up to the valley, "Over the last few hours I've grown to accept that I've got to climb up there. But I'm not going to do it on an empty stomach. I'm bloody starving! All this exercise is giving me an appetite. Can't we stop for something to eat?"

Everyone laughed, as he looked pleadingly at Sirius, who threw up his hands in resignation, "All right Ron We can afford to stop for half an hour. And since when did you need exercise to give you an appetite? But after this, we don't stop till we get to that valley, right?"

"Right, Sirius, right. Now where are those sandwiches?"

Half an hour later, they were back on the rough track that led up into the heights of Mount Olympus. They kept to the same protective formation as before, with Sirius in the lead, their vigilance heightened by the many hiding places that were in the rough terrain.

Sirius held up his hand to halt the others when he saw something up ahead, on the left side of the track. He tentatively walked towards an object that gave off a diffuse white glow, which was apparent even in the bright sunlight. He relaxed when he drew near and saw that it was a

statue, scantily clad, standing some six feet tall and made of glowing white marble. He called the others towards him and they gathered around the statue.

"Hephaestus!" exclaimed Flitwick, "It's Hephaestus, one of the Olympian gods. He's one of Zeus' sons. I saw his statue in a temple in Athens."

"That's strange," said Remus, "I haven't heard that there were any statues on the upper trail to Mount Olympus. There should have been at least a reference to them in the mythology books. I wonder. Nadine, see what you can make of it."

Nadine approached the statue and held out her hand to touch its gleaming arm, "Yes," she breathed quietly, "I can feel something. It's giving off a psychic vibration. It feels like a magical ward, similar to the ones placed around Hogwarts. No wonder there haven't been any references to it in Muggle books - Muggles can't see it."

"So why do you think it's here?" Harry asked the group in general.

They all looked at each other with blank stares, "It'll have to remain a mystery then," said Sirius, "Come on, I don't want to hang about here too long. Lets go."

After a quarter of a mile, and just as they came to a branch in the trail, one leading off to the left and one leading to the right, they came to another of the gleaming statues, standing on the side of the trail that branched to the left.

"This is Demeter," said Flitwick, "One of Zeus' two sisters and another of the Olympians."

"Check it out please, Nadine," said Sirius.

"It's the same," said Nadine as she touched the statue, "The same psychic vibrations as the other one."

"Do you think that these are markers?" asked Hermione, "Leading the way to the meeting place of the gods?"

"You could be right, Hermione," answered Remus, "We'll soon know if we come across any more of these statues."

After four long and arduous hours, the group arrived at the small rocky valley. The sun had dropped below the horizon and it was getting dark. On the way up, they had seen another five of the glowing statues, each one representing one of the Olympian Gods.

"I don't think there's any doubt about it," said Flitwick as they sat in front of the campfire eating their supper, "Those statues must have been placed there to guide the lesser gods to the meeting place on Olympus - those who wanted to consult the ruling gods about various things."

"Yes Professor," said Hermione, "And that leaves four more that we'll pass before we get there, apart from the statue of the chief god, Zeus, that is."

"This is exciting isn't it," said Flitwick, unable to keep his enthusiasm in check, "Just think. Tomorrow we might get to see and talk to the main gods and goddesses of the ancient Greek world."

"Well I don't know about that, Filius," said Sirius, "But one thing is quite clear. We haven't seen any Death Eaters up to now and it doesn't look as if they're aware of our little expedition. I just hope it stays that way."

"I've been thinking about that," said Ceri, "It's strange that the Death Eaters turned up when we went to France but not here, at least not so far. I wonder if that's because of the school holidays, and the spy's not at Hogwarts to overhear any of our conversations."

"I bet it's that bloody Draco Malfoy!" exclaimed Ron with a hint of venom.

"You don't know that, Ron," said Ginny.

"No," said Harry, "We don't. And we won't be sure who it is until we catch him or her red-handed."

"Enough speculation for one night," said Sirius suppressing an enormous yawn, "We've all had a hard day and there's another one waiting for us tomorrow. I suggest we all turn in and get a good night's sleep. Have you set up all the wards, Ceri?"

"Yes, Sirius," she replied, "I set them up at both entrances to the valley. We'll know if anybody starts snooping around in the night."

Ten weary souls went to their two large tents and it didn't take long before they all fell into an exhausted sleep, but not before each of them thought about what they'd find the following day.

Voldemort and Lucius were the first to reach the temple. They could see, above the tall and impressive entranceway, markings in the same curious style as those on the statue in the centre of the city. They heard strangled noises coming from inside the building and they slowly entered, their wands held high. On the left-hand side of the circular room they saw Prink, sitting on the floor hugging his knees, which were drawn up to his chest. He was rocking slowly backwards and forwards, gibbering something that made no sense at all.

They then looked to the centre of the chamber, where they saw the petrified body of Plonger, stretched on the floor beneath the black altar. After glancing at the frescos that decorated the walls, Voldemort looked at the top of the altar and saw the black-bound book resting there. First, a look of pure ecstasy came over him, but this was quickly followed by a look of dark anger. He strode over to the cringing Prink and bent over him, "What has happened here, Prink?"

Prink jumped as he heard the Dark Lord's voice and he looked up at him with staring eyes, and spittle dribbling down his chin. He stuttered for a few moments and then let out a low moan.

"Prink!" shouted Voldemort, "Pull yourself together. Now tell me what happened."

A spark of recognition entered Prink's mind and he made a valiant effort to calm himself, desperately trying to forget the look on Plonger's face. He pointed over towards Plonger and tried to explain, "He... he..." but gave up as the vision of Plonger's face once more came to the forefront of his consciousness.

"He opened the book, didn't he Prink?" sneered Voldemort. Prink nodded in reply.

Voldemort let out a gasp of frustration, "The fool!" He turned to Lucius, "He wasn't to know that Aleric wrote a note at the back of his book outlining the ritual to be performed before the Necronomicon can be safely opened. The stupid fool - I had hopes for Plonger. He was one of my best followers."

They turned as Wormtail and Travis rushed through the doorway, summoned by Plonger's shriek of pure agony that had echoed throughout the ancient city.

"You two," hissed Voldemort, "Get Plonger and stand him up outside this building. I want him to remain there as a warning to anyone who thinks he can do what only I can do. And don't look at his face, unless you want to end up like Prink over there."

Wormtail and Travis looked at the gibbering Prink and then slowly walked over to Plonger, being extremely careful not to look at his face. As they carried him, face down, to the outside of the temple, Voldemort slowly walked up the steps towards the top of the altar where he paused, looking at the Necronomicon with reverence, before stretching out his hand to lovingly caress the black binding. Then he lifted the tome in both hands and turned towards Lucius Malfoy.

"This is my destiny, Lucius," he said forcefully, "This is the one thing that will ensure my triumph over the Anima Summas and set my way free for the conquest of the world."

He stepped down from the altar and walked towards the doorway, "Come. I have to get back to my cave. I've got a lot of very important reading to do." He turned towards Prink, still gibbering and shaking in the corner. An evil grin spread over his face as he pulled his wand from his robes and pointed it at the unfortunate man, "But before we go, I'd better put this pathetic bundle out of his misery. *AVADA KEDAVRA.*"

A powerful beam of green light shot from Voldemort's wand and struck Prink in the centre of his chest. Prink looked with disbelief at Voldemort before sagging, lifeless, to the floor.

The group of ten, four teenagers and six adults, set out for the summit of Mount Olympus early the following morning. They stuck to the same formation as before, but had to walk in single file along some of the narrower places, and along a narrow ridge as they neared the top. They came to their second glowing statue of the morning after an hour's walk, and there was no mistaking its identity.

"It's Hermes," whispered Hermione, "Look at the winged hat and shoes, and the wand he's holding."

"He's beautiful," said Ginny as she looked at the statue with longing, "I wish he was at Hogwarts."

"Hey, perhaps this is it!" exclaimed Ron suddenly, "This is Hermes. Perhaps this is where we have to meet him."

They all looked around, but could see no one, "Talk to him, Harry. See if you get a response," said Ron.

Harry looked at Ron dubiously, "I'm not going to talk to a chunk of marble, Ron."

"Go on, Harry," said Hermione, "Ron may be right. Try it."

Harry self-consciously walked to the front of the statue and stuttered, "He... Hello. Hermes. Can you hear me?"

After a few moments, with no response coming from the statue, Ginny giggled, "Perhaps he doesn't like speaking to boys. You try Hermi, you're named after him, after all."

Hermione nodded and placed her wand on the statue, "Hermes. I'm Hermione. Can you hear me?" After a minute of waiting, still nothing happened.

Harry turned to Ron, "If you tell anybody back at the school that I spoke to a statue, I'll make your life hell."

"Me too," said Hermione, her face slightly pink.

"Well it was worth a try wasn't it?" said Ron defensively.

They continued on their way, which became steadily steeper and more difficult. Just before they reached the huge rocky massif, which was the summit of the mountain, they came upon another statue, that of a beautiful woman with an enigmatic smile on her face.

"Hera," said Flitwick, "That's Zeus' wife, the goddess of fertility."

They walked past the beautiful statue and after a short while came to the base of the rocky summit.

"It's going to be very difficult to climb that," said Charlie.

"And I can't see any clouds at the top," added Nadine.

"Perhaps we don't have to climb it," said Hermione, "The books say that the gateway of clouds is *at* the summit, not *on* it. Let's walk around the base, there may be something behind."

They walked around to the left of the summit and started to angle towards the back end, Sirius in the lead, "It's here," he suddenly shouted.

They all walked up alongside Sirius and stared at the last glowing statue. The shock of hair, the beard flowing from his chin in ringlets and the regal expression on his face testified that this was the ruler of all the gods. Mighty Zeus. But that was not all that attracted their attention. Immediately behind the statue was a strange looking area of mistiness that hovered just above the ground.

"The gate," breathed Hermione, "The gate to the meeting place of the gods."

"Come on," said Ron, "Let's go in and see what's there."

Harry turned to the adults, "I think we need to do this alone, just like we had to at Rennes-le-Chateau."

Sirius nodded, "All right. But be careful, and if there's the slightest hint of danger, get back here straight away."

Flitwick looked disappointed at having to stay outside as he watched the four youngsters move slowly into the mist. At first, the mist was no more than a shimmering haziness, and they could see the adults watching anxiously as they looked back at them, but then it became more defined and after a few yards they found themselves in the middle of a dense cloud. They looked back but could see nothing of Sirius and the others.

As they walked slowly on, they began to hear the faint sounds of music. Hermione tilted her head, listening intently, "I think that's the sound of the lyre and the panpipes," she whispered, "The music of the gods."

They walked a little way further, but stopped as they saw a swirling ahead of them in the cloud. Then, out of the dense mist, came three of the most beautiful young women they had ever seen, "Wow," said Ron with reverence, his eyes wide and unblinking.

They drifted slowly towards the four friends and stopped about five yards in front of them. The tallest of the young women drifted forward and then stopped. She looked at the youngsters and then smiled, "We are the Seasons," she said, "The guardians of the gateway of the gods. I am Thallo, and my companions are Carpo and Auxo. Why do you approach the abode of the gods?"

Harry cleared his throat, "We have been charged to seek out Hermes. I," he looked at Hermione, "and Hermione, who was named after the great Hermes, are the Anima Summas. And these are our brave helpers. We wish to listen to Hermes' council, council that will speed us on our way to a great knowledge, knowledge that will help us in our struggle against the evil Dark Forces that are abroad in the world."

Thallo smiled as she appraised the four, "We can see that you are brave and true and your hearts are filled with goodness. But I fear you have come too late, there have been no visitors to this place for thousands of years. We, or should I say our spirits, still guard the way in the hope that the great times will return, but there is no longer anything here to guard. But we will allow you to pass so that you can see for yourselves."

The three spirits drifted back into the mists, leaving the way open for the four teens to proceed.

"Is it worth going on?" asked a disappointed Ron, "She said there's nothing here any more."

"We've got to Ron," said Hermione, "Hermes, or his spirit, may still be here to speak to us. And anyway, if we don't find anything here then I don't know how we'll be able to continue with the quest. Come on."

As they walked further, the cloud becoming thicker, and they found that they could no longer see the ground under their feet. They appeared to be walking on the very cloud itself. Then the swirling cloud thinned and they stood at the entrance to the abode of the gods. In front of them was an ornate gateway, leading into an avenue with buildings standing on both sides.

Harry and Ron were the first to go in through the gateway, quickly followed by the two girls. They walked along the avenue and stopped at the first building on the left. Ron tentatively looked inside, and then gestured for the others to follow. The place was deserted. It appeared to be someone's living quarters, with a strange bed in one corner of the room and various pieces of furniture dotted around. They walked back onto the avenue and looked around them.

"Let's see where this road leads," said Harry, "We can come back and examine these buildings later."

Up ahead, they could see another entranceway, through which shone a gentle diffuse light. They walked up to the entranceway and looked through. They saw a square courtyard, open to the sky, with five rooms on either side. The floor, unlike the avenue they had just come down, was a mass of cloud, gently undulating to the quiet sound of the weird music that was just on the boundaries of their hearing. Ornate stone benches were spaced around the perimeter of the court, in front of the many marble pillars that stretched up to the sky.

"Look over there," said Ginny pointing to a large temple-like structure opposite the entranceway to the courtyard, "That must be something important. Let's look inside."

She stepped onto the cloudy floor of the courtyard, testing that it would hold her weight, and then walked purposefully, followed by the other three, across towards the temple. They went in through the doorway and looked around, "This must be the meeting place," whispered Hermione.

She looked with awe at the large marble-furnished hall. Her eyes were drawn to the bright ceiling, which was a bright blue, symbolising the sky. Along each side of the hall were ten marble thrones, five on each side, and at the far end were seven marble steps, each enamelled with one of the colours of the rainbow. The steps led up to a podium on which there were two extremely large and ornate thrones. The largest one was made of polished black marble, adorned with gold, and had a ruby-eyed golden eagle perched on the right arm, and a purple ram's fleece covering the seat. The other throne was made of ivory, with three crystal steps leading up to it. Willow leaves and golden cuckoos decorated the back, and a full moon hung above it. The seat was covered with white cow skin.

"Why are you whispering, Hermi?" asked Ron, "There's nobody here, you know."

Hermione scowled at Ron, "I know, Ron, but this *is* the meeting place of the gods and we should treat it with reverence." She pointed to the large throne, "That must be Zeus' throne, and the one alongside it must be Hera's. The other ten thrones around the hall must be those of the other Olympian gods.

"Let's see if we can find Hermes' throne," said Harry, "There might be something there."

Ron and Ginny walked to the right side of the hall to examine the thrones, and Harry and Hermione went to the left. "This is it," said Hermione as she looked at the throne nearest the front of the hall, "It's decorated with golden wings, so it must be the one."

The four gathered round the throne and looked all around it, but could find nothing of significance, "Sit in it Hermi," said Ginny, "Perhaps Hermes will appear if you do."

Hermione looked doubtfully at her friend, "Oh I don't know, Ginny, it seems so... so disrespectful somehow."

"Go on, Hermi," said Ron, "Try it."

Hermione slowly walked to the front of the throne and felt the smooth marble armrest. Then she turned and slowly, ever so slowly, sank down and sat on the fleece-covered seat. She looked up at the others as she felt an imperceptible vibration. Then the throne lifted and floated slowly towards the doorway.

"Harry!" said Hermione in a tremulous voice, "What's happening?"

"Don't worry, Hermi," he replied, albeit with a hint of panic in his voice, "We're right behind you."

All three followed the throne as it drifted out into the courtyard. It then turned to the right and floated into the first room at the side.

"Haaarrrryyy!" wailed Hermione, "Where's it taking me?"

Harry, Ron and Ginny couldn't help but grin as they rushed into the room. The throne had now settled back onto the floor and was immobile. Hermione sat wide-eyed, gripping the arms of the throne, afraid to move in case she was taken on another free ride. When she saw her friends enter, she quickly jumped up from the seat and threw her arms around Harry's neck.

"It's ok, Hermi," he whispered in her ear.

Hermione quickly gained her composure and turned around to look at the throne, "Why do you think it did that?" she asked.

"Well I think," said Ginny, "that the throne thought you were Hermes and took you to his private living quarters. You're very much alike spiritually, you know."

"Yes, of course," she replied, "I read in one of the books that the furniture was made by Hephaestus - his was the first statue we saw on the path up to the summit. The book said that he made some of the chairs able to move themselves."

They looked around the room, examining every item that was inside, but could see nothing that could help them with the quest.

Hermione sighed, "There's nothing here. Come on, let's go back and take a closer look at the council hall."

"I think I'll see if I can get a lift back," said Ron as he sat in Hermes' throne. The others laughed at Ron's disappointed expression when the throne remained inert.

"I think it'll only work for Hermi, Ron," said Ginny.

At the others' insistent prompting, Hermione again sat back on the throne, which once more lifted from the floor and drifted back into the council hall, where it settled back into its rightful place. Hermione stood back up, grinning this time, and directed the other three to look more closely around the hall.

After half an hour, the four gathered back at the foot of the steps leading up to the podium.

"Nothing," said Harry.

"Although everything seems as fresh as the day it was built, the place has an air of desolation, of abandonment," said Hermione sadly, "I don't think we'll find Hermes. He should have been here, in the meeting hall. I... I just don't know what to do now."

"There's got to be something," said Harry, "Everything points to this place - there's just got to be something here somewhere."

"There's one thing we haven't tried," said Ginny. The others looked at her expectantly, "Zeus' throne. Harry - why don't you go and sit in it. See if something will happen?"

"I don't know, Ginny," said Hermione anxiously, "It may be dangerous. Zeus was famous for hurling thunderbolts at anybody who annoyed him."

"There's nothing else Hermi," said Harry gently, "I think Ginny may be right."

Hermione put her hand to her mouth as Harry quickly walked up the seven coloured steps and stood in front of the great god's throne. Then he took a deep breath and sat on the purple ram's fleece that covered the seat. He looked about him expectantly, waiting, hoping, for something to happen.

Ron suddenly shouted, pointing to the right hand side of the throne. Harry turned his head and saw a shimmering in the air. He quickly stood up and went back to stand with his friends. They all looked as the shimmering started to take form and then, on the back wall of the hall, appeared an area of cloud, about three feet high and fifteen feet wide. As they looked, fascinated, writing began to appear on the cloud until after a few moments, five large columns were displayed. The shimmering disappeared, just leaving the cloudy parchment on the back wall.

Hermione let out an excited yell, "Yes! Well done, Harry. Come on - let's see what it says." She rushed up to the cloud, quickly followed by the others.

"What sort of language is that!" exclaimed Ron, "I can't make head nor tail of it."

Hermione looked disappointed as she stared at the strange script, "Well I can't be sure, but I think it's ancient Greek."

"Can you translate it, Hermi?" asked Ginny.

"No Ginny," she replied, "If it was Latin I'd have a good go, but I know nothing about ancient Greek."

"But Remus or Professor Flitwick might," said Harry suddenly, "Remember they said that they'd studied ancient Greece at University. They might be able to translate it."

"Let's see if we can take this back with us," said Ron as he stretched out his hand to grab hold of the side of the cloud. His hand disappeared, the cloud swirling around his fingers as he failed to gain any purchase.

"Well that wasn't a very good idea," he said.

"We'll have to bring them here," said Hermione, "Let's go and get them."

"You and Harry'd better stay here, Hermi," said Ron, "Perhaps the writing may disappear if we all leave. Come on Ginny, let's go and get the professors."

"Wormtail," hissed Voldemort, "Go outside and summon Crabbe. I want him here when I perform the ritual."

Wormtail rushed outside the cave to do his master's bidding, while Voldemort, Lucius and Travis remained in Voldemort's secret cave in Northern Scotland looking down at the fabled black-bound Necronomicon.

"We have to do this right," said Voldemort, "Aleric was very specific about the procedure. He makes it plain that his instructions must be followed to the letter if the book is to be opened without anything nasty happening. I want Crabbe here because of his expertise in Dark Arts ritual, but I want you others here as well. There has to be exactly five Dark Wizards present to perform the ceremony."

A few minutes later, Wormtail came back into the cave followed by the very large figure of Crabbe, Vincent's father.

"My Lord," said Crabbe bowing to Voldemort, "How may I assist you?"

"We must perform a ritual to open the Necronomicon, Crabbe. Here, read this and make the necessary preparations." Voldemort handed Crabbe Aleric's book, turned to the inside back cover where the instructions were written. Crabbe studied them for a few minutes.

"Hmm," he said, "It will take about an hour to get everything set up. Wormtail, Travis, give me a hand with the preparations."

An hour later, everything was ready. The Necronomicon stood on an improvised altar, about four feet high and made from the loose rocks from around the outside of the cave. At each corner of the altar were four iron torch holders, each flaming with magical light. The five Dark Wizards stood around the altar, Voldemort and Crabbe on one side, and the other three opposite. Crabbe nodded to the Dark Lord, indicating that the preparations were complete and the ritual could begin.

"You must all concentrate and become immersed in the solemnity of the ritual," said Voldemort, "It is important that the mental atmosphere we generate is exactly right. Only then can I speak the words that will open the Necronomicon and protect us from the dangers that will surely be released. Are you all ready?"

The others nodded. "Then let the ritual begin."

For the next half hour, the cave was filled with the chanting of ancient Dark Arts occult verse, designed to build the right atmosphere for what was to follow. Then Voldemort stepped up and stretched out his arms over the Necronomicon, his wand in his right hand.

"*ABICIO PERICULUM,*" he uttered in a very loud voice, "*DEFENDO PULLUS SECUUTII,*" he paused and looked down at the black book, and taking a deep breath he said the final words of the ritual, "*CAMPERIO NECRONOMICON.*"

A black light flowed from his wand and covered the book, which lifted slightly from the altar and remained suspended in the charged air. Then the light disappeared and the cover of the Necronomicon started to open. Wormtail, Travis and Lucius looked on with fear as the pages of the book were displayed - they knew what had happened to Plonger at Irem.

Suddenly, an inky blackness rose from the book and flowed over to each of the five Dark Wizards in turn. It didn't touch them, however. With a loud screeching sound, the darkness moved towards to cave exit and flowed outside, where it dissipated harmlessly in the bright sunlight.

"Excellent," said Voldemort with a look of deep satisfaction and excitement on his face, "You have all done well, especially you, Crabbe. Now go; I wish to study the Necronomicon thoroughly. Keep up your recruiting activities. I think that what I learn in these pages will allow us to start on our campaign of terror very soon."

Ron and Ginny stepped back into the cloud, on their way to fetch the two professors. They became disoriented as they walked further, not knowing which way to go to get back to the waiting group of protectors.

"I think we're lost, Ron," said Ginny.

"Yes. Hang on a minute," he raised his voice as he called out to the Seasons, "Thallo. We need your help."

The three Seasons drifted up to the redheaded pair, and Thallo stepped forward, "You need our assistance?"

"Uh, yes," said Ron, "We have to go back to fetch two professors who are waiting for us by the statue of Zeus. But I'm afraid we're lost, we don't know the way back."

Thallo grinned, "You have no need to fear. The way is always the same. Whichever direction you follow will always lead you to the point where you entered the cloud."

"Oh right," said Ron gratefully, "Thanks. Thanks a lot."

"Thallo?" asked Ginny, "Is it all right to bring our two professors through the clouds to the place of the gods?"

"Yes, my child. We will not object." Thallo and her two companions then drifted into the clouds and disappeared from sight.

Ron and Ginny walked through the clouds until they began to thin. They suddenly emerged behind the statue of Zeus, where they saw the adults watching them intently.

"Where's Harry and Hermione?" said Sirius, looking a bit worried.

"They're back in the meeting place of the gods," said Ginny, "Look, Harry activated something that displayed some writing. Hermione thinks it's ancient Greek, but she can't read it. Can any of you help?"

"Yes!" shouted Remus and Flitwick together excitedly.

"Well come on, follow us," said Ron as he and Ginny turned back into the mist.

Remus and Professor Flitwick looked around with awe as they walked through the clouds into the courtyard and then into the great council hall. Professor Flitwick, in particular, found it difficult to contain his excitement as he approached the podium and looked at the cloudy parchments at the back of the hall.

After spending a few moments studying the script, Remus turned to the little professor, "It seems to be an archaic form of ancient Greek, Filius, but I recognise some of the words."

"Yes, Remus, and it seems to be grammatically close to what I've studied as well. I'm sure that between us we'll be able to translate it."

"Uh, we'll need a few pieces of parchment and a quill to do this," said Remus, "I haven't got anything on me; have you got anything Filius?"

Professor Flitwick looked abashed, "Uh, no. I haven't."

"Don't worry," said Hermione, "I never go anywhere without parchment and quill. Here you are."

The two professors beamed at Hermione as she handed over the material, "This is going to take us about an hour," said Remus.

"Take as long as you need," said Harry, "We'll explore the rest of this place. There might be something else here that'll help us."

As the professors became engrossed in their translation, the four teens walked back out into the courtyard and across into the avenue leading down to the entrance gate. They went into the first of the buildings they came to and looked around them with interest, "This seems to be some sort of workshop," said Ron.

"I think it's Hephaestus' workshop," said Hermione, "There's a partly-made table over there, and there's some paintings on this table that he's been working on."

They'd explored most of the buildings in the avenue before they came to one with a painting above the doorway of a mortar and pestle. The four stepped inside and saw about six large stone tables, with a number of stone objects lying on their surfaces. Around the walls were several large cabinets filled with bottles containing powders and liquids of various colours.

"This must be the apothecary," said Hermione.

At the back of the room, a doorway led into another room. Ron stepped through and saw what looked like three compact furnaces and a number of stone containers, each with their lids fixed firmly in place.

"Hey look at this," he shouted back to the others, "What do you think they made here?"

Harry walked over to one of the containers and gently eased off the lid. He peeked inside, but it was empty. Ginny walked over to another of the containers, which had a strange design and script on the side. She eased off the lid and saw that the container was full to the top.

"What's this?" she asked, looking at the strange fine white powder.

"Perhaps it's ambrosia," said Hermione from the other side of the room.

"What's that, Hermi?" asked Ron.

"It's what the gods ate, Ron," she replied, "One of the books said that it's an uncooked mixture of honey, water, fruit, olive oil, cheese and barley."

"Ughh," said Ron as he walked over to stand alongside his sister and looked into the container, "But I don't think that's what this stuff is. It's a white powder."

Ron reached his hand inside and felt the powder. It felt very, very fine in texture and was extremely light. When he picked up a handful of it, it didn't seem to weigh anything at all. He put a small amount on the end of his finger and lifted it towards his mouth.

"Ron!" shouted Hermione as she ran over and held his arm, just preventing him from tasting the powder, "Don't. You don't know what it is and it may be dangerous. Another of the books said that ambrosia is made from a species of speckled mushroom, created whenever Zeus' thunderbolts struck the earth. It's said that this is what kept the gods immortal."

"Immortal?" said Ron, "I think I'll take some of this. I can have it for supper every night."

"Ron!" exclaimed Hermione laughing, "That's probably just a myth. But seriously, I wouldn't fool about with this stuff. It could be anything."

"I bet Snape would like to get his hands on this," said Harry, "It might keep him quiet for a few weeks trying to find out what it is and what it does."

"Hey, that's not a bad idea, Harry," said Ron.

"Just leave it be, you two," said Hermione, "I've got a bad feeling about this. It's best left where it is."

"Come on, we'd better get back," said Ginny, "They must have finished by now."

The four walked back into the council hall where they saw Remus and Professor Flitwick talking animatedly with each other, looking at the parchments in front of them.

"Have you finished, Professors?" asked Harry.

Flitwick looked up to reveal a face flushed with excitement, "Yes. Yes. All finished," he said.

Remus walked over, "And what a story this tells! I can't believe my eyes. This is absolutely incredible."

"Amazing... amazing. Who would have thought?" muttered Flitwick.

"Well come on then," said Hermione, getting caught up in the excitement displayed by her two professors, "Tell us what it says."

"Later, Hermione," said Remus, "The others will want to hear this as well, and I don't think my nerves will stand reading it out more than once. Some of the script was very old and obscure, and we couldn't understand some of the words, but I think we've got it right in the end."

"Let's get back then," she said, "I can't wait to hear this."

They all walked back through the clouds, although the three Seasons didn't put in an appearance this time, and walked out past the statue of Zeus to the others. Remus quickly explained that they'd managed to translate the script, and that they should go somewhere a little more comfortable for him to tell them all what it said.

"First things first," said Ceri, looking at her watch and raising her eyebrows meaningfully at Ron.

Ron stared for a moment and then erupted, "Bloody hell. You're right Ceri. Look at the time - it's way past dinnertime. I'm starving again."

"But Ron," wailed Hermione, "Can't you wait? I want to know what the script says."

"No way, Hermi. I won't survive the wait. Come on, we can listen to the translation after we've had dinner."

Harry smiled at the pained expression on Hermione's face, "You should know by now, Hermi. Do you really want to get in the way of Ron and his next meal?"

"Oh come on then. But let's be quick," she said.

After the last morsel of food passed Remus' lips, Hermione pounced, "Come on then, Professor, let's hear it."

Remus grinned at the lovely girl, her eyes sparkling with anticipation. He turned to Flitwick, "Do you want to read it Filius?"

"No, no Remus. You go ahead."

"Right," said Remus as he pulled the parchments from his cloak pocket, "I'll read it out exactly the way we translated it. Ready?"

"Yes, come on, come on," said Hermione.

"TO THE SONS AND DAUGHTERS OF THE LIGHT. TO THOSE WHO SEEK KNOWLEDGE AND TRUTH.

THESE ARE THE LAST MORTAL WORDS OF ZEUS, LEADER OF THE MAGICAL COMMUNITY OF OLYMPUS.

I, Zeus, have departed this existence and moved to a higher plain. This is my testimony of the great experiment carried out in this land, an experiment that was first performed eons ago in a far off place. My colleagues and I arrived here to find barbarity and ignorance among both magical and non-magical people. It fell to us to try to bring reason to these realms, to build a society that would embrace tolerance and leaning, to build a civilisation that would endure.

It was not our intention for those of this land to treat us as gods, but that was their way of understanding the magical works in which we engaged to build a greater future for them. The white ambrosia, on which we fed, made in our community here at Olympus, allowed us immortality, as well as feeding our souls with light. How ambrosia came to the knowledge of my people is lost in the mists of time, back in the great land of our ancestors.

But now it is over.

Under our guidance, Greece became a great state of learning and integrity, producing many sons and daughters of wisdom and intellect. We are all saddened by the fate that has befallen this land. It seems that nothing can stand in the way of mighty Rome, that powerful state that is intent on conquest.

And so we have departed our beloved home. We have ceased to partake of the ambrosia. Some, like myself, have decided to end our earthly existence and rise to a greater existence. Others, like my beloved son Hermes, have chosen to end their physical existence but remain in this plain as spirits and guardians of the Light, giving aid and truth to those who are worthy and would seek that knowledge. Ah, my most favoured one; he has taken on the awesome task of moderating the thoughts and deeds of our conquerors. He has this day made haste to their seat of power. I wish him well in his task.

After Remus finished reading, everyone was silent, each staring into the campfire and digesting what they had heard about the true nature of the Olympian gods and their great experiment.

After a few minutes, Nadine cleared her throat, "It's so sad. They were truly a great people, but like so many before them, had to submit to the power of Rome."

"But they didn't submit, Nadine," said Charlie, "They chose to end their existence."

"And their great experiment didn't die," said Professor Flitwick reflectively, "Rome came to embrace the great culture of Greece, and tried to imitate them. And don't forget, perhaps their greatest legacy is still alive and well today - Democracy."

"Well now we know," said Ceri, "The Greek gods weren't gods at all - they were magical people just like us. But it just goes to show, there's a grain of truth even in the myths of the world."

"What are we going to do with this?" asked Sirius, "Are we going to tell the world the truth?"

Remus had a dreamy look in his eyes, "No Sirius, I don't think so. I don't think anybody would believe us anyway - apart from Dumbledore, that is. No, I think the myth should live on - it would be a sin to shatter the illusion."

"We saw it, you know," said Hermione quietly, "We saw the ambrosia in the apothecary building we examined."

Ron held his hand out in front of him, "And to think," he whispered, "I held immortality in the palm of my hand."

"But I thought that it was the Philosopher's Stone that gave immortality," said Ginny, "the one that Professor Dumbledore destroyed a few years ago."

"Yes Ginny," said Remus, "But who knows how the stone was used? It may have been a sort of catalyst to produce this white powdery stuff, and who's to say that there was only one Philosopher's Stone? There may have been another, even several of them, in ancient times."

"And that's another reason for keeping this quiet," said Remus, "You can imagine the furore that would follow if we told everybody about ambrosia. Not to mention Snape - he'd make our lives hell wanting to know how to get to it."

"Yes," said Flitwick, "I agree. But I for one will die happy. I feel truly privileged to know the truth of one of the greatest myths of mankind."

"But where does this leave us - with the quest, I mean?" said Harry, "Where do we go from here?"

"Zeus told us that, Harry," said Hermione, "He said that his most favoured one - that's Hermes - went to the seat of Roman power. We've got to follow Hermes to Rome."

"But Rome's a big place, Hermi," he said, "Where do we go?"

"Well you know I was in Rome with my parents a few years ago," she replied, "We went to most of the ancient temples there, but I didn't go to one dedicated to Hermes. In fact, there was nothing in the guidebooks about the temple of Hermes, I'd have noticed it if there was. But I remember reading about a Roman god who was very similar to Hermes - one who wore a winged hat and sandals, and held a magical wand."

"Who's that Hermi?" asked Harry.

"His name's Mercury, Harry. Hermes must have changed his name to Mercury when he entered the Roman Empire. But I know I didn't go to a temple dedicated to Mercury back then, and I don't know if there's one still standing there."

"So it's off to Rome we go then," said Ron.

"How are we going to get there?" asked Ginny.

Everyone looked at Remus, who stared back before blurting, "Well don't look at me. I've got contacts in Greece and a few other countries, but I don't know anybody in Rome."

"Well we'd better get back to Hogwarts then," said Sirius, "Perhaps Professor Dumbledore can arrange for a Portkey to Rome."

"That'll have to wait till tomorrow," said Ceri, "We'll spend the night here, and get back to the Portkey site tomorrow; we should get there by nightfall since it's downhill all the way."

"We can spend a bit of time back in the library," said Hermione brightly, "We can do a bit of reading on Rome and Mercury - we'll have to have some idea where to look in the city - it's a big place, you know."

"Right. To bed then," said Sirius, "We'll make an early start in the morning, I think."

"So it was an experiment carried out by magical people," said Dumbledore, who sat facing the protectors and McGonagall, stroking his beard with his left hand, "They tried - and succeeded in creating a great civilisation. Such vision - such intellect. But I suppose they had to have such a far-reaching vision to give them a reason for living so long."

"What do you think that ambrosia was, Professor?" asked Charlie, "We speculated last night that it was made using the Philosopher's Stone. Did Nicholas Flamel say anything about how he used his stone?"

"No, Charlie, he didn't. And I didn't ask him about it. I may be old fashioned, but I believe that such things are best left hidden. It would cause enormous difficulties if it ever came to the world's attention."

"It's a good job Snape's not here," said Sirius, "You can imagine how he'd react to it. Anyway, where is he Professor?"

"He's at the auror training site in the Forest of Dean. The ministry asked if he could give a lecture to the latest batch of recruits on the art of infiltration and spying."

"How is the ministry's recruitment drive going, Professor?" asked Ceri.

"Quite well, I think," he replied, "Fudge seemed happy with the way things are going when I spoke to him yesterday. Things are still very quiet though - and I fear they are far too quiet. There still hasn't been any Death Eater attack since the one on the school last month, and I can't help feeling that Voldemort is up to something. The sooner Harry and the others complete their quests the better."

McGonagall smiled, "Well it won't be for lack of trying. They're in the library now, trying to find out as much as they can about Mercury."

"Will you be able to arrange for a Portkey to Rome, Professor?" asked Sirius.

"No problem, Sirius. I know the headmaster of the Fiuggi School for Magicians and he'll arrange it in an instant. His school is in the hills to the South East of Rome, so it shouldn't be

a problem. There's one thing though. Rome is a very busy place, and full of tourists at this time of year. I think it would be best if you arrive under the cover of darkness, and away from the city nightlife, but still close enough to the place or places you need to visit. But until the four kids find out where you have to go, I can't make the arrangements."

"Anything?" asked Hermione as Ginny closed the book she'd been reading and went to put it back onto the shelf.

"Nothing in that one," she said as she browsed through the titles of the other books on the next shelf.

"I think I've got something, Hermi," said Ron suddenly. The other three gathered around, looking over his shoulder at the book he was reading. He pointed to the section that had caught his attention, and read it aloud, "Mercury, Roman god of trade and travellers. He is closely associated with the Greek god, Hermes, with whom he shares many qualities and attributes. The fastest of the gods, he is usually depicted with a winged hat and sandals. His feast day is in May, and Romans used to celebrate the event in his temple in Rome."

"Does it say where in Rome, Ron?" asked Hermione.

"No, that's all I can find," he replied.

The three sat back at the table and continued reading their books. After a while, Ginny shouted, "I've got it. It's right here - listen. Mercury is equated with the Greek god, Hermes. He had a temple in Rome on the Aventine Hill, which dates back to 495 BC. His festival was celebrated at the temple on 15th May, when many offerings were also made at his shrine in the Circus Maximus. Later, the cult of Mercury spread among the Celtic and Germanic peoples."

"Well done, Ginny," said Harry, and then looked across at Hermione, "Have you heard of these places Hermi?"

"Yes Harry," she replied, "I've even been to one of them - the Circus Maximus. It's just a short distance to the South of the famous Colosseum. And the Aventine Hill is just a little further South of the Circus Maximus. But I don't remember reading about any temples there in any of the guidebooks. From what I remember, the Aventine is a mainly residential area, with just a few churches and basilicas."

"What's the Circus Maximus, Hermi?" asked Ron.

"It's a huge place where the Romans held their chariot races," she replied, "You know, like the one they showed in Ben Hur."

"What's Ben Hur?" asked Ginny.

"It's an old film, Ginny. The Circus Maximus is about 650 yards long by 220 yards wide, and the chariots raced around a long stone wall at the centre. They say that the place could hold a quarter of a million people. But when I was there, it was completely in ruins, with only a few crumbling structures on the East side."

"So what do you think?" asked Harry, "Should we go and look at these places?"

"Well it doesn't look very promising," answered Hermione, "But there's nothing else we can find in these books, so I suppose we should."

"Let's go back up and tell the others," said Harry.

They all rushed into the headmaster's office, where the protectors, McGonagall and Dumbledore still sat talking about the quest, "Have you found anything?" asked Sirius.

"Yes," said Hermione, "There are two possibilities, both just south of the Colosseum."

"Right," said Dumbledore, "I'll get in touch with Professor Bagetti and arrange a Portkey for tonight. Can you think of somewhere away from the nightlife and tourists, Hermione?"

Hermione thought for a few moments, then, "Yes, Professor. I think the Roman Forum would be an ideal place, just outside the Colosseum. There won't be any tourists about at night, and some of the ruins are illuminated, so any passing Muggle, or Death Eater, won't notice the lights from our wands."

"The Forum it is then," said Dumbledore.

The four friends, together with their protectors, arrived by Portkey just after darkness fell inside the Roman Forum. They looked about with interest at the impressive illuminated ruins, once the commercial and political centre of ancient Rome. They found themselves standing in front of an almost completely ruined temple, at the side of an avenue winding through the Forum.

"This is the temple of Julius Caesar," said Hermione in hushed tones.

"Oh no. Here we go again," said Ron, "Another bloody history lesson."

"Shut up, Ron," said Ginny, "Some of us are very interested in this. You carry on Hermi."

"This way," said Hermione as she pointed to the right. They walked slowly through the ruins, their wands held low to the ground to avoid any loose rocks. They adopted the same procedure as in Greece, with Sirius in the lead, but this time with Hermione at his side, Ceri at the rear, with Charlie and Nadine on one side and Remus and Flitwick on the other. Hermione stopped after only a few yards and pointed to a podium built from Roman brick, "This is the place where Mark Anthony delivered his famous burial speech - 'Friends! Romans! Countrymen! Lend me your ears! I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him!'"

They continued on their way with Hermione pointing out some of the more famous illuminated ruins, the Temple of the Vestal Virgins, the Temple of Romulus and the Basilica of Constantine. They walked up a rise towards a huge stone arch, which marked the eastern boundary of the Forum. Hermione again stopped when she walked under the arch and held her wand towards the right-hand side, "The Arch of Titus," she said, "Even you should be interested in this, Ron. This fresco depicts Titus' victory over the Jews and his sacking of Jerusalem. You can see the slaves carrying away the treasures of the temple to Rome. See here, it shows the Menorah. This is the treasure that was later taken by the Visigoths when

they conquered Rome, and took it to Carcassonne in France. Remember - a lot of writers thought it was the treasure of Rennes-le-Chateau. But we know different, don't we Ron?"

Hermione tossed her head and strode purposefully down the sloping track towards the magnificent spectacle of the Colosseum, the illumination giving it an even more regal appearance than it normally had. A shamefaced Ron called after her, "Uh, interesting Hermi. Honestly! I really *do* think that was interesting."

They soon reached level ground, with the Colosseum rising in front of them, and Hermione led the group to the right and past the Arch of Constantine, heading towards the Circus Maximus and the Aventine Hill. After a few hundred yards, Hermione stopped and pointed to an area of darkness, made prominent by the absence of any street lights throughout its expanse, "The Circus Maximus is here," she said, "We can't see anything, but we're fairly close to the Eastern end."

"I don't fancy that, Hermi," said Harry, "Let's try the Aventine first."

Hermione walked beside Sirius as she led the group a little further and then branched to the right, where they started to climb the Aventine Hill. Like Hermione said, it appeared to be a mainly residential area, and there were no signs of any ancient ruins.

They wandered around for a few hours, but could find not even the slightest trace of an ancient temple, "This is useless," said Ron, "I bet it's long gone. There's probably a church or a block of flats standing on the site now."

Harry sighed with a hint of resignation, "Come on then, let's go back to the chariot race track. At least we know it's there."

In fifteen minutes, the group stood at the place where they'd stopped earlier, looking with trepidation into the darkness that was the Circus Maximus.

"I don't like this one little bit," said Ceri, "You could get hurt wandering about in there, and if we light our wands, we'll stand out like a beacon to any Death Eaters that may be about."

"We should be all right, Ceri," said Hermione, "There are some old ruins just inside the boundary, only about fifty yards from where we're standing. They're the only surviving structures in the place, and once we get inside, our wand lights should be hidden."

Sirius led the way through the fence and down a steep embankment, keeping his wand low to the ground. After a short while, they came to the structures Hermione had told them about. They looked with distaste at the low ruined buildings, which were half buried in the ground. The masonry, Roman brick, looked very crumbly and unstable, "I don't think this is very safe," said Remus.

"Look over here," said Ginny, who had wandered just inside one of the structures on the left hand side, and was pointing her wand down towards the ground. They all joined her and saw that a small entrance, protected by a wire cover obviously there to keep out any adventurous tourists, led down into the inky blackness beneath the ground. There was a sign on the wire gate, written in several languages, which said 'Danger! Keep Out! Risk of Injury from Falling Masonry.'

"No way!" said Charlie, "You're not going down there, it's too dangerous, especially at night. Come on, let's look at the rest of these ruins."

After an hour of searching through the ruins, they had found nothing and there were no other entrances leading to the space below ground.

"Well we haven't got much choice now," said Ron, "We've got to go through that wire gate, there's nothing else here."

"I'm not happy about this Ron," said Charlie.

He was stopped from any further protest when Nadine put her hand on his shoulder. "They've got to do it, Charlie. There's no other way."

"These might help to protect you," said Professor Flitwick as he muttered a few words, pointed his wand, and four bright yellow helmets appeared on their heads.

"Thanks, Professor," said Ginny, "I don't like the colour much, though."

Harry grinned, "Come on then, let's go."

After Sirius and Charlie had removed the wire obstruction, Harry led his three friends down the steps and into the dark tunnel. He bent over in the confined space and held his wand out in front of him. He was not too enthused when he saw several piles of fallen brick on the floor, which led down beneath the spectator area of the Circus Maximus.

After about thirty yards, the floor levelled out and they came to a low brick wall, which ran in front of a wall of earth that flowed over the brick ceiling above. It barred their way forward, but paved areas led to the right and left, running alongside the wall.

"This must be the original level of the chariot track," said Hermione, "All the earth must have been piled on top of it since it was abandoned some fifteen hundred years ago. There's a good chance that we'll find Mercury's shrine, I think."

"Let's go to the right," said Harry, "I think it's more likely to be in that direction, towards the centre of the stadium."

They moved slowly along the pathway, all the while looking above their heads at the crumbling brick above, which was obviously struggling to support the huge expanse of earth that had been piled on top of it. They all felt nervous in the ominous and claustrophobic tunnel, but continued on into the darkness ahead.

They had covered about two hundred yards before they came to an opening on their right-hand side, "Let's look in here," said Harry as he led the way through a low brick arch and into a small room about eighteen feet square. The ceiling was higher here, and they were able to stand straight, easing the ache in their backs following their crouched approach through the tunnel.

Apart from the debris accumulated over hundreds of years that littered the paved floor, the room was completely empty, with the exception of a life-sized statue that stood in a small apse at the back.

They walked over towards it, and Ginny reached out and brushed the dust away from its head and shoulders. The statue looked to be made of white marble, and was completely naked.

"It's Mercury," whispered Hermione, "Look at the winged hat and the strange wand he's holding."

"Yes, but keep your eyes off his other wand, you girls," said Ron staring at the nether regions of the statue, "The Romans really should have put a fig leaf over that!"

"Ron!" exclaimed Hermione and Ginny together, their red faces hidden in the gloom.

"It's art Ron," said Hermione, "It doesn't count."

Harry smiled and looked more closely inside the apse and at the back of the statue, "I can't see any shelves or anything," he said.

"Maybe we've got to do something," said Ron, "Like touch his wand... I mean his proper wand.... Uh, I mean the wand he's holding in his hand... oh bugger, you know what I mean!"

"It's a Caduceus, Ron. That's what his *magical* wand is called," said Hermione.

Ginny rolled her eyes, "We know what you mean, Ron. Go on, Harry - try it."

"What should I say?"

"Try Alohomora," said Hermione.

Harry held out his arm and placed the tip of his wand against the Caduceus, "*ALOHOMORA*"

The four stepped back as the statue of Mercury moved its hand, which held the Caduceus. Then it extended its arm and held the wand against the right-hand wall of the apse. After a few moments, a blue light came from the wand, after which the statue returned to its earlier position. The section of the wall where the blue light still shone shimmered, and a small stone drawer moved silently out of it. When the drawer was fully open, the blue glow faded, leaving four pairs of eyes staring at it with disbelief.

Hermione was the first to react and she walked over and looked inside, where she saw a small piece of parchment. She placed her hand in the drawer and slowly pulled out the parchment, fearful that it would disintegrate if she handled it too roughly.

She bent down, placed the parchment reverently on the floor, and then held her illuminated wand over it. The others joined her and added the light from their wands. They saw that the parchment was covered in what appeared to be a hastily written script, the scrawled words having been written at an angle, unlike the neat rows of script they had seen in the cloud parchment on Mount Olympus.

"I can't make any sense of that," said Harry, "What language is it?"

"It's ancient Latin, I think," said Hermione, "I recognise some of the words."

"Can you read it, Hermi? You're pretty good at Latin," said Ginny.

"I'll try, Ginny. I'll read out what I can translate and you write it down."

"Hang on," said Ginny as she took the parchment and quill from Hermione and gestured for Ron to bend down so that she could use his back as a rest, "Ready."

Hermione spent a few minutes studying the writing, then started to translate, "It was written by a Roman wizard called Pontius Aurigula," she said, "He says he was the personal aide and archivist to the great wizard, Mercury."

She spent a few more minutes looking at the script, and had more difficulty in deciphering the scrawl than in translating the Latin, "Right," she said finally, "I think I've got most of it. He says, '*I must write this small journal in haste. The Barbarians are close by and I must away to a safer place. My mentor and friend, the great wizard Mercury, is no longer here; he has made the decision to return to a former abode, there to give guidance to seekers of the Light. But I have no time to say more here. I must take my life's work and set up residence at an ancient abandoned temple at the far Western extremities of the Empire, fifteen stadia from Sorviodunum*'. That's it."

"That's it? That's all?" said Harry.

"Well that's not a lot of help," said Ron sullenly, "That's the second dead end we've had."

"It's not a dead end Ron," said Hermione, "And we should be grateful to poor Pontius. He must have been in fear for his life, but he still took the time to write this note and hide it away. And he *has* told us where he went. We'll find out more there, I'm sure."

"So you know where he went Hermi? You know where this place, Sorviodunum, is?" asked Ginny.

"Well no," said Hermi looking downcast, but then brightened, "But I'll find it!"

"I've got no doubt that you will Hermi," said Harry looking fondly at her, "But come on, we'd better get back - the others will be getting worried."

On the way back through the tunnel, Ron had a sudden thought, "Hey. Pontius said that Mercury returned to a former abode. That's Mount Olympus isn't it? That's where he lived before he went to Rome."

"I don't think so Ron," said Harry.

"Why not?" he asked.

"Because we've already been there Ron," said Hermione, "And if he was there, we'd have seen him, wouldn't we."

"Oh yea. Well it was just a thought."

Sirius breathed a sigh of relief when he saw the youngsters emerge from the tunnel, "Thank god," he breathed, "Did you get any answers?"

"Some. But they only raise more questions," said Harry

"We'd better get back to the Forum," said Remus, "I fancy a nice big dinner back at Hogwarts tonight."

That night, the four friends lounged in the Gryffindor common room, feeling too full after the large dinner they'd just eaten to go to bed. They were talking about Pontius' message and where he might have gone.

"Before I went into dinner," said Hermione, "I had a quick look in the library. One of the Latin words in the message stumped me a bit. The nearest I could come up with in the Circus Maximus was 'barbarians', but it wasn't quite right. The Latin vocabulary book I looked at didn't have the word Pontius used either, but from what I can gather, the word is made up of two others and a more accurate translation is 'Dark Forces'."

"Do you think that Dark Wizards were after him?" asked Ginny.

"It certainly looks that way," said Harry, "which would explain why he was in such a hurry."

"Yes," said Hermione, "He would have had a lot more time to give better directions if he'd been referring to the Visigoths. They took a little while to conquer Rome and there'd have been plenty of warning before they finally entered the city. And it explains why his directions were a bit vague, he wouldn't have wanted to give the Dark Forces too much information if they'd found his message."

"That's all very well," said Ron, "But we don't know a lot more now than we did before we went to Rome."

"That's not true Ron," said Hermione, "We know quite a bit more. First, we know that Mercury/Hermes went back to a place he lived before he went to Mount Olympus, and he went there to give guidance and help to seekers of the Light - that's us. So that's our ultimate aim - we've got to find out where he is now. Second, Pontius said he was Mercury's archivist, and he took his life's work with him when he fled from Rome. So I think that when we trace Pontius, we'll also have the details about Hermes' history, and in particular where he lived before Mount Olympus. And thirdly, of course, we've got Sorviodunum. That's our immediate task - we've got to find out where that is, and Pontius gave us the general area to look."

"Of course," said Ginny, "He said it was on the Western extremities of the Empire."

"That's right, Ginny," said Hermione, "And the furthest West that the Romans conquered was this country - the U.K."

"But that's still a hell of a lot of area," said Harry, "Where are we going to start looking?"

"Well there's not a lot about the Romans in the school library," said Hermione, "I had a quick look earlier. So the best place to look, I think, is in a Muggle library. Every one I've been to has a load of books on the Roman occupation of Britain. And I know that there's one close to the Leaky Cauldron, just off Charing Cross Road in London."

"So that's our next stop then," said Harry, "We'll tell the others at breakfast, and we can all go to the Leaky Cauldron by Floo Powder. And don't forget to wear your Muggle clothes."

Ron and Ginny looked with interest at the passing big red double-decker buses as they walked down Charing Cross Road the next morning. Sirius, Ceri and Remus walked a little way in front of the four teens, with Charlie, Nadine and Flitwick following about twenty yards behind. The four had been in stitches earlier at Hogwarts when Professor Flitwick had made an appearance. He looked so different and very funny in his Muggle clothes.

"This way," Hermione called to the three in front as she pointed down a street running off the main road. Soon, the group stood in front of the imposing library building, and the adults waited outside while the four friends went inside.

Hermione approached one of the library assistants and said, "Excuse me. We have to do a project for school this summer on the Romans in Britain. Can you tell me where best to look?"

The assistant directed them to the first floor, which housed the reference library, "The books on Roman Britain are along the back wall," she said.

The reference library was fairly empty; only about eight Muggles were there, sitting at some of the many tables in the large room. The four walked over to the back wall and started looking along the rows of books for likely looking titles. Five minutes later they sat at one of the empty tables and started reading. It took just one minute for Ron to look up from his book, a broad grin on his face, and declare, "I've found it. Here in the index - Sorviodunum."

He quickly turned to the page number given in the index and started to quietly read to the others, "The Romans built a minor fort, which they called Sorviodunum, beneath the impressive Iron Age hill fort known as Old Sarum, which is about two miles from Salisbury. Where Sorviodunum once stood is now the little village of Stratford-sub-Castle."

"So that's where we go next then," said Ginny, "Perhaps Pontius went to Old Sarum to live."

"Perhaps so," said Hermione, "but we need to find out how far fifteen stadia is - Pontius said the place he went to was 15 stadia from Sorviodunum."

"There's something about Roman measures in the book I've got," said Harry. He looked in the index, then turned to a page towards the middle of the book and started to read. After a few moments he looked up at his friends, "It says here that it's about the same distance as the furlong - that's 220 yards."

Hermione did a quick calculation in her head, "So fifteen stadia is about two miles. It can't be Old Sarum then, it's too close."

"Salisbury is two miles from Old Sarum," said Ron, "Perhaps it's there."

"I don't know Ron," said Hermione, "Pontius said he was going to an ancient and abandoned temple. That means it was ancient nearly two thousand years ago. I don't think Salisbury is that old, but I suppose there may have been a temple on the site before it was built. Let's get back to Hogwarts. There are large-scale maps of the country there, so we can draw a circle two miles in circumference around the village of Stratford-sub-Castle and see what we get."

Half an hour later, the four sat around a large table in the library, looking at a large-scale map of Wiltshire. Hermione opened a pair of compasses and measured off just under two miles using the same scale as the map. She then placed it on the map and drew a circle. Four pairs of eyes scanned around the line of the circle, looking for likely places.

"Look at that," said Ginny pointing to the map, "Wow! Stonehenge is right on the line of the circle, to the North."

"It has to be," said Hermione, "Some people say that Stonehenge was built about 10,000 BC, so it would have been ancient in Pontius' time. And although no one really knows what it was built for, a lot of scholars say it was a temple."

"What are we waiting for?" said Harry, "Come on, let's go and tell the others."

"Hang on Harry," said Hermione, "The place will be crawling with tourists at this time of year, and in any case they won't let anybody inside the stone circle. I was there a few years ago with my parents, and the site is fenced in and has a boundary rope around the monument. I remember one tourist climbed over the rope and tried to touch one of the stones. About five security people grabbed him before he got anywhere near."

"So we'll go tonight after dark," said Ron.

"Ok Ron," said Harry, "Hermione. You've been there, so can you remember any likely places where Pontius would have stayed?"

"That's the problem Harry," she replied, "There's nowhere in or near Stonehenge where he could have lived. There aren't any buildings or anything, just huge standing stones."

"Perhaps it's magical," said Ginny, "Like a magical tent with wards set up to hide it from muggles."

"I don't think so, Ginny," said Hermione, "If he was hiding from Dark Wizards he'd want something a bit more secure than that. We'll just have to go there and see what we can find."

Ginny shivered involuntarily as an owl hooted eerily in the moonlight. The four friends and their protectors could see the impressive Stonehenge in silhouette as they approached the rope boundary.

"We'll stay here," said Sirius, "While you go and search inside."

The four ducked underneath the rope and approached the circle, where Hermione stopped and placed her hand on one of the large standing sarsen stones forming the outer circle. She breathed deeply and whispered, "This is amazing. This is a magical place, even to Muggles. How did the builders manage to move and raise these huge stones all that time ago?"

Harry and Ron walked inside the circle and approached the massive trilithons forming the inner circle. Ginny and Hermione soon joined them and Ginny walked up to the huge structure and touched it. She shuddered, "There's magic here. I can feel it."

The others touched the huge stone and also felt the magical vibrations coming from it, "I'll fetch Nadine," said Ginny, "She's good at this. Maybe she'll be able to detect where the vibrations are strongest."

Ten minutes later, Nadine called to the four teens, "It's here," she said, "It's definitely stronger at these stones." She was standing underneath one of the trilithons in the inner circle. Harry walked up and then stepped into the space between the two standing stones and looked up at the capstone. He could feel the magical vibrations without even touching the stones.

He called to the others, "Come and feel this. I think there's something here."

Nadine watched as the three youngsters joined Harry underneath the capstone, "What do we do now?" asked Ron.

Harry and Hermione looked at each other, nodded, and then held hands, Harry's right hand and Hermione's left. They looked up at the capstone and lifted their other hands, palms upwards, "*SHAJ AHNWTY*" they said together.

Suddenly, they were no longer standing inside the trilithon. The four were inside a small room, which contained a stone table and a stone chair. In a corner of the room, a small window looked out on the moonlit splendour of Stonehenge. They could see Nadine looking around worriedly, and then saw her turn and run back out of the circle towards Sirius and the others.

They walked over to the table and saw a faded piece of parchment, which contained the same hurriedly written script as the one they had seen in the shrine of Mercury. Hermione bent her head and started to translate the Latin words, "It's Pontius," she said, "He says that it was a mistake to come here. The Dark Forces are outside looking for him. He says he has to flee to another place, to a more secluded site. He says he must go to a secluded and secret Roman fort in the wild country of Cambria. The fort is protected from the prying eyes of the local tribesmen by the surrounding cliffs. He says the fort was built as a treasury and armoury to support the conquest of Britannia," Hermione paused, struggling with the final part of the script, "The last part gives some directions to the fort, but it's cryptic. It says *'follow the road through the gap and it will lead to the fort'*."

Hermione looked up at the others. "The Dark Wizards must have found where he was staying quite quickly," said Ginny.

"I wonder why they were after him? I wonder what they were after?" said Harry.

"Well he must have known a lot about Mercury and Hermes," said Hermione, "They might have been after the secret of immortality - how to make the ambrosia."

"That makes sense," said Ron, "So what now?"

"We'd better get back to Hogwarts," said Harry, "And start trying to unravel this latest message."

"It's a bit like a treasure hunt, isn't it?" said Ginny, "Following the clues until we come to the end of the trail."

"Well you didn't think this quest would be any easier than the last one, did you Ginny?" said Ron, "Uh Hermi. How do we get out of this place?"

Harry and Hermione again joined hands, "*SHESTEM HA*".

They immediately found themselves standing in the midst of the trilithon, and quickly walked back to the protectors, who had started to search the area following Nadine's report of their sudden disappearance.

"Where've you been?" asked Sirius, "Nadine said you disappeared right in front of her eyes."

"It's magic Sirius," said Harry grinning.

"Did you find out anything?" asked Remus.

"Yes - Pontius had to do a bunk again," said Ron.

"And left us with a humdinger of a puzzle this time," said Hermione, "I haven't got the faintest idea what his directions to the next place mean."

"The only place name he mentioned was the wild country of Cambria," said Ginny.

"Cambria?" said Ceri suddenly, grinning widely, "That's the Roman name for Wales. You've got to follow Pontius to Wales."

Chapter 3 Necronomicon

'Be warned. The magic contained in the Necronomicon is nothing to fool with and it may subject you to evil forces with which you cannot cope. The words herein are for the true followers of the Dark and no other. Remember, if you fool with the incantations, you were warned! As a follower in the ways of the Dark I, Abdul Alhazred, can vouch for the legitimacy of this!

This is the testimony of all that I have seen, and all that I have learned, in those years that I have possessed the Dark Knowledge. I have seen One Thousand and One moons, and surely this is enough for the span of a man's life, though it is said the Prophets lived much longer. I am weak, and ill, and bear great tiredness and exhaustion, and a sigh hangs in my breast like a dark lantern. I yearn to walk in the path of the Great Ones, to follow them into their Dark realm where I may be rejuvenated and made strong once more.'

Voldemort looked up after he read the opening lines of the Necronomicon. He hissed with excitement and anticipation at what he would learn. He cackled with glee as he awaited news from his inner circle. He had earlier ordered Wormtail to get in touch with his chief lieutenants, and had told them to arrange a little reminder for the magical community of the country, a reminder that he, the Dark Lord, was back and ready to take his rightful place in the world.

He turned his attention back to the fabled book and read on....

'I have seen the Unknown Lands that no map has ever charted. I have lived in the deserts and the wastelands, and spoken with demons and the souls of slaughtered men and women, victims of the fiends that were let loose in the land.

I have travelled beneath the Seas, in search of the Palace of Our Master, and found the stone monuments of vanquished civilisations, and de-ciphered the writings of some of these, while still others remain mysteries to any man who lives. And these civilisations were destroyed because of the knowledge contained in this book.

I have found fear. I have found, there in the ancient City of Pillars in the Temple of the Gates, the Gate that leads to the Dark Realm, by which the Ancient Ones, who ever seek the entrance to our world, keep eternal watch. I have smelled the vapours of those Ancient Ones, the mighty Nephilim, whose names are written in the MAGAN text, the testament of some dead civilization whose priests, seeking power, swing open the dread, evil Gate for an hour past the time and were consumed.'

Voldemort stared at the text and re-read it, not once but three times, not believing what he had seen, "It can't be!" he hissed, "The Mad Arab must indeed have been mad. But yet, those words somehow ring true in my very being. I feel it..."

He searched his memory, trying to find the bit of information that would confirm the truth of these words. And then he had it.

"Of course!" he exclaimed, the dank cave walls echoing his assertion, the only witness being the coiled Nagini in the far corner, "Irem! The temple where the Mad Arab laid the book to

rest. That must have been the Temple of the Gates, the place where access can be gained to the Dark Realm. But how is it achieved?"

He read further...

'Let all who read this book be warned thereby that the habitation of men are seen and surveyed by that Ancient Race of Dark Gods and demons from a time before time, and that they seek revenge for that forgotten battle that took place somewhere in the midst of the desert. Raise them at your peril, for their revenge will be terrible. They alone possess the power and knowledge to defeat the sons and daughters of the Light. They alone know where and how to raise the ancient sword of destruction. Be warned that those who re-enact the ritual depicted in the temple must surround themselves with the greatest protection lest they be swallowed into the gaping maw of the fiery Demon of Darkness.'

Voldemort's eyes closed as he tried to remember the details of the temple in Irem. His eyes suddenly shot open as he remembered the frescos he had seen, "That must be it. Those frescos must show the ritual to be performed to gain access to the Dark Realm."

His voice bellowed out through the cave, calling Wormtail from the smaller cave where he'd been banished while Voldemort studied the book.

"Yes my Lord," said Wormtail, panting from the effort of his mad sprint into the cave.

"Wormtail - summon Lucius and Crabbe immediately, and then bring Travis back with you. There is something that we must do."

As Wormtail ran outside to do his master's bidding, Voldemort returned to reading the Necronomicon, wanting to read everything that was there about raising the Ancient Ones, the Nephilim, from the Dark Realm.

The room was dark, all magical lights extinguished. The room was filled with tension and anticipation of the event that was soon to happen.

Then, floating magically towards the table came a very large cake, aglow with the light of sixteen magical candles. The cake settled over the middle of the table and then gradually dropped to the silver dais that had been placed there to receive it.

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY," they shouted as Arthur Weasley waved his wand and turned the lights back on in the kitchen. They were all grinning widely at the look on Harry's face. He hadn't really expected anything special for his sixteenth birthday - after all, he wasn't used to the attention after spending all his birthdays before this one at the Dursleys.

Hermione, who sat next to Harry, was the first to plant a big kiss on his pink-tinged cheek, and she was quickly followed by Ginny, Ceri, Nadine and Molly Weasley, the architect of both the surprise and the huge birthday cake. Ron, who sat the other side of Harry, slapped him on his back and more restrained and verbal congratulations were shouted by the others who sat around the table - Sirius, Remus, Charlie, Arthur, Fred, George, Percy, Professor Flitwick and Professor Dumbledore, who surprised everybody by suddenly emerging from the fireplace in a rush of blue flame. The headmaster had two packages, a large, thin rectangular

one he carried under his left arm, and a large sack that he carried over his right shoulder, making him look somewhat like Santa Claus.

"Your timing is impeccable, Professor Dumbledore," said Molly, "Harry's just about to blow out the candles. Go on Harry."

Harry got to his feet and leaned over the table. He drew in a large breath and blew ferociously until all the candles went out, and everybody clapped their approval. The feast that followed rivalled the best that had ever been served at Hogwarts, testimony to Molly's inventive culinary flair and the help provided by Winky and Dobby, who served the various courses in the style that only the best House Elves could achieve.

Two hours later everybody lounged in his or her chair, still at the kitchen table, too full to move. Fred, nudging George, eyed the headmaster quizzically, "What have you got in those parcels, Professor?"

The headmaster stood up and looked at Harry with a grin on his face and a twinkle in his eye, "These? Oh well, I suppose it's time for Harry to get his present. Harry, this sack is stuffed full of birthday cards for you. Just as you went through the fireplace to The Burrow, a huge flock of owls arrived at Hogwarts. They flew around the school for ages, no doubt confused that you were no longer there. Professors McGonagall, Snape and myself had a dickens of a job persuading them to come into the Great Hall and leave the cards in our care."

Dumbledore heaved the sack over his shoulder, walked over to Harry, and dropped it with a loud thud by his side. Harry opened the sack and saw hundreds upon hundreds of letters, he rummaged around inside, glancing at the addresses, seeing his name on all the ones he looked at.

"B... But how, Professor?" he stammered, "These can't all be for me, surely? Who would have sent them?"

"I think you've got to thank Rita Skeeter, Harry," replied the headmaster, "She's still writing a series of articles in the Daily Prophet about the Anima Summas, and three days ago she published your birthday. So these are no doubt from your many admirers around the country, and a bit further afield if I'm not mistaken. Some of those owls looked very strange, certainly not indigenous to the U.K."

"It's going to take ages to read all these," said Harry, "I don't know how I'm going to be able to write back to everybody thanking them."

"Hey Harry!" exclaimed Ginny, "I know. Why don't we get your fan club to reply for you? We can ask Colin Creevey and Clare Bryant to do it, I'm sure they'd love to get involved."

Harry looked doubtfully at Ginny, but Dumbledore said, "I think Ginny's got a very good point. I'm sure that not all these are birthday cards; a lot of them are probably messages wishing the four of you well on your quests. They're all counting on you to save them from Voldemort, after all."

"But I can't ask Colin and Clare to do all that, it wouldn't be fair on them," said Harry.

"I don't think you have anything to worry about on that score, Harry," said the headmaster, "I'm sure they'd only be too glad to help. Look, after you've read them, let me have them back and I'll get in touch with them for you. How does that sound?"

"Thanks, Professor," said Harry, "I'd be very grateful."

"And now Harry," continued Dumbledore, "I suspect you're wondering why you haven't had any presents yet." Everyone at the table grinned, full of anticipation, with the exception of Hermione, who looked just as puzzled as Harry.

"We all wanted to get you something that will endure through time," said Dumbledore, "And not only you, Harry. Hermione, this is for you as well - look on it as an early birthday present. We all clubbed together and contributed towards this," he picked up the rectangular package from the floor and held it in front of him, "Your friends here chipped in, as well as all the professors at Hogwarts, and even some of the students. The balance was made up from a mixture of school funds and the Ministry of Magic, so you could say that this is from the whole country."

Harry and Hermione looked at each other, and then back at Dumbledore, "But Professor," said Hermione, "Whatever it is must have been very expensive."

"Uh yes, Hermione it was. But it was well worth it."

The headmaster pulled the wrapping from the present and then placed a large painting on the table. Everyone gathered round to inspect it. It was a magical painting, showing Harry and Hermione standing side by side holding hands, their rings prominently displayed. Their heads and shoulders were covered in a soft silvery glow, and they kept glancing at each other and smiling, then looking back out of the painting at their audience and waving their hands. The background in the painting showed Hogwarts in silhouette against a lightening sky, and the sun just rising from behind one of the turrets. The painting was headed, 'Anima Summas at Hogwarts'.

Harry and Hermione were thunderstruck, unable to say anything. Dumbledore grinned as they looked, mouths slightly agape, at the painting, "I commissioned this from Leonardo Micaeloni, probably the best and most famous painter of magical portraits still living in the wizarding world. As subjects, he used a lot of wizarding photographs that Colin Creevey took of you both recently. He was in on this as well, you see, and I must say he did a good job getting just about every angle of you both, helped by Ron and Ginny of course."

Harry looked at the grinning Ron and Ginny, "So that's why you kept pestering us to go outside for walks." Both his friends nodded.

"Do you both like it?" asked Ginny.

Hermione glanced at Harry and smiled, "We love it. But where are we going to keep it?"

"That's already taken care of," said Dumbledore, "It will get pride of place in the Entrance Hall at Hogwarts. Everybody who enters the school will be able to see it high on the wall in front of them. It will be there as an inspiration to the student body, both present and future."

"Th... thank you Professor," said Harry, blushing slightly, "From both of us. We just don't know what else to say."

"Then don't say anything," said George as he handed Harry a small package, "This is from Fred and me. We wanted you to have a little something else to open."

'Uh oh,' Harry thought, 'Hermione, do you know anything about this?'

'Not a thing, Harry, honestly,' she silently thought back.

Harry slowly and cautiously started to open the parcel, glancing at the grinning faces of Fred and George. He knew that something unusual was about to happen. He finished opening the package and stared at a model of a Firebolt broomstick - almost an exact replica of his own, but only about twelve inches long, "Uh, this is great," said Harry tentatively, "But it's not going to do anything nasty is it?"

Fred and George didn't answer; they just sat grinning. Harry looked around the table, but everyone seemed to be as puzzled as he was. Harry looked back down at the model, not really knowing what he should do. He wasn't sure whether to place it on the table, keep holding it, or put it on the floor and stand well back. Then the broomstick started to move, but not in the way a broomstick usually moves. It seemed to wobble like jelly, undulating like a small snake as it sat in Harry's hands. Then, quick as a flash, it moved up Harry's arm and hovered for a moment on his shoulder.

Harry sat wide-eyed, squinting at the wobbly broomstick from the corner of his left eye, unable to move for fear of provoking it. Then the broomstick coiled back on itself like a rattlesnake, as if preparing to strike. And strike it did - it shot straight into Harry's left ear and disappeared completely. A gasp went up from those watching, and Harry clutched frantically at his ear, laughing involuntarily between his gasps of anguish as he felt the gelatinous creation wriggling and tickling inside him. Then, ever so slowly the broomstick reappeared, to the hilarious delight of Ron and Ginny and the disbelieving shriek of Molly, edging its way out of Harry's nose. It then slid down the front of his shirt, settled back into his hands, and vanished with a loud belching noise

There was a mixture of silence and barely suppressed sniggers from everyone at the table, but Harry cut the tension when he declared, "That was something else! The strangest thing I've ever felt."

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

"Did you like it?" asked George, "Do you think it will sell?"

"Fred! George!" shouted Molly, "Upstairs, now! That was the most embarrassing thing I've seen for many a year. Are you all right Harry dear?"

"Yes Mrs. Weasley, I'm fine. I suppose it was funny - to anybody watching, that is."

"Leave them alone Molly," said Arthur, trying not to laugh too much, "That's one of their better inventions I think. Technically it was very impressive."

Everyone now let go their suppressed mirth and Sirius and Remus, who had known all along what was going to happen, congratulated Fred and George on a very professionally constructed prank.

"Uh Harry," said Fred, "Can we use you to advertise this? If we tell everybody that it was first tested out on Harry Potter, the Anima Summa, it's bound to sell."

Hermione looked at the twins darkly, "You mean to tell me that this is the first time you've tried it out? What if something had gone wrong?"

"Don't worry Hermione," said George, "we tried it out on ourselves first, during the development stages, so we were fairly certain it would work properly."

"Ugghhh." She replied, looking very cross until Harry, grinning, put his hands on her cheeks, turned her head towards him, and kissed her on the tip of her nose.

The rest of the evening was a great success and Harry at last felt that he was part of a family, and the feeling it gave him was incredible.

Cornelius Fudge sat in his large and sumptuous leather chair in his office at the Ministry of Magic. He leaned back in the chair, tapping the armrest with his fingers, and held the report in front of him, the weekly report on auror recruitment. He looked up when he heard a knock on his door. At his prompt, it opened to reveal a large man in his mid thirties, short curly hair tending towards baldness, and piercing blue eyes.

"Ah Marcus," said Fudge gesturing to a seat in front of his desk, "sit down please. I've been reading your latest report, and I must say that it doesn't make very good reading. Are you sure that these figures are accurate?"

Marcus Heatherington-Jones rubbed his knee nervously. Fudge had appointed him only four weeks previously as head of auror defence for the country, and he still felt slightly uncomfortable to be moving in such high circles. After all, everybody had expected Fletcher to get the job because of his great experience, but for some reason Fudge had seen fit to appoint Marcus to a position that he'd thought was well beyond his reach.

"Quite sure, minister," he replied, "I double checked them myself before I released the report."

"Only thirty new recruits last week!" exclaimed Fudge, "I'd expected twice as many as that. Our recruiting adverts have been produced by the best magical advertising agency in the country. So why isn't it working? Have you got any thoughts on it Marcus?"

"Complacency minister," he replied with assurance, "The magical community were told about the return of 'You Know Who' over a month ago. At first, there was a clamber at our recruitment offices, but since then there's been no sign of any Death Eater activity. It's been very quite, too quiet. It's my belief that the majority of the wizarding public are beginning to doubt that he is, in fact, back. And that's led to the falling off in the number of people applying to join."

Fudge rubbed his chin, "Hmm, perhaps you're right and it does seem strange that we've heard nothing from 'You Know Who'. So what do we do? How can we get these numbers up?"

"I fear that's down to 'You Know Who'," replied Marcus, "Until the public get some positive proof that he's back I can't see what we can do."

Fudge squinted his eyes as he appraised his chief auror, "You wouldn't be suggesting that we provoke an attack would you?"

"Of course not, minister. I wouldn't know how to go about it anyway. And let's face it; even his chief lieutenants won't take any rash action without the Dark Lord's express orders. No, I'm afraid we have to wait for 'You Know Who' to make a move first."

"I suppose so, Marcus. Right, the other item that caught my eye in your report is the one concerning training. You seem to be suggesting that something's lacking in the way we train our aurors. Would you care to expand on that?"

Marcus paused for a few moments, gathering his thoughts, "I visited our training camp in the Forest of Dean two weeks ago. I spent several days there, since I wanted to see for myself how things are going down to the smallest detail. And I can only come to one conclusion. We're using our field aurors to do the training, taking them off active duty to pass their experience on to the new recruits. Now that's admirable, but the big problem is that the vast majority of our front line aurors haven't got any experience worth talking about, not the hard up-front battle experience that's necessary to produce tough and reliable new aurors. Most of the aurors with any experience of actually fighting Death Eaters have retired."

"Yes, you're absolutely right of course. And you think this is a big problem?"

"Yes, minister, I do. What we need is a group of aurors of the old school, aurors with the battle-hardened know-how to get the training job done properly. And they should be led by the best old-school auror we can find. Do you think we can persuade some of them to come out of retirement minister?"

"Yes I do, and I'll get onto it straight away." Fudge smiled at Marcus, "Excellent work, Marcus - absolutely first class. I knew I could count on you. And as for the right man to head up our training operation, I know just the one for the job. The only trouble is, he probably won't listen to me. But I know whom he will listen to - I'll get in touch with Professor Dumbledore immediately."

The four friends sat at the largest table in the library at Hogwarts surrounded by a pile of books. Only Harry was reading, all the rest of the books had been finished and his three friends waited for him to finish the last one. A few minutes later he closed the book and looked up, shaking his head, "Nothing."

"We've looked through every book in the library about Wales," said Ron, "And not one of them has any reference to 'The Gap'. I don't know where we go from here."

The four looked at each other silently, looking for some inspiration. Then Hermione spoke, "Of course, 'The Gap' may not be the name of a place at all. It may be something quite different."

"What've you got in mind Hermi?" asked Harry grinning, "I can see the cogs churning over in your brain."

"What if 'The Gap' is just that? You know, a gap in an embankment or a mountain," she said.

"Come off it Hermi," said Ron, "There's hundreds of mountains in Wales and I read in one of those books that the biggest embankment in the country, Offa's Dyke, stretches the whole of the country from North to South. We wouldn't stand a chance of finding it."

"But you're forgetting something Ron," she said with a smile playing around her lips, "Pontius said follow the *road* through the gap," she looked at her friends expectantly.

"So?" asked Ron.

"Well don't you see? Only one lot of people built roads in Pontius' time - the Romans. So what we need to do is look on a map for all the Roman roads throughout Wales and see if there's anything labelled 'The Gap' on one of them."

"How many roads did the Romans build in Wales, Hermi?" asked Ginny.

"I don't know," she replied, "But I do know that the traces of any Roman roads are marked on the large scale Ordnance Survey maps of the country, and we've got them all here in the library."

"But what if the road Pontius is referring to no longer exists?" asked Harry, "It may have been completely obliterated over the last sixteen hundred years or so."

"Then we come to a full stop Harry," replied Hermione, looking at Harry sternly, "Come on, we've got to be positive. It's our only lead and we've got to follow it up."

"All right Hermi," said Ron, "You'd better get the maps and we can split them up between us."

Hermione walked over to the Muggle section of the library and pulled about twenty folded red Ordnance Survey maps from the shelf.

"Bloody hell!" exclaimed Ron as Hermione shared out the maps between them, "We'll be ages looking at these. Look at the size of them when they're opened out." He opened one of the maps which measured three feet square, "And not only that, we'll all be cross-eyed after looking at this lot."

"It won't be that bad Ron," said Hermione, "We're only looking for Roman roads don't forget. Now I've given you and Ginny the maps starting in the North, and Harry and I have got the ones starting on the South. So when we finish, we should meet up in the middle somewhere."

"I'm not giving up any of my meals for this," grumbled Ron, "When it's time to eat, we eat. Agreed?"

"Agreed Ron," they all said.

Eleven black-cloaked figures moved stealthily into the back garden of a small cottage on the outskirts of the little village of Widecombe, situated in the heart of rugged Dartmoor in the county of Devon. The moon periodically peeked out from behind the dark clouds skidding across the sky in the strong breeze, showing a narrow winding path that led through the garden up to the back door. They knew who lived in the little cottage, a young man who worked at the Ministry of Magic in the Accidental Magic Reversal Squad, and the light from the window told them that the man and his family were at home that night.

The leader of the group of Death Eaters motioned with his arm for five of his men to move closer to the door and take up position on either side of it. Then he led the other five up the path and halted, nodding to the two largest men to break down the door.

The young ministry employee and his wife were sitting at the kitchen table, playing Wizard Snap with their eight-year-old son, completely oblivious to the fate that awaited them. They looked up in alarm as the door burst from its hinges, and then with fear as they saw the Death Eaters pour into the room.

The young wizard made a dive for his wand, which was in the pocket of his robes hanging a few yards away on the kitchen wall, but he didn't quite reach it.

"AVADA KEDAVRA" shouted the leader of the Death Eaters, and the green light hit the young man in the middle of his back, his hand still two feet away from his wand. He dropped to the floor, dead before he hit it, his eyes staring blankly at the ceiling.

His wife let out an agonised scream and pushed her young son behind her back, trying to shield him from the evil in the room. He started to cry pitifully, and shouted for his mother as three of the Death Eaters walked over and separated them, one holding the boy and the other two holding the woman. The leader had a cruel smile on his face as he pointed his wand at the woman.

"*CRUCIO*" he cried, watching with avid satisfaction as the unfortunate woman crumpled to the floor, crying out at the agony that coursed through her body. Her agony lasted a full minute before the curse was lifted, but her respite proved to be only temporary. Again and again the leader sadistically applied the curse, and again and again the woman collapsed in excruciating pain. For fifteen minutes he subjected the poor woman to the cruel torture, all the while witnessed by her young son, until she mercifully lost consciousness.

Then the leader turned to the young boy, still held fast and trembling uncontrollably, and pointed his wand at him.

"You are old enough to understand what has happened here tonight. Tell those who will come for you what you have witnessed. Tell them that this is only a mild foretaste of what will come."

He pulled himself up tall and dropped his wand to his side, "Tell them that Lord Voldemort has returned. Tell them that he will soon take his rightful place in the land."

He turned and strode dramatically out of the cottage and was quickly followed by his men. He stopped at the end of the garden and pointed his wand at the dark sky, "*MORSMODRE*" he yelled, sending the Dark Mark into the air above. This was the trigger for a series of Dark Marks, sent by Death Eaters placed strategically around the country, into the evening air.

The boy whimpered pitifully and looked at the still forms of his parents on the kitchen floor. Then he cried out and flung himself down at the side of his mother, calling to her and shaking her, but there was no response.

That night, most of the magical community in the country saw the Dark Mark hanging in the sky and knew that something terrible had happened. That night, the magical community trembled.

The next day, Professor Dumbledore sat with his team as Cornelius Fudge burst into the office holding a copy of the 'Daily Prophet'. He strode quickly to the desk and flung the paper onto it, "Have you seen this Albus?"

"Yes Cornelius, I'm afraid I have. A terrible business," answered Dumbledore.

"My office has been besieged all morning," said the agitated minister, "and the queue of owls outside my window stretched back for over a mile! Everybody's in a panic, and Rita Skeeter hasn't helped with this article on the front page. She's got everybody in turmoil with her predictions of doom."

"Cool down, Cornelius, and take a seat," said the headmaster, "Have you heard how that poor woman and child are?"

"The boy wasn't hurt, physically, but I don't think he'll ever get what he saw out of his head. His mother, poor woman, is alive but in a terrible state. The doctors aren't sure if she'll ever recover - they think that her mind was broken by the torture she suffered. The boy is staying with his mother's parents now."

Everyone stared glumly at the floor, thinking of the terrible things that had occurred last night. Then Fudge, now much calmer, whispered, "We've got to give them something, Albus. We've got to give everybody some hope that the Dark Side can be beaten. They haven't heard anything from the Anima Summas lately, nor how their quests are progressing. Can we tell them something, anything that will ease the panic?"

"Harry, Hermione, Ron and Ginny are down in the library now, doing research on the latest lead they've uncovered. The path to the solution of the second quest is proving to be very difficult and mind-bending and I think that's how it's meant to be, the way to enlightenment is never easy. But they're working at it, Cornelius; those four are doing their best and won't give up until they find what they're looking for."

At that moment, Dobby came into the office, "I'm sorry to interrupt sir; that lady reporter's downstairs. She wants to see you urgently."

"Rita bloody Skeeter," growled Fudge ominously.

"Show her up please Dobby," said Dumbledore.

Whatever Rita Skeeter expected in Dumbledore's office, it certainly wasn't eleven hostile-looking faces staring at her as she entered, "What possessed you to write that scare-mongering article, Miss Skeeter?" said Fudge.

"Uh minister," she seemed quite taken aback with the hostility as if she had no idea as to it's cause, then she looked sheepishly at Fudge, "Look. I only reported things as I saw them. That terrible episode last night affected me badly, you know, and I just wrote the piece the way I felt at the time. I'm sorry if it caused any problems, but well, that's why I'm here now. I want to put things right. I didn't realise the effect my article would have until early this morning when the office was inundated with people and owls," she turned to Dumbledore, "Professor, I'd like to interview the Anima Summas if that's possible. I want to remind our readers that all is not doom and gloom, that there is light at the end of the tunnel. What do you think?"

"That's the most sensible thing I've heard you say in a long time," said Fudge as he looked expectantly at the headmaster.

Dumbledore looked at Sirius and raised his eyebrows questioningly. Sirius cleared his throat, "Well they have to get used to the attention. Harry knew this, of course, right from the start when he agreed to go public. And it'll give them a break from all the work they're doing. I've no objections, Professor."

Dumbledore nodded and turned back to Fudge and the reporter, "I'll speak to the four of them shortly, and ask them to give you your interview. But I think it will have the best impact on the whole wizarding community if they make a public appearance to give the interview, right here in Hogsmeade. We'll all go to The Three Broomsticks for lunch - say in about an hour - and you can do your interview then."

"Thank you Professor," said Rita, looking very relieved.

Ron stretched his arms above his head and yawned loudly as he walked out into the school grounds, "It's great to get away from those maps for a bit. They're driving me bonkers"

"And we've only looked through half of them," said Ginny, "I can't believe the Romans built so many roads in Wales."

The four friends walked in the middle of the group, which included their protectors, Dumbledore, McGonagall and Snape. As they neared Hogsmeade, they could see a crowd of people waiting at the start of the main street, looking in their direction.

"Are you ready for this?" Sirius asked the four, "It looks like you've got a reception committee. Rita Skeeter must have told everybody in the village that you're coming, and judging by the size of that crowd there's quite a few from outside as well."

As they entered the main street, the crowds strained to get a good look at the four youngsters, and the reason for their great interest was soon made plain as they shouted their encouragement.

"Are you going after 'You Know Who'?"

"Are you going to protect the village?"

"When are you going to get 'You Know Who'?"

They entered The Three Broomsticks to find the place crowded with people, all wanting to speak to Harry and his friends. Madam Rosmerta came to their rescue and herded them over to three large tables at the far end of the room where they found the waiting Rita Skeeter. Madam Rosmerta made sure that the people kept their distance from the group, but they still watched with interest, waiting for the interview to start.

As soon as they were all settled into their seats, Rita put some parchment on the table and placed her enchanted quill on top of it. It stood up and poised itself above the parchment ready to faithfully write everything that was said. Professor Dumbledore stood and turned to the watching people, "Harry, Hermione, Ron and Ginny have agreed to give Miss Skeeter a public interview this afternoon, and it would be appreciated if you will remain quiet during this time, but I'm sure they will answer some of your own questions afterwards. Miss Skeeter, if you're ready?"

Rita nodded at the headmaster and looked across at the four youngsters facing her, "Our readers have shown considerable interest in you four since the story of your first quest and the arrival of the Anima Summas appeared in the 'Daily Prophet'. There's a lot I want to ask on their behalf, but perhaps the most burning question on everyone's lips is when will you be ready to face 'You Know You'. Harry?"

Harry looked a bit nervous but answered confidently, "The spirit of the Light has told us that we have to complete three quests before we are strong enough to face Voldemort." A gasp went up from the watching crowd at the sound of the dreaded name, "You know about the first one, and we're working on the second one now."

"Yes, but how long will it be before you are ready?"

"That we don't know," Harry replied, "I only wish we did. No one knows more than the four of us how urgent it is, especially after the terrible thing that happened last night. The only thing I can say is that we're going as fast as we can, but it's very complicated and difficult trying to unravel all the twists and turns of the quest."

Rita smiled at Harry; "I think we all appreciate that, Harry, especially after reading the details of your ordeal in France. Why do you think the way is so complicated and difficult? After all, you are the sons and daughters of the Light and you'd expect the Light to make things easier for you."

"I think I can answer that," said Hermione, as her three friends looked at her with puzzled interest, "I haven't spoken to the others about this yet, but I've had a feeling about it for a little while now. The spirit told us that we need to grow and develop, and I believe that one of the reasons that the quests are so tortuous is to help us with that process. Over the last six months we've learned and experienced things at an ever-increasing pace, and I think the Light is pushing us down this route to ensure that our minds and bodies are ready to receive the ancient knowledge and power that we find."

Everyone looked at Hermione with respect as they saw the logic of her reasoning. Professor Dumbledore nodded and smiled; he had known this all along, but was pleased to see that Hermione had worked it out for herself. He knew then that the destiny of the world could not have been placed in better hands.

"I know you haven't received the full powers of the Anima Summas yet," said Rita, "But what advantages do you think that you'll have to allow you to defeat 'You Know Who'?"

"At this stage it's impossible to say," said Harry, "But there's one very big advantage we already have, and we had it right from the start. Voldemort has to rely on fear to get his support, if his minions don't do what he wants he either tortures or kills them. But the support that I... we have is based on love and friendship. To me, that's the biggest advantage we have over the Dark Side."

Rita nodded, "Can you tell me anything about the quest you are working on?"

Ginny answered, "I'm afraid not. We don't want to give the Dark Side any information about where our path lies, it would be too dangerous."

Harry nodded and continued, "Voldemort has started attacking the magical community, but make no mistake that us four are his main target. He went after us in France and even here at Hogwarts. He knows that we are the main threat to his plans to dominate the world. So we're constantly looking over our shoulders for the next attack."

"I understand and respect what you both say so I won't pursue that any more. A lot of our readers would like to know how you managed to reverse the killing curse on little Clare Bryant, and whether you can use your powers to save a lot of people in the coming conflict."

Hermione looked at Harry and sent her thoughts to him. He nodded his agreement for her to answer, "That's difficult to answer. We... Harry and I... believe that we were able to save Clare because we were so quickly on the scene after she was hit. But not only that - Clare is young and innocent. I can't begin to explain the processes that were involved in saving her, we don't fully understand them ourselves, but we think that the older and more experienced the victim is, the more difficult it is to save him or her, and our new powers were stretched to the limit with Clare. So the only answer we've got is that we don't think we could help at the present time. But in the future... well we just don't know."

"Talking about the future, what are your plans when it's all over - and we've got to believe that you *will* defeat the Dark Side in the end, we can't think that... well, will you get married?"

Harry and Hermione looked deeply into each other's eyes and smiled. Harry had a pink tinge to his face as he spoke, "We're reluctant to think so far ahead at the moment, and we haven't really spoken about that, we're still very young, you know. But if everything works out right, I can't think of anything else I'd want to do."

Hermione squeezed his hand, letting the glow of happiness she then felt flow into his mind.

"Well that will certainly be the wedding of the year," said Rita grinning. "What a scoop!" she thought to herself. "What about you, Ginny? You've attracted a lot of attention from some of our younger male readers. They're quite taken with you."

It was Ginny's turn to blush prettily, "I... I don't know," she stammered, "What will be will be, I suppose."

"What about you, Ron? Our younger female readers are frantic to know more about you. Harry's already spoken for, but you aren't. You won't believe the number of owls we get every day wanting to know how you can be contacted."

Ron looked at Rita, staring at her with disbelief, "Me? I... I don't know. I didn't realise." His three friends sat grinning at Ron's obvious discomfort, but he quickly recovered and grinned slyly, "But I can give you my address if you want."

Everybody laughed, and that signalled the end of the interview. Dumbledore again stood up and addressed the crowd, "We're about to have lunch now, so you can speak to the four youngsters afterwards if you wish. I'd also like to announce that you may, if you wish, owl them at Hogwarts but only up until school starts back after the summer holidays. They won't be able to reply themselves but I've arranged for two of their friends to handle their mail and answer any concerns you may have or any information you may want." He then gestured to Madam Rosmerta to serve lunch and the crowd, respecting their privacy, sat back at their tables or walked back out into the street to tell their friends what had been said. A lot of them were still worried, but were content that the forces of Light were still alive and kicking and seeking a solution to their problems.

"So, you two didn't know you had lots of admirers did you?" asked Harry as he sat at the large table in the school library. They were feeling pleasantly full after their lunch at The Three Broomsticks and were chatting before getting down to the task of searching the maps.

"I think she was exaggerating," said Ginny, "I can't see how anybody would fancy us just by looking at one photograph in the newspaper."

"Speak for yourself Ginny," said Ron, flattening his mop of red hair with his hand, "If a load of girls fancy me then I'm not going to complain."

"You *were* joking weren't you Ron?" asked Hermione, "When you offered to give Rita Skeeter your address?"

Ron grinned slyly, "Yes of course I was, Hermi." Hermione frowned, not sure whether to believe him.

Ginny looked dreamily towards the large window in the library, "I don't think I'll ever meet a boy that I'd really, really like. And I don't know if one would ever really like me that way, anyway. After today, if I *did* meet someone I wouldn't know if he was attracted to me as a person, or whether it was just because I'm famous."

Hermione squeezed her friend's shoulder, "Don't put yourself down, Ginny. There are lots of boys who'd want to go out with you - Ginny the person."

"Ah, the price of fame," said Ron grinning at his sister. Harry looked at his friend with compassion and understanding, knowing exactly how she felt. After all, he'd been there not so long ago himself.

"Come on," said Ginny, feeling a bit embarrassed, "We've still got half these maps to look at."

They scoured the maps for the rest of the day, until just four remained. They were feeling very tired and their eyes were starting to burn with fatigue. "I think that's enough for one day," said Harry, "We can look at the remaining four in the morning."

"I hope we find something tomorrow," said Hermione as they walked up to Gryffindor Tower, "I just don't know what we'll do if we don't."

After breakfast the next morning, they went back to the library, full of hope that they'd find the gap. They'd briefly glanced at the four maps the previous night and saw that they showed quite a few old Roman roads.

Two hours later, the four poured over the map that Harry was looking at, the others having finished with theirs. It was the Landranger Ordnance Survey Map 160, covering the mountainous area of the Central Brecon Beacons.

"This is an interesting area," said Ginny as she pointed to the section of the map she was studying. There's quite a long section of Roman road leading from the village of Trecastle up into the surrounding hills, and it leads to quite a large area of Roman camps and an old Roman fort." After a few minutes she shook her head, "But there's nothing marked on it for the gap, and the road seems to follow the contour lines around the hills rather than through them."

"There's a lot of tracks marked going up through and between the mountains," said Harry, "But none of them are marked as Roman roads, they seem to be just tracks."

After another hour they'd covered the whole map but had found nothing about the gap. They sat looking at each other forlornly, feeling very depressed and none of them knowing what to suggest next. They were roused from their thoughts when the library door opened and little Clare Bryant rushed in, followed by Colin Creevey, Sirius and Ceri. Clare immediately pounced on Hermione and Harry, hugging them both in turn.

"Hello Clare, Colin, what are you doing here?" asked Harry.

"Professor McGonagall just arrived with them," said Sirius, "They've agreed to answer that load of mail you had for your birthday, and piles more that we can expect after the interview yesterday."

They grinned at Clare and Colin, "Are you sure you don't mind doing this?" asked Harry.

"Of course we don't Harry," said Clare, "It's great to be getting involved in your quests, even if we can't come with you." She said the latter part with a hint of regret.

"And I've got some great photos we can include with some of the replies," said Colin.

"Have you found anything yet?" asked Ceri as she looked at the map on the table.

"That was the last one Ceri," said Ron, "And we haven't found anything."

Ceri suddenly stooped over the map and looked at it intently. After a few moments she jabbed a finger towards the centre of the map and exclaimed, "I don't believe it!"

"What?" asked Sirius as he and the others leaned over to see where she was pointing.

"The little village that my ancestors came from, and where the Muggle part of my family are still living. It's right there, just beneath these high mountains - Llanmad (see note at end of chapter)."

"That's a coincidence Ceri," said Hermione looking thoughtfully at the map.

"And that's not the only coincidence," said Sirius. "No one ever took you to the place where you lived with your parents Harry, did they?"

"No Sirius, they didn't," he replied looking puzzled.

"Well Godric's Hollow is right here," he pointed to the map, "The name isn't shown on the map, but it's right here, and it's only about three miles from Llanmad. You see that tiny valley surrounded by all those contour lines? Well that's where Godric's Hollow is."

They all looked at the map, and Harry's mind was in a whirl of conflicting emotions.

"This is too much of a coincidence don't you think?" asked Hermione, "I really think we should check out this area. Look here... and here; there are quite a few paths and bridleways going through the mountains. Perhaps one of them was a Roman road that's been covered over or something."

Sirius rubbed his chin, deep in thought. He looked at Harry, "Do you want to go there, Harry? I know how painful it's going to be for you, seeing the place where your parents.... Well, you know."

"Died Sirius? Yes it will be painful. But it's also the place where they lived. And where I lived as well. Yes, I want to go there. And Hermione's right. We need to check out the area; it's the only thing we've got left anyway."

Ceri looked at Sirius with a determined glint in her eyes, "I want to visit my relatives, Sirius - there in Llanmad. We should be able to take some time out don't you think?"

"Of course we can, Ceri. And we'll all go, as long as you don't mind. I don't want to split up our protection."

"Right, and thanks. Well we'd better go down to the Great Hall for lunch, they'll be waiting to start."

"Colin and Clare are going to spend two days a week at Hogwarts to answer your fan mail," Dumbledore said over lunch, "So before you go winging your way into the wilds of Wales I suggest you spend a little bit of time with them to make sure they know what they should and shouldn't say. And Professor McGonagall and I will give them some guidance as well when you're not here."

"Thank you, Professor," said Harry.

A little while later, they were ready to continue their quest and the four friends and their protectors walked into Hogsmeade to Apparate to Godric's Hollow.

Harry looked sadly at the ruins of the little cottage where he'd spent the first year of his life. It stood alone in a small depression in the ground, surrounded by trees. Hermione stood next to him, gripping his hand, and Ron, Ginny and Sirius stood a little way to their left. The rest of the group stood respectfully behind, all of them feeling sympathy for what Harry must be going through. The cottage was badly damaged by Voldemort during his attack and it had fallen into an even worse state of disrepair over the last fifteen years.

Harry walked into the debris, looking up at the eaves where the roof had finally collapsed under the onslaught of the rain and gales that intermittently battered this part of the country from October to March each year. He whispered, "I don't even know which was my room."

Hermione gripped his hand hard, feeling the terrible hurt that flowed through his mind as he couldn't help but visualise the events that happened fifteen years ago. He had tears in his eyes when he finally turned around, "Come on Hermi, let's go. There's nothing here any more." Hermione suppressed a sob with great difficulty as they walked back over to the group.

Sirius walked over and placed his hand on Harry's shoulder, "Are you ok, Harry?" he asked softly. Harry nodded and forced a weak smile, "Thanks for bringing me Sirius."

Ceri, feeling Harry's emotions, stood to one side, quietly crying at his grief and also her own grief as the poignant moment brought back her own sad memories.

Nadine cleared her throat; "I think it might be a good idea to visit Ceri's relatives now. It's only a couple of miles away isn't it Ceri?"

Ceri wiped her eyes and smiled, "Yes Nadine, I have a cousin that I write to quite often. He lives a few hundred yards from the edge of Llanmad."

They walked slowly through the beautiful countryside in the gentle warmth of the late afternoon, deep in their own thoughts as they made their way through the narrow lanes flanked by hedges and trees. Hermione pointed out the wildlife she saw, trying to lift the mood, "There's a pair of buzzards circling over to the left, and look there - there's a red kite! We're lucky to see one this far south." She stopped and pointed to the high hedge on the right hand side of the lane, "There's a badger set there; you can see the runs leading out from the hole."

Ginny took up Hermione's efforts, "Did you know that there are nearly four times as many sheep than people living in Wales? There're over eleven million of them here."

"I read about that too, Ginny," said Ron, "But why don't you tell them the full facts? Did you know that the average sheep eats so much grass that it farts its own weight in methane every day? Now if the average sheep weighs about thirty-five pounds, that's 172,000 tons of greenhouse gasses a day! So in a year it's nearly sixty-three million tons they fart into the air! And that's only in a small country like Wales. No wonder we've got global warming and holes in the ozone layer."

"Ron!" they all shouted as they chuckled at his flair for amusing facts. But it served to lift the mood, and they were in far better humour as they approached the large sprawling farmhouse where Ceri's cousin lived.

As they passed a small junction in the lane that led to the right, Ron stood staring up at the old and rusty signpost, scratching his head, "How the hell do you pronounce these names? What's that one, Cl...Clanfr... oh, I don't know."

Ceri laughed, "It's Llanfrynach, Ron. In Welsh, double 'L' is treated as a single letter and it's pronounced like no other letter in English. You have to stick the tip of your tongue up into the roof of your mouth and just blow air over it. And CH is another case in point, it's pronounced, well there's no other way to describe it, like you're trying to clear your throat. Try it."

"Cl... Cl... Oh I give up," said Ron.

"It takes a bit of practice to get it right, Ron," she said laughing.

"Does your cousin know you're a witch Ceri?" asked Professor Flitwick.

"Oh yes," she replied, "The Muggle side of the family are well aware of what we are. I just hope they won't be overwhelmed or put out by all of us descending on them."

They walked through the gate at the front of the farmyard and along the rough track that led to the house. Two sheepdogs raced from the barn and sniffed enquiringly at their feet, looking up at their faces nervously. Nadine smiled and extended her hand, palm upwards, towards one of the dogs, "Come and say hello then," she said to the dog.

The dog sniffed at her hand and then slowly began to lick it, her tail wagging faster and faster, "There's a good girl," said Nadine, "We're friends now, aren't we?"

Ceri tentatively knocked at the door and stood back waiting, unsure of her reception. The door opened and a little boy, about ten-years-old, opened it, his eyes widening at the large number of strangers standing there. He turned his head back towards the inside of the house and shouted, "Mam! Mam! There's a load of people at the door. Come quick." He turned back to the door, eyeing the strangers suspiciously.

A dark-haired woman, closely followed by a little girl, walked up and gently eased her son to one side as she opened the door wider, "Hello, can I help you?"

Ceri smiled at her cousin's wife, "Is Ifor at home? I'm Ceri Jones, his cousin from America."

"Oh duw, duw," she said looking flustered, "Ifor!" she shouted over towards the barn.

They turned and saw a strapping red-faced man in his mid-thirties come out of the barn, wiping his hands on an old piece of cloth. He looked at the people standing at the door and then squinted as he saw Ceri standing beside his wife. He came closer, walking slowly over to the group, "Ceri? Is it you?"

"Yes. Hello, Ifor. How are you?"

He walked quickly over to Ceri and grabbed her around the waist, lifting her into the air and twirling her round and round, "I thought I recognised you from the last photo you sent," he said, "It's great to meet you in the flesh at last."

He put the grinning Ceri back onto the ground and held her at arms length, looking closely at her, "Why didn't warn us you were coming? We'd have had something ready for you to eat."

"Uh, it was a spur-of-the-moment thing Ifor. I hope you don't mind me dropping in like this, and with all my friends as well?"

"No, no of course I don't mind. I didn't even know you were in the country," he turned to his wife, "This is Bethan, my wife, and that's Iolo, my son. Oh and that pretty little bundle behind Iolo is Rhian, my six-year-old daughter. Come and meet your Auntie Ceri, you two."

The little girl was the first to approach Ceri, rushing from behind her brother and holding out her hand for it to be shaken, "Hello. I'm Rhian. Dad's told us about you. You're a witch, aren't you?"

Ceri laughed as she took the proffered hand and gently shook it, "Hello Rhian. You've grown since the last photo I saw of you. And yes, I'm a witch."

Rhian looked at the rest of Ceri's group, "Are these all witches and wizards?"

"Yes they are," she replied, "You're not afraid of them are you?"

"No. Dad said that you were a very nice lady, so if they are your friends, they must be nice too."

"Come in, all of you," said Bethan, "What must you think of me keeping you here standing at the door. I'll put the kettle on so we can have a nice cup of tea."

Everyone walked into the large kitchen, typical of country farmhouses in Wales, and sat around or to the side of the table. It took a little while for Iolo to approach the group but he was soon captivated, together with his little sister, by Professor Flitwick who did some amazing charms for their amusement.

"Again! Again! Professor Flitwick," shouted Rhian as Flitwick made his finger glow red as he put it on the end of her nose.

After finishing their tea, Ifor looked at Ceri, "You'll all stay for dinner, won't you? And you can all stay the night if you wish. I know that you have ways of fitting into tents and things."

"We can't impose on you," said Sirius, "The tea was lovely, but if you saw the amount of food Ron eats, you wouldn't ask - believe me."

"No I insist," said Ifor, "We've got plenty of food in the freezer. And anyway, we don't get to see one of our relatives from America very often, so I won't take no for an answer. You're staying."

"Thanks Ifor," said Ceri, "We really do appreciate it."

"While Bethan makes the dinner, we can go into the lounge and have a little chat over a few cans of beer."

"I'll help Bethan with the dinner," said Nadine, "The rest of you go on in."

Ifor produced several packs of the best Felinfoel ale from his large fridge and handed them around, "You kids had better dilute this stuff with some pop, I think," he said as he produced four glasses and a large bottle of lemonade. He then filled two glasses with lemonade for his own two children.

Ceri and Ifor talked incessantly, swapping news of their families. The others listened with interest, not wanting to interrupt. After a while, Ifor asked, "So. What brings you all to this neck of the woods? I know Ceri wanted to visit, but something tells me that there's more to it than just a family visit."

Ceri looked at Sirius and nodded. Sirius told Ifor that they were on a quest relating to the wizarding world, but he didn't go into any great detail about it.

Hermione, however, couldn't pass up the opportunity to probe a little bit, "We've got to find a place called The Gap," she said, "An old Roman road is supposed to run through it but we can't find it anywhere on the maps of Wales we've looked at."

"And no wonder too," said Ifor, "It's only known locally as The Gap."

Everybody sat stunned, "You've heard about it?" said Hermione, her excitement rising.

"Yes. It's only a few miles from here; it's an oddly shaped gap running between the flanks of two mountains up in The Beacons. There's an old Drovers' road running through it. Hundreds of years ago the farmers used to drive their cattle up the mountainside, through the gap, and down the other side to the towns in the South Wales Valleys. Now legend has it that the Romans originally built the road, and they were the ones who made the gap through the mountains. But I think it's far too big for it to have been fashioned that way. I think it's just a natural feature that the Romans made use of."

"Can you take us there?" asked Harry.

"Of course," he replied, "I'll take you up first thing in the morning if you wish. But first you'd better let me tell you about the other legend connected with The Gap."

Everybody leaned close, waiting. Ifor grinned widely - he was in his element.

"The old people in the village used to tell stories about the road through the gap leading to an old fort. Y Gaer, it was called - that's Welsh for 'The Fort'. Now this fort was said to have been built by the Romans, but after they left when the Roman Empire fell, people started to see and hear some very strange things there," he paused, staring around at his captivated audience, "And the feelings they had were not good feelings. They tell of great evil lurking in the very stones of the fort," he again paused, "Well!" he said loudly, making everybody jump, "The people back in those days were very superstitious, and they gave the fort a wide berth. But they were still afraid that something bad would happen in their community, so one day they all went up to the fort, the whole village, and destroyed it completely, making sure that not a brick was left standing. But that didn't stop the feelings of great evil coming from the

place where the fort once stood. So they abandoned the village and moved miles away to this very spot - the village of Llanmad - and never once returned to the old place. Now, if the legends are true, this all happened a very long time ago and over the years the place where the old fort stood has been long forgotten. No one knows where it is today, and you won't find anything on any map I know of. So if you come across it, be very careful and remember the legend."

"So if you take us up to the gap, we should be able to follow the road to the old fort?" asked Hermione.

"Well I don't know about that," replied Ifor, "The old road peters out after a while and no one knows where it leads from there. Over the years, the farmers built their field enclosures from the rocks lying on the slopes of the mountains and also, no doubt, from the bricks and cobbles from the old Roman road itself. So I wouldn't get your hopes up too much."

"Come on you lot," shouted Bethan from the kitchen, "Dinner's ready."

Everyone managed to squeeze around the large kitchen table for dinner, with Iolo, who was quite taken with Flitwick, squeezing up next to the little professor. Rhian squeezed in next to Ceri.

"This soup is heavenly," breathed Ron as he made short work of the first course, "Is there any more please? And what's it called?"

"It's called cawl Ron," said Bethan, "It's a Welsh speciality made from chunky vegetables and medallions of lamb. And there's plenty more if you want it, but I really don't think you'll have any room for the main course if you have any more."

"You don't know Ron," said Harry smiling, "I swear that his stomach's twice the size of a normal person's."

After dinner, everyone went back into the lounge and spent a very pleasant evening, with Professor Flitwick, Nadine and Charlie keeping the two young kids amused and the rest listening spellbound to Ifor, who was in his element telling them about the local legends of the area. It was past eleven before Bethan managed to halt his oratory and get everyone to bed.

"Right," said Ifor, "We'll start out at the crack of dawn in the morning. Are you sure you're all up to a bit of climbing?"

"It's not too difficult a climb up to the gap is it Ifor?" asked Charlie.

"Oh no, nothing difficult. But I know a short way up along the right flank of Fan-y-Big, and it can get a bit steep in parts."

Early the following morning, after a very large breakfast, the group, led by Ifor, set out along the country lane that led to the base of The Beacons Mountains. They had said their goodbyes to Bethan, Iolo and a tearful Rhian, promising to visit again as soon as they were able.

After half an hour of walking along the lane, the road suddenly petered out, and Ifor called a halt. He pulled an Ordnance Survey map from his coat pocket and handed it to Sirius, "This might come in handy," he said, "It's a contour map of the Central Beacons and we're.... Just

here." He pointed to a place on the left-hand side of the map, "I'm afraid I haven't got a spare compass, but I'm sure you have your own way of finding directions. The fine weather looks set for the day, so you shouldn't have any problems, but don't treat these mountains lightly. Even in summer, thick mists can come down without any warning, and quite a few people have lost their lives here, mainly because they weren't prepared for the changing conditions. Oh and don't be surprised if you see a few soldiers wandering about up there. There's an army training camp about ten miles away and they often drop their squaddies into the Beacons by helicopter, and let them fend for themselves until they find their way out."

He pointed up into the mountains, "There's the gap."

They looked into the distance at the place that had taken so much effort to find, and saw a curiously shaped square notch cut into the place where the flanks of two mountains, Fan-y-Big on the left and Cribyn on the right, met.

"The old road runs through the gap to the other side," said Ifor, "and you can just see parts of the road on this side of the gap, running down to the right."

"So that's the old Roman road," said Hermione softly, "I hope it leads us to some answers."

Voldemort, with Lucius at his side and Wormtail, Travis and Crabbe following behind, approached the Temple of the Gates in Irem. The petrified body of Findus Plonger still stood where he had been placed outside the entrance. Voldemort stopped and walked up to the grizzly remains and looked directly into Plonger's hideously contorted face, "Remember not to look at Plonger's face, unless you want to end up a gibbering idiot like Prink. You must be surrounded by the highest countenance of the Dark to look into such madness and survive."

The other four shuddered and followed Voldemort into the temple, being careful to keep their eyes averted from their one-time colleague. The pathetic body of Prink still lay where he'd been struck down, on the left just inside the entrance. The Dark Lord stood at the base of the inky black altar in the centre of the temple and looked around at the walls of the circular chamber, "Do you see these flecks of black material embedded in the pink marble walls?" he asked his watching followers, "They are made from a substance not of this earth, a substance brought here by The Nephilim when they built this temple. This is the substance that channels the magical energy that opens the gateway to the Dark Realm."

He looked with intense interest at the five large frescos on the walls of the chamber, two to the left, two to the right and one in between, directly opposite the entrance on the far side of the altar.

"Crabbe, come and stand beside me," said Voldemort, and waited for the large bull of a man to join him, "I have brought you here because of your knowledge of Dark Arts ritual. I want you to help me unravel the meaning of these frescos. They depict the ritual used to raise the Ancient Ones from the Dark Realm and with them at my side, no one can stand in my way, not even the Anima Summas. There is more information in the Necronomicon about the words that are needed for the ritual," he patted the side of his black robe where he carried the fabled book inside a leather pouch.

"Yes my Lord," said Crabbe, "Can I read what the Necronomicon says?"

"No Crabbe, that is for my eyes only. I will tell you what you need to know. But first we need to work out what these frescos tell us."

Crabbe and Voldemort studied the frescos for a few minutes and then Crabbe nodded to himself, "I think I know what order these scenes are in, my Lord. The first one is on the far left side. It shows five Dark Arts priests standing at the base of the black altar looking at something that's been placed on top of it. One of the priests is holding a wand to one of the four tall torch holders that are spaced around the altar. I think the torches are filled with that black substance you told us about earlier. This is obviously the set-up phase of the ritual."

Voldemort nodded his agreement and gestured for Crabbe to continue, "The next one is the second fresco on the left. It looks as if this is the ritualistic phase that builds the mood and atmosphere before enacting the final phase of the ritual. There's a priest standing beside each of the four torches, which are now casting magical light onto the chamber walls. See that some of the black pieces of material are now sparkling. The fifth priest, obviously the high priest, is standing at the top of the steps that lead up to the altar, and he's reading from a Dark Arts book while holding a wand over the object on the altar."

"I agree with your assessment so far, Crabbe," said Voldemort, "And I can now begin to see where the words in the Necronomicon fit in with the frescos. Carry on."

"The third in the series is the fresco on the far right side. The four priests at the bottom of the altar are now kneeling in supplication, their arms raised above their heads. Judging by the shapes of their mouths, they seem to be chanting. The one at the top has stopped reading and there's a green magical beam going from his wand to the object on the altar. This must be the final phase of the ritual, and the start of the process to open the gate. See how the dark material in the wall is starting to pulse with green light."

"Yes. The words in the Necronomicon are making a lot more sense now," said Voldemort.

"The fourth one," continued Crabbe, "is the other fresco on the right and the gate is starting to open. You can see that the green lights streaming from the black substance on the wall are converging onto the object on the altar, and then through it as a single intense beam of green light onto the back wall. There's a small black circular hole beginning to appear and there's a tiny white dot of light at the centre. All the priests are now on their knees, looking at the hole with their arms raised. And the final depiction is, of course, the fresco on the back of the wall opposite the altar, the place where the black hole started to appear. The black hole has now been replaced with a bright circular light and you can just make out some shadowy shapes within it. The priests are still kneeling, but their heads are bowed and their arms are raised in supplication and worship. This is the culmination of the ritual, the gate has been opened and the Ancient Ones are starting to come through from the Dark Realm."

"Excellent, Crabbe," said Voldemort with satisfaction, "Everything I read in the Necronomicon is now falling in place." His look of satisfaction suddenly changed as he thought for a few moments, "But there are two things that are bothering me. No, three things. Firstly, I don't like the way those Dark Arts priests are behaving. They seem to be treating the Ancient Ones as their gods and masters. I refuse to do that. I'll have to do some more reading to try to find a way of controlling them, of bringing them around to my way of thinking. The other two problems I see are the objects depicted in the frescos. The black substance that is placed in the torches - there has to be some of that here somewhere, and we'll have to find it

here in Irem. And what's that object sitting on the altar? It's the focus of the ritual, but there's nothing about it in the Necronomicon. What do you think it is Crabbe?"

Crabbe walked closer to the frescos and looked up at them, trying to make out what the object on the altar was, "Wormtail, Travis - come and lift me up so that I can get closer," he said.

The two lifted Crabbe up, not without great difficulty, so that his eyes were level with the object on the altar. He stared at it intently. After a few moments he told Wormtail and Travis to set him back down and walked over to Voldemort, "It's not easy to make out, my Lord, but it appears to be a disc-shaped piece of that black substance, with a glowing black crystal in the middle. There seem to be thin chains attached to the top half of it as if it was meant to be worn around someone's neck."

"Well they've got to be here in the city somewhere," said Voldemort, "I want you all to start searching, beginning with this temple. These items, and the torch holders I suspect, will all be stored together in some sort of sacred Dark Arts place. I'll stay here to try to find more information about the Nephilim in the Necronomicon, and you start the search."

As the four Death Eaters began to examine the temple walls and floor, Voldemort raised his head and hissed, "We will not leave this place until we find what we came for. I will not be stopped now!"

Chapter 4 Pontius Aurigula

Ifor led the group around the western flank of Fan-y-Big, heading towards the gap through the mountains. At first, it turned out to be a very gentle and enjoyable climb and Hermione pointed out a lone hawk, a Merlin, streaking like a flash of lightning towards the ground to claim the breakfast that he'd spotted during his frenzied hovering high above. Ron, to the amusement of everybody, pinched his nose with his fingers as he hurriedly passed a large flock of sheep grazing in a lush field below them.

As they grew ever nearer to the gap, the ground started to rise more steeply, and towards the top they had to clamber up on all fours, breathing heavily. Finally, they collapsed onto some level ground right in front of the gap, their chests heaving.

"Ifor," said Sirius in between his gasps for air, "If you think that's an easy climb, what do you call difficult?"

Ifor, who stood with his leg raised on a rock looking out over the countryside, and breathing only slightly heavier than normal, just laughed, "You townies should get out more - take in the beauty of the country and expend a bit of energy. It'll do you good in the long run, you know."

It was five minutes before their breathing returned to something like normal, and they were able to stand and take in the splendour of the mountainous country around them.

"Well this is it," said Ifor, "The gap, and you're all standing on the old Roman road. I've done all I can to help, so the rest is up to you. I hope you find whatever it is you're looking for, but don't forget what I said about that old legend. I'll leave you now; a farmer's work waits for no one but the farmer. Oh, if you don't finish your search today, or if it's late when you do, you're all welcome to stay with us tonight. We'll be glad to have you."

After shaking hands with everyone and hugging Ceri, Ifor started back down the steep trail to the bottom of the mountain, making amazingly fast progress, "What a character he is, Ceri," said Sirius, "I could sit and listen to his tales all night."

"Uh, you did Sirius," she replied, "we all did. And yes, my cousin certainly is one amazing Welshman."

They turned and walked over to Hermione when she called them over to where she was standing, right in the middle of the gap. She looked up at the steep cliffs on either side and then down at the ground, "You can see some of the old cobbles the Romans used to build the road," she said, bending down to feel the stones, worn smooth but also chipped in places by the hooves of the cattle that had been driven over the road for hundreds of years in the past.

Nadine walked to the furthest end of the gap and looked out over the countryside on the other side of the mountains, "This place is so beautiful," she said as she looked down at the lakes and wild meadows below her, "It reminds me a lot of my home -don't you think so, Charlie?"

Charlie walked up alongside Nadine and put his arm around her waist, "Very much so, Nadine. It's lovely," he replied, savouring the slight weight of her body as she leaned back into him.

"Hey come on, you two lovebirds," called Remus from the other end of the gap, "Time to get down to some work. We've got to decide what we do next."

"Well that's easy Professor, we follow the road," said Ron as he started to stride out through the gap towards Charlie and Nadine. He'd walked past them and was starting to pick up a fair old pace when he suddenly stopped, finally realising that he was walking all on his own.

He turned back to see everybody laughing, "Come on back up here Ron," shouted Ginny.

Ron looked puzzled as he once more rejoined the group, "What's the matter? Why didn't you follow me?"

"Uh Ron," said Ceri, "Before we do that, don't you think it'd be a good idea to decide which way to go first?"

"But that's the way I went Ceri," he replied, "Pontius said follow the road through the gap, so I went through the gap. What's the problem with that?"

"Ron," said Hermione, "Didn't you stop to think which way through the gap Pontius meant? Look, if he came here from Stonehenge, he'd have approached from the East, and the first place he'd have come to was the large Roman settlement in Caerwent - that's over on the Eastern side of Wales. From there, he'd have probably followed the main Roman route into the Southern plains of Wales, and then up into the valleys just North of what is now the capital - Cardiff. From there he'd have passed through the valleys and up into the mountains north of the valley towns of Merthyr and Aberdare, and from there he'd have come straight up this Roman road to the gap. Now that means that he would have approached *from* the South - and the direction you started to go in was *to* the South. Entirely the wrong way."

Ron stuck out his chin and glared at Hermione, pointing his finger at her, "And what makes you so sure he came that way, little miss know-it-all? Don't forget, the Bristol Channel bridges weren't there in Pontius' time, and he'd have had to go up the right-hand bank of the River Severn until he came to a place narrow enough to cross over into Wales. And that's nearly up as far as what is now Gloucester. And if you remember your maps, this part of Wales is directly across from that spot. He could easily have ignored the main Roman road to the South and cut straight across country to those camps and forts we saw close to Trecastle. The distance would have been a lot shorter than your route, and if Dark Wizards were on his tail, he'd have wanted to keep off the main highways, wouldn't he?"

Hermione looked shamefaced at her friend, accepting the logic of his argument, "I... I'm sorry Ron; I shouldn't have jumped at you like that. Pontius may well have come the way you say; it *does* make very good sense," she reached out and put her hand on Ron's arm, looking pleadingly into his eyes, "Forgive me?"

Ron's stern look quickly turned into a smile, "Course I do, Hermi."

"That leaves us with a big problem," said Ginny, "Which way do we go? South or North?"

Everyone in the group shrugged their shoulders helplessly, but then Harry grinned and said hurriedly, "Well we don't know, but I know a man who might be able to help. Hang on, I'll be back in a few minutes." Harry closed his eyes and transformed into his golden eagle Animagus form. He bent his legs and launched himself into the clear air, hovered for a

moment and then soared quickly back down along the side of the mountain, heading in the direction they had just come from.

"My word," said Professor Flitwick, "I didn't know that Harry's an Animagus. When did this happen?"

"Not long before Christmas last year, Filius," said Sirius, "But Professor Dumbledore wants to keep it quiet for now; he thinks it might help in the fight with the Dark Side."

Harry flashed down the mountainside, flying low over the flock of sheep they'd passed on the way up the mountain. They scattered in alarm at the sight of the big bird of prey, trying to gain the cover of the hedges that enclosed their field. Harry's extra keen eagle eyesight quickly spotted Ifor as he moved down the rough track, and flew over his head as he came into a perfect landing about ten yards in front of the wide-eyed farmer. Ifor's eyes grew even wider as he saw the huge bird shimmer, leaving a grinning Harry in its place.

Ifor found his voice after a few moments and his face contorted in a look of agonised anguish, "That's bloody cruel Harry. I've just witnessed the most amazing sight of my life, and I can't tell anybody about it. If I tell this story down at the pub, my mates will think I've lost my marbles."

Harry grinned, "But you can still tell Bethan, Iolo and Rhian."

Ifor brightened, "Yes I can, can't I. But I warn you that when you visit us next, or if you come back tonight, the kids will want a demonstration."

"No problem Ifor, and I can give them a ride on my back if they want."

"Oh, they'll want Harry - make no mistake about that!"

"Ifor, we've got a problem and I'm hoping you can help. We don't know whether to follow the Roman road to the North or to the South. I thought that if you've got an idea where your old abandoned village is, it would help us decide."

Ifor thought for a few moments, scratching his chin, then, "I don't know where the village is, but the old people said it was about eight miles or so away from Llanmad, in roughly that direction." He raised his arm and pointed to the West, slightly South of West, "Does that help?"

"Not really, Ifor, that's right in between the two directions we could go."

Ifor thought again for a few moments, thinking aloud, "The village must be to the North West of Pen-y-Fan, that's the highest mountain in Southern Britain, so let's see," he closed his eyes, deep in thought, trying to visualise the terrain of the area, "I know that the old Drovers' road to the South goes directly South, following the high ridges of the mountains to the West. And there's no easy way over them for at least eight miles. So your way can't be to the South, Harry. I don't know where the Roman road leads to the North, of course, but I do know that there's far easier access to the West just at the bottom of these mountains. I think it's definitely North."

Harry grinned and shook Ifor's hand, "Thanks Ifor, I just knew you'd be able to help. See you soon, I hope." Harry again transformed and soared into the air, flapping his wings to gain height as he flew back to the gap. Ifor turned and watched him go, scratching his head in amazement.

"North it is," said Harry after he'd transformed back. He proceeded to tell the group what Ifor had said to him, and they all looked a lot happier than they had a few minutes previously.

Sirius and Ceri led the way down the rough track, the four friends just behind, and the remainder of the group bringing up the rear. There was no room for anyone to patrol the flanks, the ground rising steeply to their left and falling, precipitously in places, to their right. After a short while, the path started to rise up the side of the mountain, avoiding some dangerous-looking cliffs, then levelled off along the cliff top and back down again on the other side. Half an hour later, they reached the bottom of the mountain where the path started to swing around to the left, but it soon became indistinct as the group entered a flattish area of meadowland.

Sirius called a halt and gestured for the four youngsters to join him, "The road seems to have disappeared," he said. He pointed to the dry stone walling a little further down the valley, "I think the farmers must have used the cobbles to build those walls. I'm not sure which way we should go."

"Can you help Harry?" asked Ginny, "Perhaps you can fly up and look for any signs of the road reappearing up ahead."

"Good idea, Ginny", he replied, and quickly transformed and rose majestically into the air. At first he couldn't see anything, but then he flew a little higher and gazed at the road up to the point where the group now stood. He scoured the area in front of them for any sign of the road reappearing, and could just make out a slight difference in the colour of the grass in several places, about the width of a pathway. He flew further and in about another three hundred yards saw the unmistakable signs of the roadway just before it led into an area of woodland. He flew back to the group and transformed.

"I could just make out the outlines of the road," he said pointing straight ahead, "It enters some woods about three hundred yards or so further on."

The group continued on their way and soon came to the woodland where they once more picked up the trail. They walked through the dappled shade of the trees, savouring the heady aroma of earth and decaying leaves, "I just love oak trees," said Hermione as she gazed up at the spreading branches above, "They're so proud and regal."

"I don't know about that," said Ron, "But it makes a change being able to walk under a tree without it trying to bash your brains out." Ron, of course, had had more than one unfortunate experience with the Whomping Willow at Hogwarts.

For the next three hours they made fairly slow progress, and Harry had to fly above the ground several times to find the faint outlines of the road. They walked through lovely wooded glades, across steep-sided valleys through which sparkling streams flowed, and up gently sloping grassy mounds as the road led to the West and across the foothills of the mountains rising to their left. They soon entered an area of rough terrain, with no fields or meadows near, which suggested that they were now in a fairly remote part of the countryside. The old

Roman road now became more distinct, with many of the original cobbles in place. Further progress was halted, however, when Ron let out a loud shout of anguish, "How much further? Do you realise that we haven't eaten for six full hours! If we go on much longer, I'll have to start eating the grass, and then you can look out - you know what it does to the sheep! I refuse to walk one inch more until I take on some fuel."

He sat down on a flat rock and folded his arms, a look of determination on his face. Everyone laughed at his antics but they all knew that beneath the amusing comments lay a grim reality - Ron and his food just cannot be kept apart for too long.

Everyone enjoyed the delicious picnic that Bethan had prepared for them that morning, and when they'd finished, Ron was pleased to see that there was plenty left for later. When they set off shortly afterwards, they saw that the road started to shift to the South, heading back up into the mountains and some of the roughest terrain they had so far encountered. They passed an old ruined farmstead, long abandoned, and after another hour saw them standing, quite breathless, on a curious flat-topped hill surrounded by much higher mountains. Everything was quiet, not the twitter of birds, not the bleat of sheep, not the screech of hawks, just their heavy breathing following the steep climb up to that point.

After a few minutes they walked across the flat hill, still following the old Roman road, and soon came to the edge, where the road wound in zigzag fashion down to the bottom. At the base of the hill, they followed the road around to the right and around a sharp spur that jutted from the mountainside. Sirius and Ceri pulled up sharply as they led the way around the spur of rock. There, up ahead, they were faced with high cliffs surrounding a circular valley, and the road led right into it. Ceri, who had been following their progress on the contour map, looked closely at it and then up into the valley.

"This place is called Craig Cerrig-Gleisiad," said Ceri, "It's a hanging glacial valley scooped out by retreating glaciers after the last ice age."

They continued along the old road into the valley, and looked up at the craggy cliffs as they reached the centre. The ground was littered with loose rocks and terminal moraine left by the melting glacier. The going became tough as they approached the far side of the valley, the road skirting the base of the cliffs, and then the road swung back towards the centre for about twenty yards before it suddenly stopped.

They looked around, trying to pick up the trail, but there was no sign of it anywhere. Nadine, however, had not moved since reaching the end of the old road. She stood still, her head to one side, and her pretty face screwed up in deep concentration.

Charlie rushed over to her and caught around her shoulders, "Nadine, what's wrong?"

He asked gently.

"It's this place," she replied, opening her eyes to look at Charlie, "I can feel the vibrations, and they're not very nice."

"Perhaps this is the place," said Professor Flitwick, "Perhaps the road ended because it's reached its destination - the old Roman fort."

Everyone looked towards the rough ground at the spot where the road ended, "Nothing," said Harry; "I can't see anything that looks like an old fort."

Remus looked around at the cliffs, "This place is a sort of natural amphitheatre. I wonder if that's what attracted the Romans when they built their secret fort."

"Split up into pairs," said Sirius, "and look all around the valley floor. There's bound to be some indication of the fort around here somewhere. But watch out for potholes - the map says this is limestone country and there's probably a lot of caves right under our feet."

They examined the valley floor carefully, but after an hour of searching could find nothing. They all met back at the place where the road ended and took stock, "Not a thing," said Sirius, "Ifor said that the old villagers destroyed the fort brick-by-brick, and they must have done a pretty good job of it - I couldn't even see any bricks lying about."

"They may be here, Sirius," said Ceri, "But with all this rock and debris lying about it's no wonder we can't find anything. Nadine, are those vibrations stronger in any one place?"

"Not really Ceri," she replied, "But I suppose they do seem a bit stronger in the area beyond where the road ends."

"Of course," said Ginny, "It worked before so why not now? Harry, fly up and see if you can see the outline of anything."

"Ok, Ginny. Want to come and help me?"

"Yes!" shouted Ginny and walked over to Harry, waiting for him to transform, "Give me some parchment and a quill, Hermi. If I spot anything I can draw the outline and some landmarks so we can find it when we get back down." She climbed onto the eagle's back and leaned forward, placing her arms around his neck. Harry pushed off from the ground and flew high into the air, above the line of cliffs surrounding the valley.

Harry hovered high above the spot where the road came to an end and looked down. Ginny leaned over to one side and also gazed closely at the ground, "See it Harry? I can just make out a rectangular shape about fifty yards long and twenty yards wide. And there's the faint outline of what must have been four round turrets at the corners."

Harry nodded his head and waited for Ginny to finish drawing in the outline on the parchment, "Ok Harry, I've finished."

Back on the ground, Ginny and Harry, closely followed by the others, walked over to the area of ground where they'd spotted the outline of the fort. Ginny looked at the parchment and then at the ground, and walked over to a spot about twenty yards away, "This is where we saw one of the circular turret shapes," she said, and proceeded to build a mound of loose stones at the spot. She and Harry did the same at the other three corners, and then they stood back, visualising what the old fort must have looked like before it was destroyed.

"I can see some of the bricks now," said Sirius as he poked around the ground with his foot at the place where one of the walls once stood, "Unless you know exactly where to look, you'd never spot them; they blend in so well with the natural rocks. No wonder these old ruins haven't been discovered up until now."

"See if you can feel anything stronger Nadine," said Charlie, "The four corners may be a good place to start."

Nadine walked over to the nearest corner and stood where Ginny had piled the rocks as a marker. After a few moments she shook her head and walked over to the next one. She gasped out loud as she closed her eyes, "It's here," she said in a strangled voice, "It's terrible - so dark and evil."

"But Pontius wasn't evil," Ron muttered to his three friends as they walked over to Nadine, "He was on the side of the Light. How can anything evil be here?"

The four friends looked at each other ominously and then started to examine the circular piece of ground where one of the turrets must have stood. With the protectors watching, they soon cleared away the loose rocks and bricks that covered the spot and stared at a small depression in the ground, where loose earth, fed by the many flash floods that must have occurred over the years, had accumulated. Ron picked up a flat rock from the ground and started to clear away the earth, and before long his rock hit something solid. He paused, looking up at the others, before redoubling his efforts and quickly revealed a man-made cover stone about six inches below the level of the surrounding ground. They could just make out some faded markings on the stone and Hermione bent close to examine them more closely.

"It's a Latin inscription," she said, "It's not very clear but I think it reads..." she paused as she traced the outline of the writing with her finger, muttering to herself, "N..E..X....L..U..X. I can just make out two words - death and light," she looked up at her three friends, "I think it says 'Death to the Light'."

"Move over Hermione," said Sirius as he, Remus and Charlie approached. They scraped around the edges of the cover to reveal its outline and then inserted several long shards of rock, trying to lever it up. The stone soon started to wobble and the three men lifted it carefully and placed it to the side.

Nadine suddenly let out a gasp and staggered back, clutching Charlie's arm for support and comfort, "It's so strong now," she muttered in a trembling voice.

The four youngsters stepped cautiously forward and looked dubiously at the hole, and the stone steps that could now be seen spiralling into the darkness below.

'Listen well, for the wrath of the Watcher at the Gate is terrible. Cover yourself with the protective aura of a powerful talisman of evil, for he must know that you are worthy to seek his presence. The Disc of Gates is such a talisman and it will serve to keep you safe as well as heightening the power to open the Gate.

Recite the incantations as they are written here, in the manner thus prescribed. Prepare the rituals without erring, and in the proper places and times render the power that will open the Gate. Shudder at what you will see; know that the countenance of the Watcher must be revered above all else. Reap the wild harvest that will be your reward.

May the Ancient Ones ever be merciful unto thee! May you escape the jaws of the Seeker of Souls, and turn it thus on those who would seek to thwart the coming of destiny.'

Voldemort looked up from the Necronomicon and stared, unseeing, into his future with relish. His mind was full of the words of the evil book, and his thirst to learn more was almost tangible, 'The Seeker of Souls,' he thought to himself, 'I must find out more about this.'

Voldemort now knew how to protect himself against the Nephilim, but he couldn't find anything in the book to allow him to control them. He took the decision to take his chances with the Ancient Ones; to his way of thinking, the rewards would far out-way the risks. He returned to reading the Necronomicon, looking for more information about the Seeker of Souls.

Meanwhile, Lucius and the other three Death Eaters had finished scouring the temple for the artefacts needed to open up the gate to the Dark Realm, but had found nothing. Lucius led them outside and looked at the adjacent buildings, "Wormtail, you and Travis search the building on the right; Crabbe and I'll take the one on the left."

Lucius and Crabbe walked up to the building, which was a lot smaller than the Temple of the Gates, although it had the same strange markings above the entranceway. He went into the gloomy place and raised his wand high, looking around at the dust-covered objects that stood against the walls of the small chamber. He counted three stone chests of varying sizes and each bearing the markings of the strange script above the door, although the markings on each of the three chests were slightly different. There was a very large one about ten feet square, a smaller one about seven feet long and four feet wide, and the third was only two feet square.

"This looks interesting Crabbe," said Lucius, "Help me get the biggest one open."

The two Dark Wizards had to put all their strength into raising the lid of the first stone chest, but as soon as they levered it open just a fraction, the lid raised itself under its own strange power. They looked inside and saw, neatly stacked in columns, the black material they were looking for. The chest was completely full of the inky black substance. They then opened the middle-sized chest and saw the four torch holders - the same ones that were shown in the frescos.

Lucius and Crabbe grinned at each other as they approached the last chest, which they easily opened. Their grins soon disappeared from their faces when they saw what lay inside. On a black velvet cushion, they could see a disc-shaped indentation, where the third object of their search once lay. But it lay there no longer. They searched around the room with great care, but they could find no sign of the disc. Fearing the worst, they walked back to the Temple of Gates, calling out for Wormtail and Travis to join them.

"Lammashtha," Voldemort breathed quietly, "The Seeker of Souls is Lammashtha, the she-demon." He had just finished reading the spell that would call her from the Dark Realm and unleash her terrible fury on an unsuspecting world, albeit for a short time. But it would be enough.

He looked up as Lucius and the others walked back into the temple, "Well?" he asked.

"My Lord," said Lucius, "We have found the place where the ritual objects are kept, and have found the black substance and the torch holders. But the disc is no longer here. We opened its container and saw the place where it rested, but there was no sign of it anywhere."

All four Death Eaters cringed as Voldemort let out a bellow of rage and anguish, his fury echoing around the circular temple. After he regained his composure, he turned back to the others, "That is the most important object in the ritual - the Disc of Gates, the talisman of evil that would boost the power to open the Gate and serve to protect us. We must find it."

Crabbe spent a few minutes deep in thought, and then a few more building the courage to speak when Voldemort was in such a foul mood, "My Lord, you may not need the Disc of Gates."

Voldemort glowered at Crabbe and hissed, "Spit it out, Crabbe, what are you thinking?"

"I was thinking, my Lord, that we already have a talisman of evil - the Necronomicon. It could well serve the same function as the Disc of Gates."

"Hmmm. You may be right, Crabbe," said Voldemort pensively. Then he seemed to come to a decision and said forcefully, "Right. All of you - prepare for the ritual. We will use the Necronomicon to channel the power and to protect us. I will teach you the words that you must say in the ritual just before we start."

He turned back and looked up at the black altar at the centre of the chamber, "One hour - just one hour and I will hold the fate of the world in my hands."

"You kids stay here," said Sirius, "Remus, let's check this out first, I don't want them walking into any nasty Dark Arts booby traps down there."

"Wait a minute," said Harry as he held Sirius back, "It's just as dangerous for you two as it is for us, and we can do the ancient protection spell to cover us." Harry stretched his hand out for Hermione to join with him and called his two friends to come closer.

Harry and Hermione held their arms above their heads and said, "*DADEX MER*."

A beam of silvery-blue light shot from their upraised hands and met about two feet above their heads; where it cascaded down to cover the four friends in an emerald green shimmering light. Still keeping their arms raised, Harry and Hermione, closely followed by Ron and Ginny, slowly walked down the stone steps, branching to the right as the steps spiralled around a central stone column. Ron and Ginny lit their wands as they became engulfed in the darkness, and they soon reached the bottom of the stairs where they found themselves standing in a small antechamber, which was completely devoid of any furnishings.

"Feel it?" asked Ron as he pulled his cloak tighter around himself to ward off the chilly evil feelings in the place. They all nodded and walked slowly over to an iron door, which was set into the wall opposite the stairs. As they approached, the feelings of an evil presence became stronger.

"I think whatever's causing these feelings is in there," said Harry nodding towards the door. Ron tentatively reached out and touched the door lightly with his hand, but then drew it back sharply as if it had been scalded.

"I don't think it's in the room behind the door Harry," he said, "I think it's in the door itself."

Harry and Hermione nodded to each other and then slowly dropped their arms to end the protection spell. Hermione reached out and quickly brushed her fingers over the door, "Ron's right," she said, "It's definitely in the door. And it feels like a Dark Arts sealing spell."

Ginny pointed her wand at the door and yelled, "*ALOHOMORA*." The door didn't budge. Harry then tried the unlocking spell, using all the power he could muster, but the door still refused to open. Like Ginny's, the beam from his spell was enveloped by an undulating dark green light where it was stifled out of existence.

Hermione whispered, "It's going to take something special to open this door. Hold my hand, Harry."

Harry grinned and held her hand. They pointed their other hands at the door and yelled, "*KHEWEW, KHETI*."

The silvery blue beam struck the iron door and the dark green light reappeared, shimmering excitedly as it attempted to nullify the spell, but then quickly flowed down the door and disappeared into the ground as it failed in its vain attempt.

"Try it now Ginny," said Hermione.

This time, Ginny's unlocking spell had the desired effect, and the door slowly started to creak open.

"Ughh," they all said as the stale air, tinged with an indefinable stench, rushed over them. "That door must have been airtight," said Ron.

Ron was the first to slowly enter the small chamber, but soon came to a halt as he stared, wide-eyed, at something inside the room. Ginny walked up alongside him and let out a loud screech, covering her mouth with her hands. Harry and Hermione quickly followed and stared at the cause of their friends' shock, drawing in a deep breath as they looked at the grinning skeleton sitting at a stone table that stood at the centre of the small room.

"Are you kids ok?" shouted Sirius.

"We're ok Sirius," Hermione shouted back, "I think we've found poor old Pontius Aurigula."

The skeleton sitting hunched over the table still held a long, sharp piece of rock in his bony right hand, and they saw that he'd scratched several columns of writing on the stone table, his only method of telling anyone who found him what had happened. Harry and Ron eased the skeleton back, and they saw that the writing trailed off towards the bottom of the table. They carried Pontius' remains over to the stone bed in the corner of the room, where they reverently laid it to rest on its back.

"Hold your wands over the table," said Hermione as she pulled some parchment and a quill from her robes, "I'll see if I can translate what he's written."

Hermione saw that the writing was in Latin, in the same style as the message they'd found at the Shrine of Mercury. She studied the ancient text for a few minutes and then started writing, talking aloud as she translated the message.

'I, Pontius Aurigula, write this and fear it is the last duty I perform in the cause of the Light. The Dark Wizards have found me at last, and sealed me in what will become my tomb after they attacked the fort and killed all the Legionaries. My life's work - the glorious history of my mentor, Mercury, has been taken from me and the Dark Ones gloated with evil sadism at my method of execution. I have little time left to me here, and the air will soon turn foul. So I will tell you, and I pray that you are sons and daughters of the Light, where your path lies.'

Hermione wiped a tear from her eye as she paused briefly. Then, with a sigh, she continued.

'The times have become very dark of late, and the power of the evil ones is building. I pray for the coming of the Anima Summas so that the evil can be struck down, as it was in times long past. I have little hope that this message will be found, but if it is, seek out the Anima Summas if they exist in your time, and tell them what is said here.'

Seek out the original scribe, the inventor of writing and learning. Seek out the new abode of Mercury and Hermes. That beloved Spirit of the Light will impart great knowledge to aid you in your dread task. Find the scribe in the ancient land, go to ...'

"Where Hermi?" asked Ron, "Where've we got to go to find the scribe?"

"That's all he's written," whispered Hermione, "Pontius must have been overcome by the bad air and died shortly afterwards, before he could finish his message."

"Poor Pontius," squeaked Ginny, tears streaming down her face, "He didn't think of himself. The last thing he did was to try to guide others to the Light."

Harry put his arm around Ginny's shoulder, "There's nothing more for us here; let's leave Pontius in peace. We'll put the cover stone back in place and cover it with earth and rocks again so that no one will disturb him."

They walked sadly back up to their protectors and told them what they had found, and after covering all signs of their excavations, they all walked back down the old Roman road and out of Craig Cerrig-Gleisiad. As they walked, the four friends talked quietly among themselves. They found it hard to shake off the sombre mood that had settled on them. They knew that Pontius couldn't help them any more and they now had to find a new path to follow. Even the rumblings in Ron's stomach went unnoticed as they followed behind Sirius and Ceri.

"What I don't understand," said Ginny, "is why that evil spell was still in place. Surely Merlin and Morgana would have come to this place and opened the door?"

"We'll never know the answer to that Ginny," said Hermione, "But perhaps they didn't have to come here. Perhaps their path to the three seats of ancient knowledge lay elsewhere. Remember what I said in *The Three Broomsticks*? Maybe our path is longer and harder because we're so young; our strengths are being built up gradually. It may well be that Merlin and Morgana, because they were older and more experienced, didn't need to go through what we're going through."

"Did you notice that Pontius referred to the Anima Summas in a time long before his?" asked Ron.

"Yes," replied Harry, "But our next task is to find out who the original scribe was and where the ancient land is. Any ideas Hermi?"

"Not at the moment Harry, but it isn't a lot to go on. If only poor Pontius had remained conscious for five more minutes, he'd have told us where the ancient land is."

"URU NECRONOMICON...ME NECRONOMICON...KALAG NECRONOMICON."

Voldemort stood on the top step reading from the Necronomicon, which lay on the black altar, his wand extended over it. He was chanting the ritual spells to prepare the Necronomicon as the vessel of power and protection in the 'Opening of the Gate' ceremony that was to follow. A torch holder, filled with the mysterious black substance, stood at each corner at the base of the altar, flaming with magical light. A Death Eater stood by the side of each of the torch holders.

Voldemort looked up at the temple walls with satisfaction as he saw some of the pieces of black material start to spark into life. He watched as his helpers knelt onto the ground and raised their arms, chanting the strange words he had taught them earlier. He looked back down at the Necronomicon and chanted the words of the ritual. Green light burst from the end of his wand and covered the fabled Dark Arts book on the altar. The black material now glowed and pulsed with the green light.

The Dark Lord spoke the final words of the ceremony as he pointed his wand at the book before him, "SA KAPU... GEN KURUM."

Green light started to stream down from the walls onto the Necronomicon, where it gathered for a few moments before sending a beam of green power towards the fresco at the far end of the temple.

Voldemort frowned with disappointment when he saw that the beam of light was not as intense as that depicted in the fresco. He looked down at Crabbe in anger, but then jerked his head back up as he sensed that something was happening. The beam had stopped midway between the altar and the fresco and a small black hole started to form in the air at the place where the light was concentrated. Slowly, ever so slowly, a small area of white light started to expand at the centre of the hole, extending outwards to consume the blackness. Then it was finished, the gate had been opened - but not in the same way as shown in the fresco, the intensity of the light was much less.

Voldemort stared intently at the light and he could just make out a shadowy form undulating in the background. The form slowly took on more definition until its features could be discerned. It was the same as the creature on top of the pillar in the centre of Irem. He was huge, about ten feet tall, and his face was reminiscent of a Neanderthal, but slightly more refined. His pointed ears extended for about six inches, and he was naked from the waist up; his bottom half remained hidden behind the portal.

Voldemort opened his mouth to utter a greeting, but stopped as he heard a loud, resounding voice that reached directly into his mind. He looked down at his helpers but they showed no sign of having heard anything.

"Who summons the guardian of the gate? Who dares to commune with the gods of the Dark Realm. Speak quickly, for my time is short."

"I am Lord Voldemort, the greatest Dark Wizard on Earth. I seek help in defeating the Light and subjecting humanity to the rule of the Dark. The Necronomicon is my evil talisman and helped me contact you."

"That is why I cannot now enter your realm. The Necronomicon is not strong enough and only allows us to speak across the divide. Only the Disc of Gates can allow us entry so that we can take our revenge.

"The Disc of Gates is no longer here; it has gone from its chest in the place of Dark Arts relics."

"I will tell you where you can retrieve the Disc of Gates, but first I must tell you about the past, how it came to be lost to us. Many ages ago, we ruled your earthly realm from our seat of power in the City of Pillars where you now stand. Then the light spawned two powerful wizards to challenge our supremacy. There was a fearsome battle in the desert near the city, and the Anima Summas of that time banished us back to our realm of darkness. But the seeds were sown. The legacy of our teachings lived on in the Dark Arts of your wizarding world. And that is why you stand here before me now.

The Disc of Gates was stolen by the Anima Summas and sealed in a barren tomb, sure that it would no longer see the light of day. But they were wrong. I can tell you where it is hidden and also the tablet of ancient dark spells that will activate its awesome power for they were buried in two separate places. For it is not only the instrument of opening the junction between our two realms, it is also a powerful weapon that can be used against the Anima Summas and the wizards of Light. It can destroy the body, but it can also capture the soul and transport it to the Realm of Dark to be used to feed the ancient ones for eternity. But it has been long since we have had fresh souls on which to feed. Only rarely is a Dark Wizard strong and knowledgeable enough to summon one of our servants - the She Devil - to hunt for fresh souls.

"But if the She Devil can be summoned, why can't you?"

"The She Devil does not have our awesome powers. No human can possess the strength to summon the Nephilim, only the Disc of Gates can do that.

"Will you tell me where I can retrieve the Disc of Gates and the Tablet of Spells?"

"I can, and I can also give you the spells that you will need to break through the protections set by the Anima Summas.

I know the area where the treasures were sealed, but not their exact locations, but I can also provide you with a spell that will tell you when you are close to them. But for all this there is a price. I will make with you a pact. In return, you must bring terror to the land, you must build the fears of the followers of the Light - their souls will be far more interesting to feed on when we come to claim them. And then, when you have defeated the Anima Summas, you will use the Disc of Gates to open the way for our return. Do you agree?"

Voldemort thought quickly. He didn't like the arrogance of the Guardian of the Gate, nor his lack of respect when he addressed the Dark Lord, and suspected that his fellow Nephilim were no better. But he had to get his hands on the Disc of Gates and the spells. They would allow him to achieve his destiny. And then, when he had achieved it; that would be the time to worry about the Nephilim. That would be the time to consider whether to honour the pact, "I agree, Guardian of the Gate."

"Good. Write down the things I will tell you now, for they are very complex."

Voldemort signalled to Lucius to bring him parchment and quill, "While I await my writing materials, there are two questions I would like to ask you." The Guardian nodded his assent, "What is the black substance that is used in the ritual?"

"That is not of your world. It is only found in the Dark Realm. There is a similar substance in your realm, but it is only for the Light. If used, it would corrupt the Dark."

"And what has happened to Abdul Alhazred? How did he get to your realm?"

The Guardian laughed evilly, "He discovered the spells and rituals at an ancient site, and used them to come here. But he was selfish; he did not want any of his kind to follow, so he omitted the spells from the Necronomicon and destroyed the tablets that held the knowledge. He is still here, kept alive by the dark aura of our realm. But he is now quite mad. He thinks he is one of us, but we tolerate him purely for our own amusement."

Lucius handed the parchment and quill to Voldemort and retreated quickly back to the foot of the altar.

"As part of the pact, I want you to contact me and tell me of your progress. Agreed?"

Voldemort nodded.

"Then listen carefully and make no mistakes when you write it down...."

They had just finished the excellent dinner provided by Bethan that evening, and were sitting comfortably around the kitchen table drinking coffee. Harry was listening to Ifor's amusing account of his efforts to retrieve a sheep that had fallen into a ditch that day when he felt a tug on his sleeve. He turned around to see Iolo and Rhian looking up at him nervously, "Harry," said Iolo, "We were wondering - can we see you change into an eagle?"

The imploring look on little Rhian's face dispelled any thoughts of refusing, so he got up from his seat, "Come on then, let's go out to the back garden. Want to give me a hand?" he asked his three friends.

Hermione, Ron and Ginny followed them out into the garden, which stretched up for about a hundred yards towards the wooded slopes of the mountains behind the farmhouse. They looked to make sure that there were none of the locals around, and then walked into the middle of the garden.

"Ready?" Harry asked the two little ones. He closed his eyes and concentrated, then transformed into his golden eagle form. Iolo just stood still, eyes wide, staring at the beautiful bird as Harry spread his impressive wings. Rhian's reaction was completely opposite to that of her brother as she jumped up and down, giggling excitedly and clapping her hands.

"Can I have a ride?" the little girl asked as she ran up to Harry.

He looked at Ginny and nodded. The red head went up to Rhian and lifted her slight body onto Harry's back. She then climbed up behind her and held her around the waist, "Hold onto Harry's feathers just at the bottom of his neck," she whispered into her ear.

Harry kicked off from the ground, and looked around to make sure no one was watching before soaring up towards the line of trees at the base of the mountain. He skimmed low over the trees, scattering a small herd of deer as he flew over a clearing in the forest. After another ten minutes he glided slowly back to the garden and landed.

After he'd transformed back, the excited little girl ran up to Harry and hugged him around the waist, "Thank you uncle Harry. Can I have another ride please?"

"Uh, it's getting a bit too dark now Rhian. But I promise you can have a ride next time we visit. You too Iolo."

They went back into the farmhouse where they found everyone sitting in the lounge, talking about what they'd found in the mountains that day.

"So the legends were right," said Ifor, "But where do you go from here?"

"We really don't know," said Hermione despondently, "Our only real lead is still Hermes and where he lived before Mount Olympus. But we've read all the books at the school - I just wish there were more there."

"I think I can help you there, Hermione," said Bethan, "There's a little town not far from here that's famous for being the book capital of the world. They hold conventions there every summer, it's only just finished, and people come here from all over the world to browse through the books, some of them quite old and rare, that they put on display outside all the little bookshops. I was there last year and spent all day browsing through the books - I love reading, you see. Anyway, I remember one little shop that seemed to specialise on the esoteric writings of a number of philosophical traditions."

"Esoteric?" asked Ron.

"That means mysterious, obscure, arcane, secret," said Hermione, "Go on Bethan."

"Well there were a lot of old books and tracts there about the Hermetic tradition. I saw one book called...now what was it... oh yes, The Corpus Hermeticum. This formed the basis of the Hermetic school of thought that swept throughout Europe during the Renaissance. I remember that it's split into two main parts, philosophy and alchemy. Perhaps you can find something in one of the books in that little shop - I can give you the directions."

Hermione turned excitedly towards Sirius and Ceri, "Can we?"

"I don't see why not," said Sirius, "But how are we going to get there? We can't just Apparate into the town you know."

"There's a bus that runs every hour," said Ifor, "You can catch it by the bus stop at the bottom of the lane about a mile away."

Ron suddenly shot up from his seat, "Yes! Can we go by bus? I've never been on a Muggle bus before. Dad's going to be so jealous when I tell him about it."

"But we haven't got any Muggle money," said Remus, "How are we going to pay, and for that matter, how are we going to pay for any books we find?"

"Don't worry about that," said Ifor, "We can lend you the money. You can give it back to us when you visit us next."

"I'm sure that the headmaster will only be too pleased to fund the purchase of some new books for the Muggle section," said Professor Flitwick, "From what Bethan said, they'll be a valuable addition to the school library."

"Well as long as you don't mind Ifor," said Sirius, "But don't be surprised if an owl brings the money back to you."

"That was bloody amazing!" said Ron as he watched the little bus pull away from the main bus station in Hay-on-Wye. "It's a lot smoother than the Knight Bus - I bet Ernie Prang would like a go at driving it."

The group walked out of the station and stood at the side of the main road, looking at the winding streets that made up the town. "I think it's this way," said Hermione, "Down the street on left."

They walked down the street, passing many little bookshops before they came to the one that Bethan had told them about, "You four go inside and we'll stay out here," said Ceri as she looked around for any sign of Death Eaters.

The bell above the shop door tinkled as Hermione walked inside, quickly followed by the others. She stopped and looked around the old bookshop, a glazed look in her eyes, "It's like Santa's grotto in here," she breathed, "Look at all these old books!"

Her three friends grinned, but wondered how they would ever get her back out of the place, "Perhaps you should ask the owner if he has a spare room for you to sleep in Hermi," said Ron.

"Humph. I can think of far worse places to be Ron Weasley," she replied, "Come on, let's ask the owner where the books on Hermes are."

She walked up to the counter in the middle of the shop and approached an aging little man, who was bent over reading a magazine, "Yes my dear," he said, "Can I help you?"

"We're looking for the section on Hermetic Philosophy," she said.

"Ah, studying the old traditions of esoteric thought at school are you?" he said, pointing towards the back of the shop, "Admirable, I must say. There's a large bookcase down the far end. Walk straight through, then turn right and then left again. You can't miss it."

They followed the old man's directions and soon stood in front of a very large bookcase, its shelves crammed from top to bottom with some very old-looking books. Harry, Ron and Ginny stood behind Hermione as she browsed the titles, every so often pulling a book from a shelf and handing it to her friends. After half an hour, Hermione turned round, "That's it I think."

"Can we go now, Hermi?" asked Ron, who was struggling to balance the pile of books he was holding, "My arms are killing me!"

Harry and Ginny were faring no better, their arms were full of books too, "This is going to cost a fortune," said Harry, "I hope Dumbledore's in a good mood when you tell him how much you've spent."

"It's all in a good cause Harry," she replied, "The headmaster won't mind, I'm sure."

After she'd paid the very large bill, they joined the others outside the shop and spread the load of books between them. They then walked towards the outskirts of the town and found a sheltered spot in among some trees to Apparate back to Hogsmeade.

Hermione had been correct in her assessment of Professor Dumbledore's reaction to the amount of money she'd spent on the books. He chuckled with some amusement as he thought of the strategies he could use to squeeze extra funding out of Cornelius Fudge. The next day, he sent Hagrid to Gringotts bank in Diagon Alley to change some wizard cash into Muggle money, and send it by owl back to Ifor in Llanmad.

That evening, Sirius, Charlie, Ceri and Nadine sat at a table in The Three Broomsticks in Hogsmeade, taking a welcome break from their travels throughout Europe. There was no such break for the four youngsters, however. Hermione had bullied them into spending the day at the school library, making a start on reading the large pile of books they'd purchased. She knew that it might be quite a while before they found anything useful in the old tracts.

"So what's happening with you and Sirius?" asked Nadine as she and Ceri sat watching Sirius and Charlie as they played wizarding darts.

"Nothing Nadine," she replied, "He hasn't said anything, but I think Sirius is struggling a little. He's been a bit distant ever since Fudge cleared his name publicly. I know it might sound a bit odd, but I think that he'd become used to living on the edge, having to remain hidden from the wizarding world, and now that he's a free man again, I think he's finding it hard to adjust to being 'normal'."

"Hmmm. You could be right, Ceri. Sixteen years a prisoner and then a fugitive is a long time. And he did lose the best part of his youth. I really feel for him."

"He keeps up a good front," said Ceri, "But he can't fool me all the time. We've rarely been out of each other's company lately, and I can't help but pick up on some of his emotions."

"And what about your emotions, Ceri? Have you had any change of heart in starting a relationship? You seemed to be wavering when we spoke back in France."

"I don't know, Nadine. I really don't. Sometimes I... well for instance, when we took a break for lunch on the old Roman road the day before yesterday, I looked at him and saw him standing on his own, just staring blankly at the ground. I felt his confused emotions, and that's when I knew that all wasn't well with him. I felt then... I felt like going up to him and holding him close, wanting to sooth away his inner struggle, if only for just a moment. But at other times, I feel that I just don't want to get involved. Can you understand what I'm trying to say?"

Nadine grinned, "I think that Sirius isn't the only one who's confused. You seem to be fighting a battle of your own, Ceri. I felt the same way as you when I first met Charlie - exactly the same way. And look at us now - I wouldn't change it for the world. But it takes time to sort out your thoughts and feelings. Just give it time, Ceri. I'm sure that things will work out right for you both."

"You're assuming that Sirius has feelings for me, Nadine. I think he may have been interested to start with, but I did make it clear that I didn't want anything like that to get in the way of our professional relationship. I don't think he sees me in the same way any more. I think he just sees me now as a good friend. Nothing more."

"I wouldn't be so sure, Ceri. I've seen the way he looks at you sometimes, and believe me, I don't think he sees you as just a friend at times like that."

They were interrupted when Madam Rosmerta brought over their dinner, and Sirius and Charlie sat down, arguing good naturedly over which one had actually won their darts match. It wasn't always clear who the winner was in wizarding darts.

Back in the school library, things were not going well.

"This is bloody terrible," said Ron with disgust, "Can't they write proper English?"

"Ron," said Hermione patiently, "These are very old books, and the English is a bit archaic. That's how they wrote back in those days. You just have to be patient and read a lot slower than you would a Quidditch book."

"At this rate we'll be months reading all these books," said Ginny, "And we've got to go to Diagon Alley tomorrow. School starts back in a few days don't forget."

"Have any of you found anything interesting yet?" asked Harry.

"Interesting!" exclaimed Ron, "This is the driest stuff I've ever read!"

Hermione looked askance at Ron, "It's all interesting Harry. But I haven't found anything that can help us yet."

"Well that's it," said Ron, closing his book with a loud slam, "Dinner time. We can call it a night, I think."

"Well you might," said Hermione, "But I'm coming straight back up after dinner. What about you two?"

"I'm with Ron," said Harry, "My eyes are stinging after all that reading."

"I'll come back here with you Hermi," said Ginny, "But I don't know if I'll get much reading done. I'm finding it very difficult to understand what they're saying, so I find I've got to read a passage about three times before I even get the gist of it."

"Thanks Ginny," said Hermione rising from her seat, and then looking across at the two boys, "Well come on then! I wouldn't want to be accused of keeping you starved."

Voldemort walked slowly down from the altar towards his waiting servants, deep in thought as he read yet again what the Guardian had told him to write down. He didn't recognise the language used in the spells he'd been given, but had written them down phonetically as well so that he'd remember how to pronounce them.

"Well done Crabbe," he said as he reached the bottom of the steps, "It was a stroke of genius to suggest using the Necronomicon as the talisman. You will be amply rewarded when we are in full control."

He then told his servants what the Guardian had said about the Disc of Gates and the ancient spells needed to use it. He breathed deeply, visualising his coming triumph, "No one will be able to stand in my way when I have the Disc of Gates, not the Anima Summas, not Dumbledore, no one. And that time is soon approaching. Lucius, we will now return to my cave, where I want to study these ancient spells and commit them to memory. Then I want you to select ten of our best Death Eaters to accompany us five to find the Disc of Gates and the Tablet of Spells. It may take weeks and weeks to find the places where they are hidden out in the barren desert, so get them to prepare enough supplies to last us.

"And then, before we leave on our journey, I want you to arrange a meeting with my chief lieutenant in America. I want the both of you to arrange for a campaign of terror in both countries. Avery, Nott and Goyle can handle things this end while we're away. I don't want anything major to happen until I have the Disc of Gates, but I want the wizarding communities to shake with fear."

He led the four Death Eaters out of the Temple of Gates and back to the place where they would be transported to the surface. He strode along the ancient avenues with great vigour and purpose; sure in the knowledge that the time of the Dark Side was at hand, sure that his destiny was about to be met when he would establish a new world order and lead it into a great Dark future.

"Welcome students new and old. Welcome to a new school year at Hogwarts." The sorting ceremony had been completed, as had the feast, and Professor Dumbledore was just starting his welcome speech to the student body. He had decided to leave his announcements until after the students had eaten - he didn't want to ruin their appetite.

"First, let me tell our newest students about the standing rules of the school. The Forbidden Forest is still forbidden to all students, and Mr Filch will still frown on after-hours exploration of the school corridors. Now as you all know, the return of Lord Voldemort has

made the times we live in very dangerous and unstable. It is no longer safe anywhere in the wizarding world, and even this school was attacked earlier in the year. It is with deep regret, therefore, that I have to make the following announcements."

As Dumbledore paused to take a sip of water, the sound of whispering filled the Great Hall as the students speculated on what was to come.

"The inter-school Quidditch match with Salem has had to be cancelled for this year. America, as well as this country, now find themselves in troubled times. I have also felt it prudent to cancel all house Quidditch matches for the year; it is now unsafe for large groups of students to remain exposed outside the school building. When the weather permits, small groups of students, accompanied by Sirius Black, Ceri Jones and some of the professors, will be allowed outside. Your head of house will arrange a suitable schedule. Finally, I'm afraid that like last year, visits to Hogsmeade will be forbidden."

Dumbledore waited patiently while the groans and agonised whispers of the students died down.

"But on a lighter note, some of the professors and I are working on a plan to construct an indoor area so that we can hold some events inside. I'll let you all know when our plans are finalised. I sincerely hope that I will be able to review my decisions in a far better light next year. I know you will all want to join me in wishing the Anima Summas and their helpers god speed in their attempts to make the world a far better place in which to live. Now it is time for bed. Goodnight everyone."

Harry, Hermione, Ron and Ginny were mobbed as the students of all houses made their way to their common rooms - except for Slytherin, of course. They all wanted to know how their quest was progressing and when they would confront 'You Know Who'.

In the Gryffindor common room, the four were brought up to date on their fan mail, "There've been simply hundreds and hundreds of messages for you all," said Clare Bryant, "Perhaps tomorrow Colin and I can tell you what some of them said and what we've told them in reply. There were a few rude ones though," she said coyly, "Especially for Ron and Ginny."

"What did they say?" asked Ron, his interest piqued.

Colin Creevey looked a bit embarrassed as he glanced at Ginny, Hermione and Clare, "Uh, I'll tell you later Ron. Some of them were a bit... well... personal shall we say."

"Fred and George aren't going to be too pleased," said Ginny, "They were hoping to open a joke shop in Hogsmeade next week, but they won't be able to now, not with Hogsmeade visits banned. I'll send them an owl in the morning."

The next morning after breakfast, Clare and Colin dragged the four up to the room where Harry had practiced his Animagus transformation - Professor McGonagall had allowed them to use it as their base of operations. They were stunned at the piles of letters neatly stacked on a large table in the middle of the room.

Colin walked over and pointed to the letters, "These are for Harry," he said pointing to a large pile on the far end of the table, "These are for Hermione," he pointed to a pile roughly the same size as Harry's, "These are Ginny's," he pointed to a slightly larger pile.

"And these are all Ron's," said Clare as she gestured towards the largest pile on the table.

"Have you answered all these?" asked Hermione.

"Yes," said Colin, "Well, except for just a few. We showed them to Professor McGonagall because we didn't really know what to say in reply, but she just laughed, went red and said that we'd better show them to you."

"There aren't any of those for Harry and Hermione," said Clare, "but there's five for Ginny and about twenty for Ron."

"Come on then," said Ron, "Let's have a look at them."

"Uh, I'd better show them to you Ron," said Colin looking slightly flustered, "You show Ginny's letters Clare."

Ron sat at the table, and Harry pulled up a chair next to him, while Ginny and Hermione sat at the other end of the table to look at Ginny's five letters. Colin picked the first letter off the pile and opened it, glancing at the contents before passing it to Ron.

The first thing that both Ron and Harry noticed was the waft of perfume that struck their senses. Harry grinned as Ron slowly read the letter.

'Dear Ron,

I saw your photo in our wizarding newspaper the other day and I just haven't been able to get you out of my mind ever since.

You're so brave and strong to be helping the Anima Summas save the world, and all my friends are talking about you.

Do you think we could get together sometime soon? I'd just love to run my hands through all that red hair. Please write soon.

Your adoring admirer

Mandy'

Ron glanced at the address at the top of the letter, "Phew, maybe it's true what they say about California girls."

Harry laughed, "What are you going to tell her, Ron? It's a long way to go for a date, don't you think?"

Ron's reply was drowned out by a loud shout from the other end of the table. They looked to see a red-faced Ginny and a grinning, but equally red-faced Hermione, "Well! What a bloody nerve!" shouted Ginny.

"What was in that letter Ginny?" asked Harry.

"Never you mind Harry," said Ginny as she crumpled up the letter and stuffed it into her pocket.

Harry turned back to see that Ron was reading the next letter. He had an odd sort of expression on his face as he muttered, "Is that physically possible?"

Ron and Ginny continued to open their x-rated letters and when they'd finished, told Clare and Colin what to say in reply. Ginny had to spell some of the words she wanted to include in her replies; Clare, still being very young and innocent, had never heard them spoken before.

Classes started that afternoon and it couldn't have been a worse start to the school year - double Potions with the Slytherins. Everybody was surprised, however, when Snape allowed Harry and Hermione to sit together, albeit at the front of the class. He also allowed Ron to sit next to Neville. But if the Gryffindors thought that Snape had mellowed during the summer, they were in for one big surprise.

"During your first five years we covered most of the simpler Potions and brewing methods," said Snape darkly, "Your sixth year classes will be difficult and if you had problems before, you can expect a lot more this year," he paused as he looked towards the Gryffindor end of the room and skewered Ron and Neville with one of his deadly stares, "So some of you had better inject a healthy dose of intelligence into your feeble brain cells."

This had the Slytherins in stitches, most of them pointing and gesturing towards Neville and Ron in particular.

"However," continued Snape, "I will start today with one of the more simple sixth year potions procedures. In the past, you have brewed your potions simply by lighting the burner underneath your cauldron and letting it bubble away until it was finished. But during your final two years you will be brewing potions that require a variable amount of heat. Do you know what that is.... Longbottom?"

Snape jabbed his finger at Neville and glared at him, as poor Neville jumped and sat stiffly in his seat, "I ... uhI ..." said Neville, too nervous to answer coherently.

"I thought not," said Snape grinning slyly, "Five points from Gryffindor. It means, Longbottom, that you have to control the temperature of the potions through several phases of the brewing procedure," he turned and looked at the class in general, "You will have to learn how to control the flame with your wands, using a number of charms that I am about to give you. Now watch carefully."

He lit the burner on his desk and pulled his wand from his cloak. He looked up at the class as he pointed his wand at the flame, "I will start by giving you four of the more common charms to control the heat of the flame. The first one diminishes the heat."

He turned his attention back to the flame and said, "TEPESCO"

A light blue beam shot from his wand and covered the flame, which decreased in size and power, "That charm serves to cool the flame. ADAUGEO"

This time the flame grew brighter and more powerful, "And that one serves to make the flame hotter. Now the next charm is used with the first two to give you more control over the degree

by which the heat is increased or decreased. Watch closely. TEPESCO SENSIM," he said softly.

The flame gradually grew cooler, ever so slowly, "ADAU GEO SENSIM," Snape shouted and the flame gradually, but rapidly, became hotter and more powerful.

"Can you tell me what just happened....Potter?"

"Uh...the louder you say the charm, SENSIM, the faster the increase or decrease in heat, and conversely, the quieter you say it, the slower the effect."

"Hmmm, that's quite correct Potter," said Snape looking slightly disappointed. "And when the heat reaches the desired temperature, you simply end the charm in the normal way. Now the last charm I'll give you today will send the flame to its highest power and heat. Watch ... MAXIME."

This time, Snape's flame roared to its highest heat and power, "Have you all got that? Right, now we'll see if you've learnt anything. Longbottom, come to the front of the class."

Neville again jumped and groaned as he got up from his seat. "Go on, Neville," whispered Ron, "You can do it."

"Listen carefully Longbottom," said Snape as he started chopping up some potions ingredients, "I'll do the difficult part of this potion. All you have to do is brew it in the correct manner." He put the chopped ingredients into the cauldron and poured some foul-smelling liquid on top of them, "Firstly, you have to apply a very small amount of heat for one hour precisely. Then you have to very slowly increase the heat for fifteen minutes until the flame is white hot. Then you have to apply the maximum heat for ten minutes, and finally gradually reduce the heat to nothing for the next five minutes. Got it?"

Neville looked nervously at Snape and nodded. Snape grinned evilly, "If you do this correctly, then after one and a half hours the room will be filled with the most delicate of aromas, and it will fill your classmates with a sense of well-being, which will last the rest of the day. If you brew the potion incorrectly, the most disgusting smell will fill the room and will remain in everyone's nostrils for the remainder of the day - and they certainly won't have a feeling of well-being," he gestured impatiently to a very apprehensive Neville, "Begin."

Neville began well, lighting the flame on the burner and reducing it to its lowest level. Then he sat back down and looked at his watch to time the first part of the brew. After an hour he went back to the cauldron on Snape's desk and tried to remember what the professor had said. He pointed his wand at the flame and said, "ADAU GEO SENSIM." The flame and heat began to slowly increase and after ten minutes it was white hot. Neville then shouted, "MAXIME," and sent the flame to its highest level. Neville stood beside the cauldron looking at his watch and after fifteen minutes, he pointed his wand at the flame and said quite loudly, "TEPESCO SENSIM."

After a further five minutes, the flame went out and Neville went back to his seat and waited nervously for something to happen. Hermione had spotted Neville's error and whispered to Harry and Ron to get ready to make a quick dash from the room. Snape had also spotted the mistake and was now standing by the door with his hand on the doorknob. Suddenly, thick brown smoke started to rise from the cauldron and drift towards the sitting students.

"Uugggghhhh," said the Slytherins in the front row as the smoke drifted over their heads. They turned towards Neville and started shouting abuse of the most hurtful kind. By this time, Harry, Ron and Hermione had reached the door, which stood open after Snape had stepped outside. The Gryffindors, who had been passed the warning to make a quick exit, quickly followed them. Most of them got outside before the potion affected them, but the Slytherins were not so lucky. Every one of them glared with malevolence at the Gryffindors.

Snape allowed all the students to pass except for Neville. He handed him a piece of parchment and quickly pushed him back into the classroom shouting, "You made this mess so you can clear it up. The instructions are on that piece of parchment. If this room is not useable after half an hour, you can expect a long detention. Fifteen points from Gryffindor!"

Fred and George sat in The Three Broomsticks that evening staring despondently into their mugs of Butterbeer. They had received Ginny's owl that morning about the Hogsmeade ban and were now trying to decide what to do.

"Zonko must have known that something like this would happen when he sold us his shop," said George, "I thought it was so cheep because he was nearly broke after the ban last year."

"We sunk all our money into that shop," said Fred, "and it looks like we'll have to close it before it even opens. The sooner Harry and Hermione get 'You Know Who' the better!"

"We'll have to look for jobs until things get back to normal," sighed George.

Five minutes later, Fred sat bolt upright in his seat, a spark of inspiration in his eye, "Maybe not, George," he looked at his brother intensely, "If Mohammed can't go to the mountain, then perhaps the mountain should go to Mohammed."

George looked at his brother as if he'd gone mad, "What's Mohammed got to do with it? And who the hell is Mohammed anyway?"

"It's just a thing that Muggles say, George," he replied, "Dad told me about it a couple of weeks ago - he thought it was very profound. And how right he is!"

"Care to explain what you've got in mind?" asked George.

"It's simple George. If the students can't come to our shop in Hogsmeade, then we'll just have to go to the students in Hogwarts. What do you think?"

George looked with narrowed eyes at Fred, "Brilliant Fred. We can use the tunnel in Honeydukes sweetshop and get into Hogwarts that way. Ginny'll give us the latest password to the Gryffindor common room and we can creep in there after all the students have finished dinner. We can take some samples of our latest jokes and a list of the older ones."

"Yes," said Fred, "We can take orders from the students and deliver them the next evening. And by then, the word would have got out to the other houses, and you can bet your life that they won't want to miss out on all the fun. I wouldn't be surprised if Ginny'll have the other passwords ready so that we can go to the common rooms of all the other houses."

"I don't know about the Slytherins Fred. They wouldn't want to buy from us of all people. But there again, I don't know if I'd want to sell anything to them either."

"When it comes to business George, you've got to swallow your pride. Let's see what happens shall we? If we get their password we'll go. Right?"

"I suppose so," said George dubiously.

"Come on then," said Fred, "Let's get back to the shop and send an owl to Ginny. The sooner we get started on this the better."

Chapter 5 Camp Merlin

The tiny hamlet of Much Fernley could not be found on any map of the U.K. It was deep in the countryside of Norfolk in East Anglia and went unnoticed except for the five wizarding families who lived there. Two of those families weren't at home on the night it happened. One family, a witch, wizard and their two children, was still away on a late holiday on the Isle of Skye, and the other, a young wizarding couple, was staying with friends that night in London. The other three families weren't so lucky.

Nott, who revelled in the pain and suffering he and his Death Eaters inflicted, stalked along the dark and quiet country lane that led to the little hamlet. He glanced behind to check that his team of thirty of his best men he'd selected for the raid still followed in his tracks. He stopped and held up his arm to halt the procession when he spotted a light up ahead. He then gestured for his men to move quietly and slowly towards the group of five cottages.

Fifty yards from the hamlet, Nott quietly ordered half his men to move around behind the cottages - he didn't want anyone to escape. He waited for a few minutes so that they could get into position and then ordered the rest of the Death Eaters to move in closer and spread out along the front of the houses. He noticed that two of the cottages on the right-hand side were in darkness but the lights coming from the others showed that they were occupied. He lit his wand and raised it above his head, looking along the line of dark-cloaked figures to make sure they were ready and waiting for his signal to begin the attack.

Nott extinguished his wand, the signal to attack, and flung the first curse at the cottage in the middle of the five, "*INCENDIO*" he shouted and the front door of the cottage started to burn, the flames reaching up almost to the roof. The other Death Eaters also flung curses, blasting and disintegrating the windows, doors and stone walls of all five cottages.

Craig and Metzela Kilcline sat reading in the cottage on the left-hand side. Craig had only recently retired and was still struggling to adjust to a more leisurely lifestyle. He and his wife were of the old school and had never bothered to learn to Apparate, but if they had it could have saved their lives. The first thing that made them aware that all was not right in the world was the window, which disintegrated and collapsed on the floor only five yards away. Metzela struggled to lift her large bulk from the easy chair she was sitting on while Craig looked out apprehensively through the hole where the window had once been. He pulled his wife close as she joined him, and stared fearfully at the line of black-cloaked figures that laughed insanely as they continued to fling curses at the houses.

Bill and Nesta Wright, the young couple who lived next door to the Kilclines, knew how to Apparate but they didn't do so. They were frantically trying to move the debris that had fallen from the ceiling, away from the bottom of the stairs, trying to get to their two young children who were asleep upstairs. Nesta started screaming and Bill roared in terrified frustration as a curse crashed through the window and blasted away the top part of the stairway, sending it crashing to the ground and leaving two very frightened little children isolated.

Stan and Betty Jones, the middle-aged couple who lived in the centre of the little hamlet, also knew how to Apparate but they didn't get a chance to escape. They were very quickly overcome by the smoke and flames from Nott's curses and collapsed to the floor. They were the first to die that night.

Nott shouted to his men to close in on the houses and he quickly followed them, entering the Kilclines' cottage by blasting away the door. He and five of his men moved quickly from room to room and finally found the terrified couple hiding behind their bed upstairs.

"Stand up!" shouted Nott, "Where are the people in the two cottages at the end?"

"They aren't here; they're away for the night," Craig answered in a trembling voice while Metzela, tears streaming down her face, clung desperately to his arm, "What do you want here? Why are you doing this?"

Nott laughed and pointed his wand at the man, "*CRUCIO*."

After he'd extracted his evil enjoyment from the sight of Craig rolling on the floor in agony, he turned to the watching Death Eaters, "Finish them."

Five beams of green light struck the couple and Nott watched with satisfaction, as they lay unmoving, their faces bearing the unmistakable mark of the killing curse. Nott then led his men out of the cottage and into the one next door, where he found five of his men holding the struggling Bill and Nesta tightly. He could hear the terrified cries of the two children trapped upstairs, but ignored them as he approached the young couple.

"You can't get away with this, you bastard!" yelled Bill.

Nott grinned malevolently, "And what makes you think that? Who's going to help you now - the Anima Summas? Don't make me laugh, they'll soon be a mere memory when the Dark Lord gets to them." He gestured for his men to release the couple and then pointed his wand at Bill.

"Please no," cried Nesta, "Please don't hurt my babies. They haven't done anything to you."

Nott laughed as he sent the killing curse that snuffed out the life of Bill Wright, and Nesta soon followed her husband, hit by multiple Flipendus curses from the surrounding Death Eaters. Nott led his men out of the cottage and walked towards the middle one, which by this time had been almost completely consumed by the flames. He shouted for the men guarding the back of the hamlet to join them, and then ordered all his team to destroy Bill and Nesta's cottage, where the pitiful cries of the two children could still be heard. After ten minutes, the cottage was nothing more than a pile of rubble, the roof and upstairs floor having collapsed completely.

Nott cackled manically as he raised his wand and sent the Dark Mark into the night sky.

Much Fernley was not the only scene of death and destruction that night. Across the Atlantic Ocean, a group of fifty Death Eaters led by one of Voldemort's American lieutenants, who was almost as crazy as Nott, attacked a small Muggle community of forty inhabitants. The little town in a remote part of Texas was added to the list of atrocities carried out by the Dark Side when it was almost completely destroyed, only five people surviving the attack. For the first time in many years, the Dark Mark appeared in the sky over American soil.

It was with heavy hearts that the squad from the Magical Congress altered the memories of the five survivors, and the Muggle newspapers the next morning carried the lead story of a

devastating gas explosion that had wiped out the little town. The wizarding newspapers, however, told the grim truth.

"This is a terrible business Albus," said Fudge as he shook his head sadly, "Eight people in the U.K. and thirty-five in America - terrible."

Fudge sat in the headmaster's office, staring across at a worried-looking Dumbledore. He'd decided to visit Hogwarts to find out how the Anima Summas' quest was progressing. Despite his assurances that everything was being done to recruit and train more aurors, and the Anima Summas were still developing their powers in pursuit of the second quest, the magical press and public were getting frightened and wanted to know when the dark times would be brought to an end.

"The four kids are spending as much time as they can on their research Cornelius," said Dumbledore, "but they can't neglect their schoolwork. I'd love to give them leave to spend all their time on the quest, but their studies are an important part of their development, and just as important as their research. Hermione hit the nail right on the head when she said their quests are being made difficult by the Light for exactly the same reason - they are all very young and have to go through the process of growing up, albeit at an accelerated rate, before they'll be ready to face Voldemort."

"I know Albus, you don't need to convince me. And deep down, the magical community knows it as well, but they're very worried and frightened - not the best mental state in which to listen to logic and reason, but I can't say I blame them. I've done what I can to try to minimise the dangers by banning any large gatherings. I've even cancelled the professional Quidditch leagues for the duration of the conflict, but I won't be able to give adequate protection to the small outlying communities until we get enough aurors trained up."

"Talking of that, Cornelius, how's he getting on?"

"I must say it was a stroke of genius on Marcus Heatherington-Jones' part to suggest we get our old experienced aurors out of retirement to conduct the training. And yes, he's doing very well indeed - I have to thank you for persuading him to take on the leadership of our training operation. Marcus tells me that things are a lot better now, we're getting a lot more recruits and their training is right on the button - they'll be far better prepared for what they'll have to face. I'm even thinking of pulling in some of our front line aurors, when the opportunity presents itself of course, to go through the new training program. We need as many well-trained aurors out there as we can get."

"Do you fancy a spot of lunch before you go back to London, Cornelius? You're very welcome to join us all down in the Great Hall."

"Yes, thank you Albus. I think I'll take you up on that. And I can have a chat with the four youngsters - you know, let them know that the ministry's right behind them in what their doing."

Oliver Wood lay on the damp ground behind a bramble bush, looking out into the small clearing in the middle of the wood. He waited patiently for something to happen. He'd laid down a number of clear indications along the path that wound through the densely packed conifers, and hoped that the Death Eaters on his trail would follow them right to the place where he lay in wait.

As he kept a wary eye on the spot where the path entered the clearing, he thought back to what he was doing just two weeks ago - it seemed a lifetime away now. He'd been elated at being promoted to first-choice Keeper for first division Quidditch team Puddlemoor United, but his elation was quickly dashed when all Quidditch matches were cancelled. He was angry at the reason for the suspension of the leagues, and he'd joined the ministry as an auror, hoping to help things get back to normal so that he could resume his Quidditch career.

His attention was brought back into sharp focus when he heard a slight sound coming from just inside the trees on the opposite side of the clearing. He tried to make himself as inconspicuous as possible, hugging the earth and raising his head only slightly to look beneath the bramble. Then he saw them - two dark-cloaked figures emerged from the path and walked cautiously into the middle of the clearing. Oliver remained where he was, not moving a muscle, and waited.

For two minutes, the Death Eaters stood in the clearing looking around intently and listening for any sound that would tell them in which direction their quarry had gone. After another fruitless minute, one of the men called quietly over to his right-hand side and another dark-cloaked figure walked through the line of trees and joined his two companions. Oliver grinned to himself - he thought they'd try something like that to flush him out. The Death Eaters started walking to Oliver's left towards the spot where the path continued through the wood.

After they'd walked past the place where he lay hidden, he silently rose and stepped out into the clearing behind them. He pulled his wand from his cloak and shouted, "Freeze. Don't move a muscle. Throw down your wands - you're nicked!"

The Death Eaters stopped in their tracks and stood still. Then they turned around and suddenly flung themselves onto the ground in three separate directions, pulling out their wands from their black robes. Oliver looked shocked at what was happening and sent off three Expelliarmus charms in quick succession. One of them found its mark and disarmed the Death Eater it hit, but the other two missed, allowing the Death Eaters to throw spells of their own.

The beams of light caught Oliver solidly in the chest and sent him tumbling to the ground, laughing insanely as he felt the acute itching of the Rictusempra charms. One of the black-cloaked figures walked up to Oliver and smiled as he looked down at him. He lifted his wand, pointed it at the helpless young man and said, "*FINITE INCANTATEM.*"

The extreme itching stopped and Oliver rose slowly to his feet, a wry grin on his face. He turned as the impressive figure of Alastor 'Mad Eye' Moody limped slowly into the clearing, his magical eye revolving insanely in its socket, "No, No, No Oliver! Haven't you learned what I taught you? You've just spoiled one of the best set-ups I've ever seen from a trainee auror. You do everything right, and then suddenly throw all your good work out the window by showing yourself and giving the advantage to the enemy! I know it's not cricket to attack an opponent from behind, but there were three of them and one of you, and if they'd been real

Death Eaters you'd now be lying there dead! You just can't afford to give a Death Eater any chance at all. Believe me, he wouldn't give you one."

"Sorry sir," said Oliver looking downcast.

"Sorry, my arse! Don't apologise to me - apologise to yourself! You're the one who'd have paid the penalty."

'Mad Eye' looked at Oliver sternly for a few moments and then his expression softened, "Listen laddie, you're one of the best trainees we've got at the moment. Don't be too despondent, almost all trainees get caught by my wily three former colleagues way before you were. You did really well, and that's what made me so mad - you let yourself down at the last hurdle. But I know you'll learn from this - I don't think you'll make the same mistake again."

"No sir, I certainly won't," said Oliver gratefully.

"Right. You'd better get back to camp," said Mad Eye, his eye suddenly gleaming unnaturally, "There's someone there who's looking forward to meeting you again. She's just been transferred over from camp Morgana today, and I think she needs to see a friendly face to ease her nervousness. I'll see you and the others in the morning; I've got one of those damn planning meetings with Marcus this evening."

Oliver grinned at the famous old veteran and his legendary dislike for anything official that took him from what he saw as his primary hands-on task of turning out only the best calibre aurors. He walked back to the training camp swapping good-natured banter with the three ex-aurors, deriding them for being suckered into his trap, but being derided for his lapse right at the end of the exercise.

After a while, they walked out of the woods and into a large clearing that housed the auror training camp. Oliver waved as the three aurors walked over towards their quarters in the hastily constructed ramshackle building at one end of the clearing, which served as 'Mad Eye' Moody's training headquarters. The first thing he'd done after agreeing to take on the job, was to move the training facility from the more comfortable environs in the Forest of Dean to more realistic surroundings in the remote countryside of Mid Wales. He'd established two camps here about five miles apart, and the wily old dog constantly set one against the other, extolling the virtues and superior prowess of one camp over the other. Camp Merlin was the one in which Oliver was placed and camp Morgana was the other.

Oliver glanced along the row of tents that housed the trainees, looking for a familiar face, but he couldn't see one. He was intrigued by 'Mad Eye's message about an old acquaintance, and wondered who it could be. He shrugged and thought that he'd have to wait until dinner that evening before finding out the identity of the mysterious girl.

He walked over to his tent and pulled back the flap, wanting to lie down for a little while after his earlier exertions. He walked into the tent and pulled up dead, staring at the very pretty girl that sat on his bed, looking nervously up at him.

"Hello Oliver," she said.

"Katie!" he exclaimed, "Katie Bell! I haven't seen you for... what, two years? How are you and what are you doing here of all places?"

Katie jumped up from the bed and stood grinning at her former Quidditch captain, "I'm fine Oliver. I've just been transferred here from camp Morgana. I'm a trainee auror, like you. Uh, I hope you don't mind me waiting here for you, but things are a bit strange here and I was feeling a bit... well you know."

"I do know, Katie. I felt exactly the same when I got here," He stared unashamedly at Katie, marvelling at how much she'd grown up since he saw her last - then she was just a girl, but now she'd turned into a woman - and what a woman! He had an overwhelming urge to ease her obvious feelings of vulnerability, wanted to make her feel comfortable, but he looked at the ground, suddenly stuck for the right words to say.

Then he looked back up into her bright blue eyes, taking the easy option, "How are Angelina and Alicia? What are they doing since they left school?"

"Alicia's working at the ministry in Arthur Weasley's department and Angelina's there too, working in the Magical Games and Sports Department. That's where I was until these attacks started and our workload dropped off quite dramatically. I felt I was just wasting my time there with very little to do, so I decided to try to help out in the field. Harry and his friends are doing their bit for the cause - a lot more than their bit - so I thought I'd try to do something worthwhile too."

"Yes, Harry's certainly got his hands full with this Anima Summa thing. I suppose I envy him in a way, you know, being right there in the middle of everything, but we can't all be Harry can we. I just hope that he and his friends get through this in one piece. But Katie, I hope you don't mind me saying this but aren't you a little... young to be putting your head on the block?"

Katie's eyes flashed dangerously, "Everybody's telling me that Oliver - my parents, my friends, but I thought you'd understand what I'm trying to do."

Oliver tried to backtrack, "Oh I do understand Katie. It's just that this game is so... dangerous."

Katie walked quickly out of the tent, her eyes flashing in annoyance. Before walking back to her own tent, she put her head back inside, "Well I didn't thing this was going to be a bloody picnic Oliver."

Oliver looked out of his tent with a sinking feeling in his stomach, "Katie.... Katie," he shouted after the girl striding with indignant purpose along the row of tents.

'Well,' Oliver thought to himself, 'I certainly put my foot in it there. But at least I managed to do one thing for her - she doesn't look a bit nervous now.'

"Sshhhh," whispered George as he and Fred eased their way from behind the statue of the humpbacked witch and onto the third floor at Hogwarts. They'd just come down the secret tunnel from Hogsmeade with a sack of their latest jokes and pranks and a bundle of order forms, which they hoped to distribute among the students. It was quite late and all the students should now be back inside their common rooms after the evening meal. They walked up several flights of stairs, keeping a wary eye out for any of the professors and ghosts. They

didn't want a run-in with Peeves, in particular, as they moved slowly towards the Gryffindor common room.

They were about to tell the Fat Lady the password that Ginny'd owed to them when Fred felt a familiar prickling on the back of his neck. He quickly pulled George behind a suit of armour and waited. He was grateful that his early warning mechanism was still alive and kicking when Peeves drifted down the corridor and stopped a few yards beyond their hiding place. The ghost turned around, his eyes full of suspicion, as he felt that something was not quite right.

"If I didn't know better, I'd swear that those Weasley twins are slinking about tonight," he breathed to himself, "I can feel them." He looked around but wasn't able to spot the hidden two. Then he shrugged his wispy shoulders, cackled, and drifted back up the corridor.

"Phew, that was close," said George, "I'm glad your senses are still on full alert."

They crept back to the portrait of the Fat Lady and said the password - chocolate frogs - and the portrait slid back, but not before the Fat Lady gave them a very odd look. They stepped into their old common room to see it full of students, and they spotted Ginny sitting with her three friends at the far side of the room.

Fred strode across the room with the sack of jokes slung over his shoulder, "Ho, ho, ho," he said in a jovial voice, "Roll up to see the latest marvels invented by Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes, brought to you by yours truly and George, masters of the improbable, inventors of the impossible."

The twins walked over to the large table in the middle of the common room and emptied their sack of goodies onto it. All the students crowded around and started to hurl question after question about what each of the objects on the table did. Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ginny joined the excited throng and tried to get to the table to see what was there, but in the end they just gave up and sat back down, waiting for the crowd to thin out a bit. But it didn't, at least not for quite a while, and when the four eventually got a look in, there was just one object left on the table, together with a stack of completed order forms and two grinning, red headed entrepreneurs.

"That was amazing," said George as he checked the order form just given him by Colin Creevey, "We've sold everything except this." He pointed to the object on the table - it looked just like a small pebble, grey in colour.

"We had twenty of these when we came in," said a delighted Fred.

"What is it?" asked Harry.

"It's a Whammo," said George, "You put it on the floor where you know your intended target, preferably a Slytherin, will pass by and the magical emanations from that person will make the Whammo explode with a loud bang and a flash of bright yellow light. It's not harmful in any way but the light sticks to the target and makes him glow bright yellow. That lasts for about half an hour. Neat, eh?"

"So it doesn't work with Muggles then?" asked Ron.

"No. Just witches and wizards," said Fred, "We'd better get going now. We've got a lot of work to do getting all these orders ready, and we've promised to deliver them here in two days."

"Uh, Ginny," said George, "Keep your ear to the ground and let us know if any of the other houses are interested in getting supplies. If they are, you'd better get the password to their common room."

Ginny nodded, but Hermione looked at the two quizzically, "How long do you think you'll be able to keep this going? The professors are no mugs, and when they see all those pranks being pulled they'll know that the students are being supplied by somebody getting into the school."

"Yes, we've thought of that, Hermi," said Fred, "We'll just have to be ultra careful. We're hoping that we'll make enough money out of this, before we're caught, to keep us going until the Hogsmeade ban is lifted."

"Well I hope it works out for you," said Harry.

"Thanks Harry," said George, "We'll see you in two days time."

Fred and George cautiously went back out of the portrait hole and crept stealthily back to the statue of the humpbacked witch and back into the tunnel.

The next morning, Crabbe and Goyle lumbered into the Great Hall to eat their breakfast. They were the first Slytherins to arrive but the Gryffindor table was almost full, the expectant students sniggering as they waited for the two goons to sit at their customary seats. As they settled into their chairs, two loud explosions were heard, accompanied by a bright flash of yellow light.

Crabbe and Goyle jumped out of their seats and ran to other end of their table, covered from head to toe in a hideous yellow light. All the Gryffindors fell about laughing, but Snape was not so amused as he witnessed the events. Dumbledore, Sirius and Remus tried their best to stifle their grins, but failed miserably.

By the end of the day, twenty more pranks had been pulled on the Slytherins, ten of them by Whammos, and all the activity didn't go unnoticed by the professors. Before dinner Dumbledore, at the insistence of Snape, held a staff meeting to discuss the new developments.

"The students are getting these pranks from somewhere Headmaster," said Snape, "and it's not the Slytherins - they're the ones at the but end of it all. It's got to be the Gryffindors; there's always a bunch of them hanging about looking when one of those exploding things goes off."

"There's no proof of that Severus," said McGonagall, "But as you say, the pranks have to be getting into the school somehow."

"Well there's no use in asking any of the students who it is," said Dumbledore, "They're not likely to want their supply cut off. I think that a little detective work is in order Sirius. You and Ceri should perhaps try to find out who's behind all this. You can help too Remus - you can use your map to track who's coming in and out of the school."

The three nodded, and Dumbledore continued, a twinkle in his eye, "I've got a fair idea what's going on, and when you catch the perpetrators I want you to bring them straight to me."

"Yes Professor," said Sirius, "You think there's more than one of them?"

"I believe so," he replied but wouldn't elucidate his suspicions any further.

Sirius, Remus and Ceri walked down the corridor to the Great Hall together, talking about their tactics for catching the prank smugglers. Sirius and Remus looked at each other and grinned. They both said the names together, "Fred and George!"

"What!" exclaimed Ceri, "How can you be sure it's them?"

"Do you remember the night at The Burrow when Harry introduced us to them as Mooney and Padfoot?" asked Sirius.

"Yeessss," said Ceri with narrowed eyes.

"Well do you also remember that they grabbed us and took us up to their bedroom for advice on their prank ideas?" asked Remus.

"Yeessss," said Ceri, still with narrowed eyes.

"Well one of the pranks they talked about was that exploding yellow light prank," said Sirius.

"Ohhhh," she said finally, "I hope Dumbledore goes easy on them - I like those two guys. They're fun."

"I'm sure he will Ceri," said Remus, "Did you see the twinkle in his eye?"

'Mad Eye' Moody limped back and fore along the line of auror trainees lined up outside the camp headquarters building, stopping from time to time to look a trainee directly in the eye, his own magical eye dancing around insanely in its socket. He grinned wryly to himself and stepped slowly back to the middle of the line and turned, preparing to give the same briefing that he'd given the trainees at camp Morgana a little earlier.

"Good," he said, "If you can stand my gaze without flinching then you'll have nothing to fear when a Death Eater looks you in the eye. Soon, you'll have learned everything we can teach you here and you'll all be assigned to a field team. But you have a few things to go through here before that happens. In three days we'll be holding the war games with camp Morgana - I must say I've thought long and hard about holding them, because quite frankly, you haven't got a hope against them. This morning, however, you'll be split up into pairs and you'll Apparate to a spot in the middle of nowhere. Your task will be to find your way back here. If all goes well and you're as fit as you obviously think you are, it should take you about three hours. Sounds simple, doesn't it?"

He looked at the group with a sly smile on his weather-beaten features, seeing a mixture of responses from his trainees. Some looked cocky and pleased while others seemed

apprehensive. Oliver kept a deadpan expression on his face - he knew that 'Mad Eye' had something more up his sleeve, and he didn't have long to wait to find out what it was.

"You'll be given a contour map and nothing else - not even your wands. Oh, and I forgot to mention it, but one of the trainers will Apparate each pair to your particular part of the wilderness, and you won't be told where it is on the map."

He grinned as loud groans of disbelief erupted from the group, "Right. Time to go. As I call your names, step forward. Oh, and if any of you don't appear before nightfall, I'll send out a search party. First pair - Oliver Wood and Katie Bell."

Oliver walked forward and joined Katie who stepped out at the far end of the line. They were approached by one of 'Mad Eye's trainers and quickly Apparated away. They had no time to quiz the ex-auror about their whereabouts - he quickly stuffed a map into Katie's hand and disappeared immediately.

Oliver looked at Katie apprehensively. Since meeting a few days ago they hadn't spoken more than a few words to each other. There were two reasons for this; first, they hadn't had much time. The gruelling and intense training schedules set by 'Mad Eye' took up almost all their time, and when they did get a bit of free time, they used it to get some much-needed sleep. The second reason was that Katie was still miffed with Oliver. She hated being treated as just a little girl who should be coddled at all times. She'd decided to become an auror only after a lot of soul-searching. She knew it was dangerous and didn't need anyone reminding her about it and expecting her to look shocked and then resign and run back home all of a sudden.

"I'm sorry Katie," said Oliver, "I shouldn't have been so patronising when we met the other day. Forgive me?"

Katie glanced up at Oliver from hooded eyes, "Maybe. I'll tell you after we finish this exercise."

Oliver groaned silently. He was elated when they'd been paired together, but now felt that he'd be walking on eggshells, not wanting to say anything to upset her any more than he had already. He resolved to be as professional as he could be for the duration of the exercise, and not let any thoughts of the pretty girl he was with cloud his judgement.

"Right, lets do a plan of action," said Katie, "First we need to find out exactly where we are on this map."

"Then we need to identify where the training camp is on the map," said Oliver.

"Then we work out in which direction we have to go to get home," said Katie.

Oliver looked around at the rough terrain in which they found themselves, looking for the nearest high point to observe a wider area of the countryside. He pointed to a rocky hill only fifty yards away, "Let's climb up there and see if we can spot some landmarks."

They walked quickly over to the small hill and climbed to the top, which was only about fifty feet above them. They sat on a flat rock and spread the map between them, then looked for any obvious landmarks in the surrounding countryside. Katie pointed over to her left, "There's

a stream running down from that low mountain. And just beyond the stream there's an area of forest and a conical-shaped mountain rising beyond it."

"And to the right, the stream joins a river that flows into a narrow ravine just beyond the place where they join."

They both started looking at the map, and Katie soon pointed to a narrow winding line of a stream joining a bolder line that signified a river. "That's it," said Oliver, "You can see the rounded contour lines of that mountain and the shaded area of the forest just below it."

"Right, so that puts us.... just here," said Katie pointing to the left side of the map, "Now how do we find out where the camp site is?"

Oliver thought for a few minutes, then, "Of course! 'Mad Eye' more or less told us. He said it would take about three hours to get back. Now in this terrain we won't be able to cover a mile in less than twenty minutes, so that puts the camp about nine or ten miles away. And we know that the camp is in a large clearing in the middle of a forest. So let's measure nine miles on the scale of this map and work around in a circle from our present position on the map.

After five minutes, they'd identified three possible sites, "Which one could it be?" asked Katie.

"I think it's this one," said Oliver pointing to a large shaded area on the map, directly East of their position, "It's the only one that shows a footpath going through it, and there's a large clear area in the middle. It must be the one."

"Right," said Katie, "So which way do we go? How do we find East without our wands?"

"Well...", Oliver was interrupted by Katie's shout.

"Wait, I know. It's about nine o'clock in the morning, so the sun hasn't risen too far from the Easter horizon. Oh..."

Oliver laughed, "Nice try Katie, but that method only works when the sun shines. The cloud cover's so thick you can't even see the bright patch of the sun behind it."

"All right then," said Katie quickly, "Let's go back down and look at those trees. Moss grows on the South side of the trunks, no wait, or is it the North side? I can never remember."

"Slow down Katie," said Oliver grinning at the thoughtful and intense expression on her lovely face, "It really doesn't matter."

"What do you mean it doesn't matter!" exclaimed Katie, "How the hell are we going to get back if we can't find the right direction to go in?"

Oliver put his hand on her shoulder and looked patiently into her eyes, "We already know which way to go," he looked back down at the map and pointed to their current position, "Look, it's right here on the map. We're here... and that conical mountain is... here, directly below our position - that's south. So East is over to our left and all we have to do is work out the best route on the map and then check our position every so often by the landmarks we pass."

"Oh," said Katie, kicking herself mentally, 'I've done it again, haven't I?' she thought to herself. I did the same at the ministry, and at camp Morgana. Ohhh!

Katie jumped to her feet, feeling more annoyed with herself than with the calm and assured Oliver, "Well come on then!" she said with rather more force than she'd intended, "We'd better get started hadn't we?"

"Hang on a minute, Katie. Let's work out the best way to go first. Look at this... and this," said Oliver pointing at the map, "We want to avoid those areas, they could be dangerous."

Katie quickly sat back down and looked challengingly at Oliver, "Well if you're so clever, what do *you* think is the best way to go!"

Oliver sighed quietly and started to tell her what he thought would be the best route across the wild terrain. After a few minutes, Katie calmed down and started to contribute to the exercise, pointing out some of the pitfalls and what looked to be the more level ground on the map.

Five minutes later, their route worked out, they walked back down the hill and moved off along the low rocky valley. Katie was deep in thought as they walked, again kicking herself for trying to take the initiative without really thinking things through. It had been the same at the ministry. She'd constantly tried to make a good impression, giving her opinion on the best way to do things but most of the time, her boss would reject her ideas and sit patiently with her while he explained why. Now Oliver seemed to be doing the same! Angelina had told her to slow down a bit, gain a bit of experience before trying to conquer the world, but she found it difficult to take a back seat. She'd lived in constant fear of just being seen as mere decoration at the ministry - the office bimbo only good for making the tea.

She hadn't improved when she went to camp Morgana and 'Mad Eye' Moody had spotted her problem immediately. He'd taken her to one side and tried to get her to slow down, tried to get her to think before she leaped into things. That's why he'd transferred her to camp Merlin. He told her that his best trainee, Oliver Wood, would be a good influence on her and she should observe closely the way he did things and thought things through before he acted.

Katie felt more at ease as they walked through the bleak countryside. She contributed as much as Oliver during the frequent checks they made to ensure that they were still on course. As she relaxed she showed more and more of the bright personality that Oliver knew and admired from their Hogwarts days.

They followed their route through secluded little valleys, around the flanks of heather-clad mountains, around dangerous ravines and through pretty wooded areas. As they walked, they talked about their old schooldays and Quidditch, and in particular about the match with Salem last year. Katie started to warm to Oliver, remembering how confident and assured he was when he was Gryffindor captain, and pleased that he'd lost none of that, in fact if anything, he was even more assured now,

Oliver found himself glancing at her a lot, trying to decide whether she was most beautiful in profile or full face on. His continued distraction proved to be his downfall, quite literally.

They were walking across a difficult area of ground, and finding it hard to make anything but the slowest progress over the high tussock grass that hid water-filled trenches. Oliver was walking slightly behind Katie and became distracted as he looked at the cute way her nose

turned up at the end, when his foot slipped into one of the trenches. He toppled sideways, arms flailing wildly, and fell to the ground. Unfortunately, his head jerked down into one of the trenches and hit a rock that was sticking up from the ooze at the bottom.

Katie gasped as she saw that Oliver made no attempt to get to his feet. She flung herself down at his side and lifted his head gently, feeling the warm blood running over her hand. She quickly ripped a piece of cloth from her shirt and held it against the cut, trying to stem the flow, all the while calling him, trying to get him to wake up. She looked around desperately, trying to think what she could do. She knew that there was no chance of help arriving any time soon, and that it could be many hours before a search party was sent to find them. She felt for a pulse and was relieved to feel a steady and strong beat coming from the vein in his neck.

She cradled Oliver in her arms and rested his head on her shoulder and chest, willing him to open his eyes, hoping that he'd just been stunned, "Thank god," she breathed when she at last saw his eyelashes flutter and start to open.

Oliver slowly regained consciousness and felt the throb of a splitting headache. He screwed up his eyes in pain as he raised his hand to feel the bump on the side of his head, but made contact with something warm and soft instead. He slowly opened his eyes and looked up into Katie's sparkling eyes, her face full of relief and only a few inches from his own face. He saw that his hand was holding Katie's as she kept the piece of cloth hard against the cut.

"Are you an angel?" he croaked, trying to smile but not quite making it, "What the hell happened?"

"You fell and hit your head," said Katie quietly, raising the improvised bandage and looking at the cut and large bump, "I think I've managed to stop the bleeding though."

"How long have I been out?"

"Only a few minutes, thank goodness," she replied, "We'll rest here for a bit until you feel up to walking."

Oliver managed a grin and settled back comfortably against her warm body. He looked wickedly up at Katie, "I'm not complaining."

Katie felt a tinge of pink creep up her face as she looked deep into his eyes, but then looked away with embarrassment, "I think you're back to normal now Oliver. Come on, I'll help you get up."

She stood and reached down to grasp his hand and heaved to help him to his feet. As soon as he took a step forward, Oliver collapsed back onto the ground, clutching his left ankle as he felt the pain shoot up his leg.

"What's wrong?" asked Katie anxiously.

"It's my ankle," he said through clenched teeth.

Katie knelt on the ground and gently pushed down his sock, feeling around his ankle for any sign of a break, "I don't think anything's broken, but by the size of that swelling I'd say you've twisted it pretty badly."

She stood back up and looked ahead, "The forest's only about a mile away, and the camp is about two miles inside. That's three miles - do you think you can make it if I support you on your left side?"

"I'll make it Katie, but I've filled out a bit since school - do you think you'll be able take my weight for the next three miles?"

"There's only one way to find out. Come on, let's get you up on your feet."

Progress was painfully slow for the next mile as they struggled to get themselves out of the boggy ground. After forty minutes they both collapsed at the edge of the forest and took a ten-minute breather before continuing. Katie looked at the map and at the surrounding landscape, "The path through the forest starts about two hundred yards on the left of where we are now," she said, "Once we get there we should find it a lot easier."

Ten minutes later they sighed with relief as they stepped onto the forest path. They made faster progress along the fairly flat surface of the path, and Katie found it easier to support Oliver's weight. His ankle was now swollen quite badly and he couldn't bear to place it on the ground. Another hour saw them within sight of the campsite clearing and Katie looked at her watch, "We've only been four hours," she said, "That's amazing. If you hadn't hurt your ankle we'd have done it inside three!"

They emerged into the clearing shortly after and two of the ex-aurors rushed over towards them, with 'Mad Eye' limping quickly behind, as they both sank to the ground. Katie was exhausted and Oliver was now in a lot of pain. "What happened?" shouted 'Mad Eye'.

"Oliver twisted his ankle about three miles back," gasped Katie.

"You two, get him in to see the nurse - I'll look after Katie."

"I'll pop in and see you later Oliver," she shouted as the two trainers carried him towards the headquarters building.

"Right lassie," said 'Mad Eye', "Tell me what happened - in detail please."

'Mad Eye' listened with growing respect as Katie told him how they'd worked out their route home and their later ordeal, "So you had to very nigh carry him for the last three miles? That's amazing - more so since you're only the fourth pair to arrive so far. There are still over forty others that haven't made it back yet. I'm impressed."

He looked at the tired Katie with a gleam in his eye, "Did you do what I told you? Did you watch what Oliver did and how he thinks things through?"

"Yes. Well not at first, but I could soon see the sense in what you told me. He's good isn't he? There're a lot of other trainees who could learn from him."

"Aye, I know," he said, slowly shaking his head, "I've tried to get him to stay on here and join my training team, but he won't hear of it. He wants to get out into the field where he thinks he can make a bigger impact. Well I think you'd better get some rest Katie. Tomorrow I'll tell you all about the war games and what your objectives will be, and the day after they'll begin. That should be plenty of time for the nurse to get Oliver back on his feet again."

Katie struggled back to her feet, "I'll see how Oliver is first sir, and then I'll get some rest."

'Mad Eye' grinned as he watched the girl slowly walk over to the nurse's office in the headquarters building. He knew that he'd done the right thing in pairing her with Oliver, and he also knew that it was right in more ways than one - he could feel it in his old bones.

Harry, Hermione, Ron and Ginny stood at the bottom of the stairs in the Entrance Hall at Hogwarts, looking up at the portrait of the Anima Summas. They'd just come back from Hagrid's hut where they'd held Hermione's birthday party. Dumbledore had waited until her birthday before officially unveiling the painting, and Cornelius Fudge and some of his senior staff had attended the ceremony along with the whole student body and staff of the school and, of course, Rita Skeeter. The pair had still not quite got over their embarrassment at the whole affair, including the lengthy photo-shoot session that Rita had insisted on.

"Come on then you lot," said Hermione, "Back to the library to do some more reading."

Ron groaned loudly, "What a way to end a perfect day. Are you sure there's something useful in those books Hermi? We've spent days and days reading them but all I can find is a load of boring old philosophy on the Hermetic Tradition!"

"There's bound to be something Ron," she replied, "And anyway, it's not boring at all - the sections on Alchemy are very interesting."

"What did your parents send you for your birthday Hermi?" asked Ginny.

Hermione grinned, "They sent me three books about the Dead Sea Scrolls."

"Riveting!" muttered Ron.

Hermione glanced disdainfully at him, "I just hope I'll get the time to read them soon, I'm dying to find out who The Liar is."

Ron was still complaining two hours later. All the other students had left and they were the only ones remaining in the library, apart from Madam Pince. They'd looked through about half the books Hermione had bought, and they now sat reading four more. Suddenly, Hermione shot bolt upright, "I think I've found something," she said excitedly, "Listen to this. It's from the Kore Kosmou, a first century tract belonging to the Hermetic writings. It's about the Egyptian goddess Isis, talking to her son Horus about Hermes..."

'I must tell you what Hermes said when he deposited the books. Thus did he speak: 'Ye holy books, which have been written by my perishable hands, they have been anointed with the drug of imperishability by Him who is master over all, remain ye undecaying through all ages,

and be ye unseen and undiscovered by all who shall go to and fro on the plains of this land, until the time when the heavens, grown old, shall beget those of soul and body worthy of you.'

What do you think?" she asked.

"Care to translate that into proper English Hermi?" asked Ron.

"Ron! Isis is telling Horus that Hermes wrote sacred books of wisdom and hid them somewhere, waiting to be discovered by those who are fully worthy - that is, the Anima Summas!"

"That could be it, Hermi," said Harry, "We might have to find the books and read the wisdom of Hermes - Margot said that we have to uncover the second store of ancient knowledge, and this could well be it."

"But is there anything more on it Hermi?" asked Ginny, "It doesn't say anything about where they could be hidden."

"Well there's a footnote written by the author referring to 'The Westcar Papyrus', an ancient Egyptian tract now locked away in the Berlin Museum. He says that it talks about an ancient chamber where the wisdom of the ages are stored."

"How the hell are we going to look at it if it's locked away in Germany?" asked Ron.

"The author says that there are translations available Ron," she replied, "I'll owl my parents and ask them to find a copy for us."

"Thanks Hermi," said Harry, "Do you think we have to go to Egypt? I mean Isis was the main female goddess of ancient Egypt wasn't she?"

"I don't know Harry," replied Hermi, "The cult of Isis spread throughout the ancient world, and she's still worshipped in a lot of countries even today. And don't forget that we went to the Temple of Isis at the foot of Mount Olympus, so it could be anywhere. We'll just have to keep reading and hope there's something in that old tract when we get it from my parents."

The other three settled back down to read their books as Hermione quickly wrote a note and walked out of the library to send an owl to her parents.

Fifteen black-robed figures walked slowly through the barren desert. The sun beat down with cruel intensity and as far as the eye could see, there was no shade to bring relief to the sweat-soaked men. Nothing stirred in that godforsaken place, save for the odd scorpion and snake, desperately trying to find their next meal that would ensure their survival for yet another day. The group came to a halt as the one in the lead stopped, raised his wand above his head and said the strange words that activated the spell.

After a few minutes, Voldemort could see that there was no reaction from the tip of his wand. He hissed with frustration and disappointment and called for Lucius Malfoy to approach him, "Lucius, let's see the map again."

Lucius unfurled the large map of the area and pointed to a spot about a third of the way up from the bottom and half way from the side, "We're right here my Lord. Shall I cross it off?"

Voldemort looked at the map and nodded to Lucius, who placed yet another cross on the grid that he'd drawn on the map before the search has started. Each square in the grid covered an area of approximately half a square mile - the area in which Voldemort would be able to detect if the artefacts were within range of the spell he'd been given by the Guardian of the Gate. The group were systematically moving from place to place, starting at the bottom of the map where the terrain was flatter and progress would be faster than the hillier parts of the desert further to the north.

"We've been searching for nearly a week in this hell hole," said Voldemort, "and there's been no sign of anything. How much longer must I suffer in this heat until I find the Disc and spells!" He stamped his foot petulantly on the sandy desert floor and turned his bad-tempered attention towards Wormtail, "Wormtail! There's about another hour of light left today. I want you to take the others and set up the tents over there," he pointed to a spot about one mile to their left, "And get our dinner started. If it's not ready by the time I arrive, or if it's not to my liking, I'll have you for dinner. Now go!"

Wormtail and ten of the Death Eaters scurried off across the desert to carry out the Dark Lord's orders. It had not been the best of times for Wormtail lately. The terrible heat and lack of results from the search had put Voldemort in an evil mood, almost from the start, and Wormtail always seemed to have to take the brunt of his anger.

Voldemort led the other three Death Eaters over to the next stop on their search pattern. Lucius, Crabbe and Travis silently hoped that the spell would start to work soon, always fearing that Voldemort would switch the focus of his frustration from Wormtail to one of them.

Wormtail, who was supervising the erection of the tents, cringed as he heard Voldemort's shout of anguish in the distance as yet another area of the grid was crossed off the map.

Everything was quiet as two red haired figures emerged from behind the hump-backed witch and looked cautiously along the corridor. They each carried a large sack filled with the jokes and pranks ordered by all four houses two days previously. They quietly crept down the corridor towards the stairs that led down to the next floor. They had decided to go to the Slytherin common room first, then up to Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw and finally to Gryffindor, where they hoped to grab a welcome cup of tea before going back to their shop in Hogsmeade.

"They're here," whispered Remus as he looked at the Marauders Map. He, Sirius and Ceri sat on the corridor floor, just around the corner from the statue of the hump-backed witch. Ceri started to rise to her feet but looked questioningly at the two men as they caught her arms and pulled her back down to the floor.

Sirius looked sheepishly at her, "We'll get them when they finish their rounds Ceri," he whispered.

"I... well both of us can't help feeling bad about this," said Remus, "We both did our fair share of this sort of thing when we were at Hogwarts, so we thought we'd let them finish their deliveries - let them have a last few hours of excitement before we turn them over to Dumbledore."

Ceri chuckled as she looked at the two men, "All right, you won't get any arguments from me. I just hope that Dumbledore goes easy on them tonight."

Two hours later, Remus again alerted his two friends as he looked at the map, "They're just coming out from Gryffindor Tower. They should be back at the statue in a couple of minutes."

They got to their feet and walked silently down the corridor and hid behind the statue, waiting for Fred and George to appear. Two minutes later, the wide grins on the twins' faces fell as they saw who lay in wait for them.

"Oh bugger!" breathed George, "I was hoping for another week or two before you caught us."

"Traitors!" said Fred, "Come on Padfoot, Mooney, can't you turn a blind eye?"

Sirius and Remus felt terrible and looked at the floor in embarrassment, and it was left to Ceri to officially apprehend the pair, "Sorry you two, you've been rumbled. Come on - Dumbledore wants to see you."

"Don't worry," said Sirius trying to suppress a grin, "I don't think he'll shout at you. His bite's much worse than his bark."

The twins groaned but followed their captors as they all walked slowly up to the headmaster's office. Dumbledore had a stern look on his face when he saw Fred and George enter his office. They stood in front of his desk looking at the floor as they waited for him to erupt, hoping that he wouldn't turn them into anything too nasty.

"Well - Fred and George Weasley," he said, "I thought you'd finished school last year. Couldn't you bear to leave the place?"

"Sorry Professor," they both said sheepishly. Dumbledore just stared at them, but said nothing.

"Look Professor," said Fred, "We bought Zonkos in Hogsmeade and we were staring ruin in the face when you banned student visits for another year."

"And we couldn't see everybody deprived of their jokes and pranks for another year," said George.

"So we thought we'd provide a service to keep up the morale of the school," added Fred, looking hopefully towards the headmaster.

"Oh, so it's concern for the students that spawned your little escapade, it had nothing to do with making money?" asked Dumbledore.

"Well there's nothing wrong with combining the two is there Professor?" said Fred.

Dumbledore, much to the relief of the watching Sirius, Remus and Ceri, lost his stern expression and grinned, his eyes twinkling, "I can't condone your illicit nocturnal visits to the school, but I'll make a suggestion if I may."

Fred and George looked at each other expectantly, relieved that they wouldn't have to spend any time crawling about on a damp floor in some dark place.

"I don't want to have to tie up my security people looking out for you at all times of the night," said Dumbledore, "So I'd much prefer you coming to the school through the front door rather than the back. I will allow you access to the school on weekends. You can use the small room at the bottom of the stairs in the Entrance Hall where you'll be allowed to sell your wares. But only on Saturdays and Sundays - and your nightly visits must stop."

"Thank you Professor Dumbledore," said George, hardly able to contain his excitement.

"We can't thank you enough," added Fred.

"But there's a price!" exclaimed Dumbledore, "I want twenty percent of your profits to go to school funds."

"Five percent," said George.

"Fifteen percent," said Dumbledore.

"Ten percent," said Fred.

"Done!" exclaimed Dumbledore, "And there's something else I want. What do you call those exploding things that cover a magical person in horrible yellow light?"

"Whammos," replied Fred, looking quizzically at the headmaster, "You're not thinking of pulling pranks on any of the professors are you sir?"

Dumbledore laughed, "No Fred. My days of pulling pranks have long gone. I'm far more interested in the possibility of using them in the fight against the Dark Side."

Both Fred and George looked blankly at the headmaster before he explained his idea, "Think about it. Fudge hasn't got enough aurors to protect all the out-lying magical communities in the country, so some well-placed Whammos around those communities could give enough warning for the people to escape. And the Death Eaters will be lit up like Christmas trees, making it easier for the aurors to track them down. And not only that, Whammos could be used to defend our aurors out in the field. They can set them as warning devices to alert them of an attack by approaching Death Eaters."

"We hadn't thought of them like that," said George thoughtfully.

"I'd like you to bring me fifty of them first thing in the morning. Can you do that?"

"Yes of course," said Fred, glancing at George to confirm they had enough stock.

"Good. I want to send them to 'Mad Eye' Moody so that he can put them on trial during his training exercises. And if they work as well as I think they will, you could soon be receiving a

sizeable order from the ministry. This could be very profitable for you both, especially if the American Congress thinks they'll be useful for their operations. I know that 'Mad Eye' has his contacts over there and he'll no doubt send them a few Whammos for evaluation purposes."

Fred and George couldn't believe their luck as they walked out the front door of the school and back to their shop in Hogsmeade. They talked incessantly; making plans for their new venture.

"After we give Dumbledore those Whammos, we'll only have about fifty left," said George.

"And if 'Mad Eye' Moody likes them - and I'm sure he will - we'll have to pull all the stops out to keep up with the orders we'll get," said Fred

"We'll never be able to cope if the Americans want them as well. We'll have to employ a few witches and wizards to keep up with production," said George, scratching his chin.

"We'll have to get in touch with some of our school friends. I know that Lee Jordan hasn't got a job yet, and Angelina said that she and Alicia weren't too happy working at the ministry since all this fuss started." Fred looked at George expectantly.

"Do you think another three people will be enough?" asked George.

"We'd better wait for a few days and see what happens," replied Fred, "And in the meantime we can make as many Whammos as we can, and then work out how we'll set up the room in the school for next weekend."

"Do you think the headmaster will allow us to put a sign over the door?" asked George.

Fred looked up at the dark sky seeing a sign in his mind's eye, "'Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes'", he said dreamily, "The School Joke Shop".

"This will be the area of operation," said Alastor Moody as he stood in front of the trainees at Camp Merlin, pointing to a large map hanging magically in the air, "Your task will be to defend these five points... here, here, here, here and here. Camp Morgana have been given the task of capturing all five places as I told you yesterday - that's from nine o'clock this morning to ten o'clock tonight. The winner will be the camp that holds the majority of those places at the end of the exercise. Is that clear?"

He looked around the trainees and saw them all nodding, "And don't forget, the only spells that are allowed are Rictusempra and Petrificus Totalus. You'll be split up into five groups and each group has to defend its ground against all attacks. The list of teams has been posted on the front of the headquarters building, and each one will have a commanding officer - he or she will determine the best defensive tactics and deploy the team in the appropriate manner."

'Mad Eye' looked at his watch, "You have one hour to get to your defensive positions and set up your strategy. Right, go!"

The trainees ran quickly up to the headquarters and milled around looking to see which team they were in. Oliver was surprised to see that he was listed as one of the commanders, and

was glad to see that Katie was in his team. He quickly rounded up his other eight team members and led them over to the map to check the place they'd be defending and the make-up of the surrounding terrain. After a few minutes study, he went to lead them out of the forest and to the small hill about three miles away that would be their headquarters for the rest of the day.

'Mad Eye' gestured him over as he jogged towards the forest path, "Oliver, I want you to try out these little devices for me," he handed Oliver five small stone-like objects, "They're called Whammos - pranks invented by your friends the Weasley twins. Let me know what you think of them."

After listening to 'Mad Eye's explanation of how they worked, he put them into his robe pocket and ran to catch up with his team. Half an hour later, they stood on the top of the small hill and studied their surroundings. They were at the highest point in their immediate area. To their front was an expanse of open grassy ground, ending at a small copse of trees about fifty yards away that led into the forest. Behind them was a narrow high-sided valley that opened, only thirty yards or so away from their position, onto some rough boulder-strewn ground. To the left and right was more rough ground, but with very few boulders, their view stretching uninterrupted for about a hundred yards in both directions.

Oliver called his team around him, "I think that our weakest position is to the rear," he said and noted the others all nodding in agreement. He pulled the five objects from his robes, "Moody gave me these - it seems he wants us to try them out. They're made by Fred and George Weasley," he said turning towards Katie, "They should come in handy to warn us when the Morgana team gets near. Now where do you think they'd best be deployed?"

Katie grinned and nodded to herself, well aware that Oliver was not taking a dictatorial attitude towards the team, but wanted them all to get involved in their defensive tactics, "We should put one of them over by that narrow valley," she said, "We want to get as much warning as possible if they decide to attack from there."

"Thanks Katie," said Oliver, "I agree. We can place one just before the valley opens onto the rough ground. Where do you think we should place the next one?"

"Over by that copse of trees to the front," said one of the others, "They're quite likely to gather there before launching an attack."

"Thanks Will," said Oliver, "Next?"

"We should put one on either side of us," said one of the others, "But I'm not sure where. There's a lot of open ground on each side."

"You're right, Sadie. We should put them far enough away to give us a clear warning, but I'm not sure what their effective range is. We'll just have to rely on luck, I suppose. Next?"

"We should put the last one towards our front," said a timid-looking young wizard, "If they don't attack from that copse of trees we'll get no warning from that direction. So maybe we should place one about half way between, in more or less a direct line of sight. What do you think?"

"I think that makes a lot of sense Bryn," said Oliver, handing two of the stones to Bryn, one to Sadie, and one to Will, "You three go and place them in the positions we agreed and where you think they'll be the most effective and Katie and I will place the one by the valley exit. You others stay here and keep a close look out in case they decide to attack early."

Oliver and Katie walked down the hill and over to the entrance to the narrow valley, "Haven't you got any idea of the effective range of these things?" asked Katie.

"Moody didn't say," Oliver answered, "But there's not a lot of room between these steep banks, so if we place it right in the middle it should be ok."

They walked back up the hill after placing the Whammo in the middle of the valley exit and settled down to wait, "They may decide to have a go at us early," said Oliver, "but they may decide to let us stew and wait for a bit. I think it'll be best if we each take an hour's stint at keeping a look out. You five," he pointed to five of his team, "take a rest for an hour while the four of us keep watch in each direction. Then we can change shifts. Everybody ok with that?"

By three o'clock that afternoon nothing had happened, even though they could hear the sound of charms being thrown at two of the other defensive positions that were closest to them. At the next shift change, Oliver called the group together, "They're trying to psyche us out," he said, "They think that by making us wait we'll be too nervous to put up any sort of resistance. We've got to resist that. Katie, you were in Morgana camp, who do you think we're up against."

Katie thought for a few moments, then, "I'm sure it's Jamie Devoy and his team. 'Mad Eye' saw him as the best trainee at Morgana, and it makes sense that he'd put him up against you, Oliver. He's a quiet lad, really, but very intense and quite smart."

"Hmmm," said Oliver deep in thought, "If I was attacking this position, I wouldn't want to risk exposing my team. It's too exposed on all fronts so I'd wait until it gets dark - that's about seven o'clock tonight. I'm pretty sure we won't get attacked until then, but we'd still better keep a good look out. Ok, shift change."

As five of his team members took up position around the perimeter of the hill, Oliver and the others settled down in the middle, drinking from their water flasks and munching on some jam-filled Welsh cakes that 'Mad Eye' had bought from the post office at the nearest little village about fifteen miles away. Oliver sat with his back against an outcrop of grey limestone, closed his eyes, and tried to empty his mind of the responsibilities of command for the next hour. He'd started to doze off when he was shaken back to reality as he felt someone settle down beside him. He turned his head to the side, opened his eyes and looked into the beautiful sparkling blue eyes of Katie Bell.

"Do you want some company Oliver?" she asked.

"I'd never refuse your company Katie," he replied. Since their ordeal on the pathfinder exercise, Katie had seemed a lot more friendly towards him. Her crusty front had seemed to crumble, and he'd seen the real Katie Bell - the one he knew at Hogwarts - but more so.

"How do you think I'm doing?" he asked, smiling at her.

"You're doing fine Oliver," she replied, "I... I want to thank you. I've learned a lot since we've been together. I just want you to know that I'm really grateful, and I'm sorry for the way I acted earlier. I think I've cooled down a bit now."

"That's ok Katie, don't think twice about it. You must have had a lot of grief from your parents when you decided to join up."

"Yes I did. Look Oliver, I haven't told anybody about this before, but my parents... well they're not my real parents. They adopted me when I was a baby. Don't get me wrong, I love them both dearly... oh I don't know why I'm telling you this."

Oliver covered her hand with his, looking deeply into her eyes, "It's ok Katie, if you want to talk about it I'm a good listener."

"Well I don't know a lot about it, but my parents... my adoptive ones, that is.... only told me that my real mother was very young when I was born - too young to look after me properly. She was still in school - Hogwarts - and her parents persuaded her to put me up for adoption."

"Do you know who she is?" asked Oliver gently.

"No. I only heard about this two years ago, and they told me that my real mother was killed when 'You Know Who' was at his strongest, before Harry sorted him out."

"I'm so sorry Katie; that must have been hard for you to take. Do you know who your father is?"

"No," said Katie, a little tear escaping from the corner of her eye, "They wouldn't tell me. The only thing they *would* tell me was that he was at Hogwarts as well, and he didn't even know my mother was pregnant. When they found out, my real grandparents took my mother away from the school, and it seems that she didn't get a chance to tell my father. Whoever he is, he doesn't even know I exist."

Oliver looked on with compassion as Katie tried to suppress an anguished sob. He squeezed her hand, trying to comfort her, "And do you want to find out who he is?"

"Yes," she said quietly, looking back up into Oliver's concerned eyes, "But I don't know how I'll ever find him. My parents were so adamant that I shouldn't find out his identity - and I don't know why."

"Look Katie...", Oliver was interrupted by the next shift change, and Katie never did find out what he was going to say to her then; they were never left alone on their subsequent rest hours.

When it started to get dark, Oliver deployed his full force around the perimeter of the hill, knowing that an attack would come soon. They could all still hear the sounds of charms being thrown in the distance. They waited patiently as the last rays of light disappeared below the horizon, and only the few red-tinged wispy clouds provided any scant reflected illumination on the surrounding countryside. They listened to the distant hoots of owls and the scurrying of little creatures as they woke to their nocturnal existence.

Very soon, the pitch dark, the dark unique to country life, covered the surrounding area. Every sound they heard was now a source of agitated concern to them. They waited... and waited.

Oliver looked at his watch and saw that it was now nine o'clock. He knew that their opponents had to make their move soon, or they wouldn't have enough time to capture their position. He was right. Suddenly, a loud explosion erupted from the direction of the narrow valley and the sky was filled with the hideous yellow light, which soon subsided to leave three bright yellow figures walking stealthily towards the hill only twenty yards away. The three team members defending that part of the hill were easily able to pick them off, sending body-bind charms to immobilise them and take them out of the attack.

Soon, two other explosions followed to their left and forward positions with the same results, three more of the enemy being immobilised. Oliver quickly calculated that there were three more camp Morgana trainees still out there, probably to their right flank. He and six of his team covered that side, leaving three others to keep watch on the positions they had already dealt with, in case there were more of the enemy lurking in those directions.

They waited for the yellow explosions, which never came. They first became aware that they were under attack from their right flank when they heard the scraping of a careless foot on loose rock, some ten yards down the hill. Oliver motioned for three of his team to move to the left and he moved with the other two to the right, straining to see into the inky blackness of the night. Then, with a loud shout, three black-cloaked figures charged up the hill and onto the summit, right in the middle of their right flank. It was an easy matter for Oliver and the others to place the three enemy trainees in a full body bind. Their part of the exercise was successfully completed.

While they waited for ten o'clock and the official end of the war games, Oliver talked to Jamie Devoy, the camp Morgana commander, "How did you avoid our two detection devices?" he asked.

"What detection devices? We came from the left side of a copse of trees and approached down the right-hand side of the clearing, then came towards the centre as we reached the bottom of the hill. What are those devices anyway? Was it those yellow explosions we saw earlier?"

"Moody'll no doubt tell you about them later," replied Oliver, "He gave them to me to test out. Pretty successful too, don't you think?"

"Yeh, I suppose," said the downcast Jamie, "Look, I concede defeat. You can get these body binds off us now."

"Oh no Jamie," said Oliver, shaking his head, "If there's one thing that 'Mad Eye' taught me, it was not to let my guard down. You lot can stay as you are until ten o'clock. Sorry."

Half an hour later, 'Mad Eye' and his ex-aurors walked up to the top of the hill, "Well done Oliver," he said, "How did those devices work? Quite well from the look of things - you're the only one to successfully defend your position; all the others were taken over an hour ago. Camp Morgana wins the war games."

"Three of them worked, but two others didn't," he replied, "What's the effective range of those stones?"

"I don't know for certain, about five yards in all directions I think. Why do you ask?"

"Well I think they'll be great out in the field, but they'll be far better if their range can be extended by another ten yards in each direction, and if I know Fred and George, they'll easily be able to make the change."

"Thanks Oliver, I'll get a report to Dumbledore and the Ministry. And I'll send some of these little Whammos to my friend in America. I'm sure they'll go for them there if the twins can make the change. Right everyone, well done. Get back to your camps and get some sleep. First thing in the morning, I'll be giving you your postings to the units out on the front line."

Next morning, the camp Merlin graduates lined up in front of the headquarters building, eagerly awaiting the appearance of 'Mad Eye' Moody. He soon came out from the front door, holding a piece of paper in his hand. He walked to the middle of the line and faced his charges.

"You are the first people to graduate from our new training camps," he said, his voice sounding a bit emotional, "You've all done well, and I'm proud of you. I've had your postings from the ministry, and here they are." He looked down at the paper in his hand and read out the names of the graduates and the field teams to which they'd been assigned.

"Finally," he said, "Oliver Wood and Katie Bell are assigned to D division, based in the South of England, as replacements for two of our brave colleagues who were lost in action three days ago. You will be placed under Phil Brace's team - a fine team leader, and one of the best of the old school of aurors."

Oliver and Katie, who were standing to attention next to each other in the line, glanced out of the corner of their eye at each other and smiled, both glad that they'd been kept together. They didn't know that 'Mad Eye' had arranged for that to happen.

'Mad Eye' pulled himself up straight and looked along the line of his first batch of graduates. Then he looked straight ahead, and shouted "Graduates of camp Merlin - good luck. Class... Dismissed."

Remus watched the Gryffindors and Slytherins take their seats in his DADA class, hoping that what he had planned for the lesson would go down well with the students. He waited until they'd settled down and then stood up from his seat and paced along the front of the class.

"Today we're going to learn about an unforgivable curse that you probably haven't heard of before. It's a very old curse that has its roots back in medieval times. It's rarely come across these days, but I want you to be aware of it just in case you come up against it. It works by sending the curse to an inanimate object close to the victim, a stone or piece of wood for example. Depending on the variant of the curse, the object is transformed into an animal of some sort - say a dragon, a lion or a crocodile. But unlike a boggart, these animals have teeth and they can kill. The curse is only ended when the kill is made, or the proper defence is set up to counteract it."

He looked around the room and saw that he had the students' full attention, "I won't tell you how to throw the curse - I'll do that and you'll each take turns in defending against it. Yes Hermione?"

He grinned at Hermione, knowing even before the class started that he'd be seeing her arm shoot into the air, "Professor Lupin, are you sure this is legal? The curse sounds awfully dangerous."

"Don't worry Hermione. It's perfectly legal - like I said last year, I've been given special dispensation to use unforgivable curses, and the animals I'll conjure up won't be very dangerous. I'll use a variant of the curse that makes them move only very slowly, so if you can't defend against it you can always outpace it."

The students laughed nervously, none of them wanting to be the first to try it out.

"Right, the defence works like this. You point your wand directly into the animal's mouth, aiming for its tongue. You'll make its tongue poke out of its mouth, and when the animal sees it, he'll think it's his victim and bite down hard, cutting it clean in half. Then the animal will disappear in a puff of smoke, the curse is ended and the original object will reappear. Clear?" No one moved a muscle.

"Well I assume you understood all that. Now let's see - Vincent Crabbe, come out to the front of the class and stand beside that book on the floor."

Crabbe looked at Draco and Goyle, hoping that he hadn't heard right. No one ever picked on him to demonstrate anything, and he wasn't very happy about it.

"Come on Crabbe, quickly now - I haven't got all day."

Crabbe slowly rose from his seat, walked slowly to the front of the class and stood beside the book, although he made sure he didn't stand too close.

"Now when I transform the book point your wand at its tongue and say *Extendo Ligula*. Ready?"

Remus pointed his wand at the book and said quietly, "*TRANSFORMO TARDESCO CROCODILUS*".

The book quickly expanded into a fairly small crocodile that turned its head slowly and looked balefully at the wide-eyed Crabbe. It opened its jaws wide and slowly started to lumber towards the terrified Slytherin.

"Crabbe," shouted Remus, "Say the defence spell."

Crabbe looked fearfully at Remus and pointed his wand at the crocodile's mouth, "Ext...Ex... oh bugger it!"

Crabbe dropped his wand, made a bolt for the door and yanked it open. He shot down the corridor at a high rate of knots, the laughter of the rest of the students fading into oblivion as he rushed down the stairs. Remus shook his head and said the spell that transformed the crocodile back into a book.

"Come on Hermione," he said, "Show us how it's done."

Hermione walked to the front of the class and stood beside the book, her wand at the ready. When the crocodile again appeared, she waited for it to open its mouth and pointed her wand, "*EXTENDO LIGULA*" she shouted. The crocodile stuck out its tongue and closed its mouth. It jerked as half its tongue fell to the floor, disappeared in a puff of smoke and was replaced by the book once more.

"Excellent Hermione," said Remus, "You made that look very easy. Care to try the tickling charm again? You did well last time we tried it, and I'd be interested to see how you'll do now."

Hermione nodded. Remus pointed his wand at her arm and shouted "*RICTUSEMPRA*."

Hermione concentrated very hard, exactly like Harry had shown her a few weeks ago, and mentally sent a shield over her arm. She felt an intense itching to start, but it slowly faded to a little irritation that she found easy to resist. She looked at Remus and smiled, excited that she'd done almost as well as Harry last year.

Remus nodded in satisfaction, seeing Hermione's powers start to grow to the level of Harry's and made a mental note to tell Dumbledore about the development.

After the DADA lesson, Harry and Ron made their way up to the Divinations classroom and took their seats at the back. They were both hoping for an uneventful lesson but groaned when Professor Trelawney placed her rune stones onto her desk.

"Before we start today's lesson, I want to check what the runes tell me about our famous two friends at the back. Come down to the front please Harry and Ron."

The two boys walked slowly to the front and stood in front of Trelawney's desk. She handed Harry the runes and asked him to cast them onto the floor, which he did. The other students gathered around as the professor knelt down to decipher the message. After a few minutes study, she looked at Harry, "You have to go on another long journey with your friends, much further than the last one. The runes are showing some urgency and... oh my, there is great danger, terrible danger. You have to keep your guard up at all times. Oh my... I see... no, it can't be!"

"What is it you see Professor?" urged Harry.

"It's not connected with your imminent journey, and I can't tell how far in the future it is. But there is... there is death. Oh my dear boy, you all have to be very careful."

Parvati and Lavender gasped and put their hands to their mouths. Harry and Ron looked at each other with grim expressions. They knew that Trelawney had been proved right in her last prediction, but they fervently hoped she wasn't right this time.

Chapter 6 The Ibis and the Baboon.

Oliver and Katie moved silently and slowly around the edge of the small wood, stopping every thirty yards or so to place a Whammo on the ground, about twenty yards inside the line of trees. Their team leader, Phil Brace, had detailed them to deploy Fred and George's modified detection devices along the perimeter of the wood. Earlier in the day, they'd had a tip off from one of their spies that an attack would be carried out on the village that night. The village lay not fifty yards from the wood, and Phil had earmarked the wood as one of the more likely places from which an attack would be launched. The other members of the team either helped with the evacuation of the wizards and witches who lived there, or placed more Whammos at other likely launching sites for the attack.

The sun had not quite sunk below the horizon and Phil surveyed the area, trying to work out where best to deploy his team. It was not an easy decision because there were at least five points from which the Death Eaters could approach. He hated having to spread his team so thinly at the five vulnerable points, but he had no choice. They had the advantage of surprise and the Whammos, of course, but with only four Aurors guarding each point, he felt very uneasy. The spy hadn't been able to find out how many Death Eaters would be in the attack, but their divisional commander could only spare one team to defend the place. Phil sighed and waited for his Aurors to finish their tasks and report back to him.

Just before darkness fell over the countryside, the Aurors were finally in their defensive positions. Oliver and Katie, together with two others, were hiding behind an outcrop of rock halfway between the village and the wood, and the nearest group were about fifty yards away to their left, keeping watch on a tree-lined lane that emerged into the clearing just in front of one of the houses. They settled down to wait, knowing that it could be a long night. Oliver and Katie felt nervous - it was their first taste of active duty and they didn't want to let the rest of the team down.

As the night wore on, the tension mounted. For the fourth time in the last hour, Katie rubbed her clammy hands on the grass and let out a deep breath, trying to calm the fast beat of her heart as it thudded in her chest. She glanced at Oliver, who was looking over the rock at the woods, wondering if he was as nervous as she, but if he was he certainly didn't show it. His gaze was steady and his demeanour calm as he looked for signs of movement in the woods. She wasn't to know, of course, that although nervous, Oliver had had some experience at keeping the outward signs in check - his first Quidditch league game for the first team was a case in point.

Just after midnight, Katie jumped as she heard a loud explosion from the other side of the village. They all looked and saw the yellow flash of light that signalled the start of the attack, and the air was soon filled with the sounds of curses being thrown. Phil rushed over and told them to hold their position, while he took two of the groups to help the four who had engaged the enemy. Five minutes later, they turned as they heard, and then saw, another Whammo that had been activated inside the wood, only about forty yards away, and was quickly followed by the flashes of another three coming from roughly the same direction.

The four defenders saw the yellow-coated figures emerge from the wood in a line abreast and Oliver quickly counted about fifteen of them. They were looking at each other in consternation at their brightly lit cloaks, not really knowing what to make of it all. As one, Oliver, Katie and the other two rose from behind their cover and sent Stupefy charms at the

gleaming targets, trying to disable as many as they could before they regained the cover of the trees.

"I saw six of them fall," said Jonas, "That leaves about nine still out there. Do you think we should go after them?"

I don't think so," replied Oliver, "If they're hiding just inside that tree line, we'll be fully exposed to their fire over thirty yards of open ground. I think we'd best wait and see if any of them show themselves. We should get some relief from some of the other groups soon."

They were still waiting ten minutes later, the fierce sound of fighting from the other side of the houses making it plain that their colleagues were fully occupied. Phil Brace quickly ran to their position and told them to hold off their group of nine Death Eaters as long as they could. The largest force, about thirty-five of them, were attacking the other side of the village and he ran over to get the final group of Aurors to help in the main fight.

"Look over there," whispered Katie, pointing to their right. They clearly saw their nine yellow-coloured Death Eaters creeping stealthily towards the other side of the village, intent on catching the other Aurors in a cross fire, "Come on," she said, "We've got to stop them. If they join up with the main group, Phil and the others won't stand a chance."

The four moved quickly to cut off the enemy, keeping to whatever meagre cover was available, and lay flat on the damp grass waiting for them to get closer. Jonas rose from the ground and stupefied the leading figure, but the rest of them weren't to be caught out a second time. Two of them had been lying on the ground keeping watch on the Aurors earlier position and they quickly adjusted their aim to send two killing curses in their direction. Jonas collapsed to the ground as the beams hit him. Oliver and Katie instinctively rolled away to their right, but the other Auror didn't react quickly enough and was dealt the same fate as Jonas.

Oliver shouted for Katie to follow him towards a garden wall about twenty yards to their right, and they sprinted as fast as they could towards the cover, green beams following their progress but missing them by inches. They flung themselves behind the wall and moved to the furthest end from where they'd disappeared from the sight of the eight remaining Death Eaters. They fell to the ground and cautiously looked around the wall, seeing four figures creeping low to the ground towards the other end of the wall. Oliver touched Katie on her shoulder and nodded towards the four yellow beacons of light. He gestured that he'd take the two closest to the wall and for her to take the two following behind. He held up three fingers and counted down; then, still lying on the ground, they stretched around the wall and sent two Stupefy spells at their first targets. Two of the Death Eaters dropped to the ground, unconscious, and the other two looked around in surprise, just in time to see the second volley of beams strike them. They, too, fell to the ground. Oliver and Katie hurriedly ducked back behind the wall as the deadly green beams from the remaining four Death Eaters peppered the rock just above their heads.

The two young Aurors grinned at each other, their adrenaline flowing freely through their veins. They were flushed with the excitement of the action, but only too aware that they played a deadly game, a game that they'd learned well under the magical eye of 'Mad Eye' Moody. They allowed themselves only a few moments rest before they once more peeped around the corner of the wall to see what their four opponents were up to. Katie frowned when she saw just two yellow glows coming from behind each side of a boulder. She looked

frantically around the area trying to pick up the telltale yellow signs of the other two, but couldn't spot them. She turned towards Oliver to voice her concerns, but was surprised to find he no longer lay by her side. She looked behind her, towards the back of the little cottage only about fifteen yards away at the other end of the garden, and shrieked with alarm, as she saw the missing two Death Eaters aiming their wands at her. She rolled to the side just as two powerful Flipendus curses hit the wall, directly behind her earlier position. She cried out as a sharp piece of stone, dislodged by the force of the curses, caught her a glancing blow on the side of her head. She screwed up her eyes in pain and held her hand to her head as she felt the warm blood from the cut running down her cheek. She heard the sound of two more spells, and waited in shocked anticipation for the agony that she'd soon be feeling. When nothing happened, she slowly opened her eyes to see Oliver, crouched low to the ground, running back towards her. Behind him, at the corner of the cottage, were the two Death Eaters, now lying prone on the grey paving stones of the path.

Oliver's eyes were filled with concern as he reached Katie, and gently put his hand on the side of her face, moving her head to see where all the blood was coming from. He quickly placed his wand onto the cut and said the spell that would temporarily stem the flow.

"I'm so sorry Katie," he said as he stared searchingly into her eyes, "I couldn't get a clear shot at them until after they'd sent those curses at you." He shook his head in self-torment as he thought of what might have happened to her.

Katie roughly pushed him away and rolled to a crouching position, shaking her head, trying to clear the feeling of nausea that suddenly came over her, "There's no time for this Oliver. There're still two of them out there, and they could be anywhere. We'd better change our position - quick."

Oliver nodded, marvelling at Katie's presence of mind after the blow she'd suffered. They moved back to the other side of the garden wall and peered around it, trying to get a fix on the position of the enemy. Katie pointed to the two yellow glows she'd seen earlier, still coming from behind the boulder. Oliver gestured for her to follow him as he dropped to the ground and started to crawl towards the boulder, which was about forty yards away from the wall. When they were just ten yards away from the boulder, Oliver stopped and motioned for Katie to go to the right hand side and he started to crawl towards the left, being careful not to make a sound, although there was little chance of the Death Eaters hearing anything over the frenzied sounds of battle coming from the other end of the village.

Oliver stood up and pressed his back into the cold, hard surface of the boulder. He glanced to the other side and saw that Katie was standing in a similar position, looking towards him for the signal to attack. Again, he held up his hand and counted down, then rushed around his side of the rock, holding his wand to the front.

The Death Eaters put up no resistance as they saw the two Aurors suddenly appear before them. They dropped their wands and raised their arms in the air in surrender, their eyes wide with fright. After they'd placed them in a full body bind, they quickly went back and stood by the corner of the little cottage, looking around the stone wall towards the fight in progress about a hundred yards away. They could see in the lights of the spells being thrown that their colleagues were pinned down in the back gardens of two cottages at the far end of the village, surrounded on three sides by about thirty glowing yellow Death Eaters.

"What now?" asked Katie.

Oliver thought quickly as he surveyed the scene, "We've got to try to help them. It's no use trying to join the others, I don't think we'd be able to in any case with all those devils surrounding them," he pointed into the darkness beyond the group of Death Eaters who held a central position, directly facing the defending Aurors, "The best thing we can do is to try to move around behind them and catch the central group in a crossfire. Before it went dark, I remember seeing an old cart turned on its side, lying against the hedge about forty yards behind them. If we can get there undetected, we can use it for cover."

"But we'll be easy meat when they see that there's only two of us," said Katie.

"Ah, that's where we've got to be a bit clever," he replied, grinning, "Don't worry too much about taking careful aim, just try to get off as many spells as you can. I'll do the same, and with any luck, the devils will think there's a lot more of us than just two. If we can cause a bit of panic in their ranks, we might just turn the tide in our favour."

Oliver and Katie ran quickly over the ground, using the darkness as cover, away from the battle and towards the hedge that ran at the back of the village. They soon reached it and crept quickly to the right until they came to the ruined wooden cart. They took up position, one to each side of it, and looked at the lights of the battle unfolding in front of them. They could see that their colleagues weren't in a very good position. The Death Eaters had the upper hand, even though most of them were illuminated with the yellow light, outnumbering the Aurors two to one, and using the many large rocks that were strewn around as cover. Oliver pointed to the group of about ten Death Eaters directly in front of them and nodded.

The two concentrated hard on flinging as many spells as they could at the group, and even though they weren't aiming with any great care, they soon stupefied three of them. The remaining seven turned in surprise, seeing a large number of beams coming in their direction, and panicked. They started to run towards one of the other groups of Death Eaters on their right hand side, but they were soon caught by the spells of the defending Aurors, who couldn't believe their luck as so many exposed targets appeared before them.

Oliver and Katie then started to concentrate their fire on the group of about ten Death Eaters to their left, and that signalled the end of the battle. The Death Eaters panicked and started running away. Several of them were rendered unconscious by the pursuing Aurors, but the majority escaped into the cover of the surrounding woodland.

The mopping-up exercise that followed took only half an hour, and soon there was a heap of about twenty-eight Death Eaters lying stunned, ready to be taken back to headquarters for questioning and subsequent imprisonment. Katie and Oliver stood sadly looking down at six of their colleagues, stretched out on the ground inside one of the gardens, each staring blankly up at the dark sky, their faces bearing the mark of the killing curse. Two Aurors walked slowly up to their fallen comrades and reverently covered each of the bodies with a white cloak. Then they stood for a few moments with bowed heads, and slowly walked away.

Phil Brace walked up and stood behind his youngest and newest recruits, and put an arm around each of their shoulders, "It's a high price to pay," he said sadly, "They were all good men and we're going to miss them."

He gently pulled the pair around and led them back towards the rest of his team, who were standing and talking quietly in the field behind the cottages. "What you two did tonight," he said, "was nothing short of miraculous. Not only did you stop that group joining forces with

the main body of attackers, you turned the tide of the battle in our favour. I was starting to get a bit worried that we wouldn't be able to get out of this mess. I'll be sending my report to divisional headquarters in the morning, and I'll be recommending you two for a commendation. And Alastor Moody'll be getting a copy of my report as well - he gets all the battle reports to gear his training to the latest Death Eater tactics. He'll be very proud of you. Well done, both of you."

He pointed to three white-cloaked figures that appeared around the side of the row of cottages, "Katie, you'd better go and get that cut seen to properly. The field medics have just arrived."

Oliver walked with Katie towards one of the medics and paused, "You were very brave tonight Katie," he said, looking deep into her eyes, "I feared the worse when those two fired off those Flipendus curses."

Katie stared back into Oliver's concerned eyes and grinned, "So did I Oliver. I thought I was a goner back there." She looked down at the ground briefly, and then back up into Oliver's eyes, "I didn't get a chance before, but I want to thank you for saving me."

Oliver smiled, "We make a pretty good team together Katie, don't you think?"

She nodded, and then they continued over towards the medic. As they walked, Oliver had an almost irresistible urge to hold her hand, wanting to feel the comfort of her skin against his own, but he resisted the temptation. There would be more appropriate times for that. They had, after all, just taken part in the biggest and most fierce battle of the conflict, but he felt certain that there'd be far worse to follow in the times ahead.

"It was nice to see Lee, Angelina and Alicia again," Harry said as the four friends sat eating their breakfast one morning.

"Yes," said Ron, "I can't believe it took all five of them to keep up with the trade they did in the shop last weekend."

"I wonder why Katie Bell hasn't joined the group," said Harry, "Those three girls were always together at school."

"George told me they tried to get hold of her," said Ginny, "But her parents said she'd joined the ministry defence force. She's an Auror now. And you'll never guess, she's in the same team as Oliver Wood!"

"Oh I hope she'll be ok," said Hermione.

"If I know Oliver," said Harry, "He'll be keeping his eye on her, don't you worry."

"Fred and George are going to be rolling it in now that they've started to get orders from the ministry," said Hermione.

"No wonder Lee and the girls looked so happy," said Ron, "Fred and George are paying them twice as much as they'd get at the ministry, and they've promised them a big pay rise if the Americans decide to use the Whammos."

Ginny sat with her elbow on the table, cradling her chin in her hand, "Who's Hermes Trismegistus?" she asked. She'd seen the term used quite a few times in the books they were researching the previous night, "I assume it's Hermes, but with a sort of title or something."

"I've seen that name as well," said Harry.

"So have I," said Hermione, "I looked it up - it means 'thrice great'."

"Hermes three-times great!" exclaimed Ron, "That doesn't make much sense."

The fluttering of a flock of owls interrupted them, as they delivered the morning post. One of the school owls dropped a small package in front of Hermione and she quickly ripped off the wrapping. "It's from Mum and Dad," she said, smiling as she read the brief note. Then she looked at the small and thin soft-covered book that the note was attached to, "It's a translation of the Westcar Papyrus," she said excitedly. She briefly leafed through the pages and then put it into her robe pocket, "I'll read some of this before classes start this morning." She quickly finished drinking her cup of tea, then rose from the table and walked up to the library. She wanted to read it there in case she had to look up any references in the other books.

She sat at a table in the library, opened the thin book and started reading the opening commentary by the translator of the ancient Egyptian papyrus. She was still reading, engrossed in one of the five tales that made up the body of the papyrus, when Harry burst into the library, his face flushed after running up several flights of stairs.

"Hermi! What are you doing? Come on! Snape's having kittens down in the dungeons."

Hermione looked at her watch and gasped, "Oh bother! I didn't realise the time."

She glanced at Harry as they both ran down towards the Potions classroom, "Is he very angry, Harry?"

"He's already deducted ten points from Gryffindor, and by the look of him, he won't stop there!"

Hermione closed her eyes and took a deep breath as Harry opened the classroom door. They walked quickly to their seats, Hermione glancing sheepishly at Snape.

"Ah Miss Granger at last," he said, "I see you've decided to grace us with your presence this morning. It's not too much of an effort for you is it?"

"Sorry Professor, I got carried away up in the library."

Snape's condescending tone changed and he stared at Hermione with his usual evil scowl, "The library won't be the only thing you'll be carried away in if you try to skip my class again. Another ten points from Gryffindor."

Two extremely difficult hours later, the three walked up to their Transfigurations class. The tortured expression that Hermione had worn for most of the morning left her as she remembered what she'd read in the Westcar Papyrus, "I've found something," she said to Harry and Ron, "I'll tell you about it during the lunch break."

That afternoon, they quickly finished their lunch and walked up to the common room, where they settled into their usual chairs. Harry, Ron and Ginny looked at Hermione expectantly as she briefly closed her eyes to gather her thoughts. Then she pulled the little book from her pocket, placed it on the arm of her chair and began to tell the others about what she'd read.

"The papyrus was discovered by an English traveller called Westcar in 1824. It's been dated to around 1650 BC but the ancient style and the hieroglyphics used is classical Middle Kingdom Egyptian, about four hundred years earlier. The content of the stories in the papyrus, however, relate to a time much older than that - back to the Pyramid age around 2600BC, and specifically to the rule of the Pharaoh Khufu, the supposed builder of the Great Pyramid at Giza."

"The *supposed* builder Hermi?" said Ron, "I went to the Great Pyramid a few years ago when we went to see Bill, and the guide told us that Khufu definitely built it."

"I looked it up in the Muggle section Ron," said Hermione indignantly, "For a long time, no one knew who the builder was, but back in 1837, a retired British army colonel, Howard Vyse, made a discovery in one of the chambers above the King's chamber in the Great Pyramid. It was directly above another one called the Davison chamber. He supposedly found some hieroglyphic graffiti, the only hieroglyphic writing ever found in the pyramid, and the translation showed that it was put there by one of the gangs of workers who built the structure. The writings praise the name of the Pharaoh Khufu. Now that's all very well, but a number of things point to it being a complete fraud. It seems that Vyse was a bit of a black sheep, and his wealthy family despaired that he'd ever make anything of himself. At that time, a number of important discoveries were being made in Egypt, and the colonel was desperate to find something that would make him famous. You can see what he was like, because he used explosives to break into the chamber - that's terrible! Anyway, it's odd that there was no writing in the Davison chamber, and the writing was found on all the walls of Vyse's chamber except the one he blew up, nothing was found on the pieces of stone from the explosion. He'd been given free reign inside the pyramid, and there weren't any controls in place like there are now - he could do whatever he liked. And he'd deliberately manipulated the dates in his diary to give his finds an air of authenticity - the diaries were later supposedly lost. And at about the same time, he declared that he'd found the builder of the third Giza Pyramid inside that structure, the Pharaoh Menkaure, but the skeleton and coffin lid were later found to come from different periods of time, and both much later than the pyramid itself. Even an eminent Egyptologist has said it was a forgery. So you can see what a dubious character he was. But ever since, Egyptologists have refused to be budged from the assertion that the Great Pyramid was built by Khufu - ridiculous isn't it?"

Hermione now looked pointedly at Harry who, all through her tirade, had just sat there grinning at her, "What!" she exclaimed.

"You really look cute when you get on your soapbox Hermi; I could watch you for ever."

"Oh," she said, colouring up slightly.

"What has all this got to do with Hermes?" asked Ginny.

"Well nothing," she replied a bit sheepishly, "But it's Ron's fault for starting me off. Now let me get back to the papyrus. As I said, the stories revolve around the time of the Pharaoh Khufu, and tell the tale of his five sons, each telling their father about marvellous events that happened in their past. But the fifth son, Prince Hardedef, asks permission to introduce a living magician, called Djedi, who would tell him of the location of a secret chamber," Hermione picked up the book and turned to a page she had marked, "His son told him, *'This Djedi knows the number of the secret chambers of the sanctuary of Thoth.'* When he was brought into the palace, Khufu questioned Djedi about the secret chambers," again Hermione looked at the book, "but he replied, *'I do not know the number O King, my Lord, but I know where the place is. The number is in a chest of flint in the building called 'Inventory' in On. The number is in that chest.'* It goes on to say that the chest would be brought to the Pharaoh by the eldest son of a priest's wife, who had not yet given birth." Hermione looked back up at her friends.

"Is that it!" exclaimed Ron incredulously, "How can that help us? I didn't hear Hermes mentioned once!"

"I know, Ron," said Hermione, "but it does speak about secret chambers, and this mysterious sanctuary of Thoth. I've got a strange feeling that it's significant, somehow. And there was a footnote made by the translator, who mentioned the American psychic, Edgar Cayce, who had visions about a secret chamber in Egypt that he calls The Hall of Records. It may well be the same as the secret chambers of Thoth."

"Who the hell is Thoth, anyway?" asked Ron.

"I don't know," Hermione replied, "But I know a man who does - or at least will have some books about him - Professor Dumbledore. Remember he said earlier this year that he studied Egyptian hieroglyphics at university, and he must have studied the ancient culture there as part of the course. We'll ask him. What's the time Ginny?"

Ginny looked at her watch, "It's twenty to two."

"Right," she said assertively, "There's no time like the present. We'll just have enough time to speak to him before afternoon classes. Come on."

As they walked down the corridor, Harry said, "So it looks like we'll have to go to Egypt?"

"It certainly looks that way Harry," replied Hermione.

Professor Dumbledore sat at his desk in his office listening, together with his team, to Snape finishing his report on his spying mission the previous night.

"Thank you Severus," he said when he'd finished, "I'm sure that the ministry are going to be very interested in that development. To finish off the meeting, I'll tell you about the chat I had with 'Mad Eye' Moody this morning. Ah... one moment," he picked up his wand and waved it in the direction of the door, "Our four young friends want to see me, it seems."

Harry led his friends into the office and pulled up short, "Oh, sorry Professor; we didn't know you were in a meeting."

"We were just about to finish Harry," said Dumbledore as he again waved his wand and four chairs suddenly appeared, "Take a seat - I'm sure you'll be interested in the final item. Now where was I? Ah yes, I spoke with Alastor Moody this morning, and he told me about a fierce battle that took place in Sussex a few days ago. About fifty Death Eaters attacked a little village defended by a team of twenty aurors. It appears that two of our old students were instrumental in turning the flow of the battle in favour of the aurors. They showed great bravery and they've been given a commendation. It seems that Oliver Wood and Katie Bell are starting to make a name for themselves."

"Are they both all right?" asked Harry, "They weren't hurt were they?"

"No, no. They're both perfectly all right. Now, what do you want to speak to me about?"

"We've found something in our research that we think you may be able to help with, Professor," said Hermione, "It looks like our quest lies in Egypt, and since you studied hieroglyphics at University, we thought you may have some books we can look at on the ancient culture."

"I have indeed," he replied pointing to the large bookcase behind his desk, "and you're welcome to borrow anything you think may help. As a matter of interest, what have you found?"

"Well our study of the Hermetic texts pointed us to an old script called the Westcar Papyrus, and I had a copy of the translation from my parents this morning." Hermione glanced sheepishly at Snape, who smiled and nodded his head knowingly.

"But instead of talking about Hermes," she continued, "It made reference to the secret chambers of Thoth. We really need to find out who Thoth was."

"Ah Thoth," said Dumbledore, "Well I can tell you something about him, but I know there's a great deal more in some of my books. Now let's see... Thoth, that's the Greek name for the ancient Egyptian moon god, Djehuti. He was associated with wisdom, magic, music, astronomy, medicine, geometry, surveying and writing. In fact, he's accredited with being the inventor of writing - the original scribe, no less."

"Ahhhh," shouted Ginny, pointing at the headmaster and looking excitedly at Hermione, "Pontius's last message told us to seek out the original scribe, the inventor of writing and learning."

"But I thought that was Hermes," said Ron, looking confused.

Hermione had a big grin on her face, "It was, Ron. But don't forget that Pontius told us he'd gone back to a former existence as a spirit of the Light. Before he moved to Mount Olympus and became Hermes, he must have been Thoth! But of course!" she exclaimed suddenly, "That's what Hermes Trismegistus must mean! Hermes the thrice great - great as Mercury; great as Hermes; great as Thoth. It all fits now."

Harry smiled at his girlfriend, "Well done Hermi, and thank you Professor Dumbledore. Now we know where we have to go - to Egypt to find the secret chambers of Thoth."

"Uh Harry," said Remus who had followed the exchange with great interest, "Egypt's a big place. Do you know where in Egypt you have to go?"

Harry's face fell, "No Professor," but then he brightened, "But at least we've narrowed it down a bit, and we know what we've got to look for."

Dumbledore smiled - he'd loved getting an insight into the thought processes of the four youngsters, and Hermione's in particular. He rose from his chair and walked to his bookcase, "You're welcome to browse through my library, but if you come over here, Hermione, I can start you off in the right direction, I think, by giving you some books about Thoth and the religion of the ancient Egyptians."

After afternoon classes, the four rushed up to the library to begin reading the books that Dumbledore had given them.

"It's amazing," said Ginny, "All this stuff I'm reading about Thoth is almost the same as I read months ago about Hermes."

"Well not so amazing Ginny," said Hermione, "They *are* one and the same after all."

"There are quite a few differences though," said Harry, "It says here that he was sometimes depicted by the Egyptians with the body of a man and the head and neck of an Ibis, and at other times by a baboon."

"Before you ask Ron," said Hermione, "An ibis is a large exotic bird that lives on the banks of the Nile."

"I wasn't going to ask, Hermi," said a disgruntled Ron, "Everybody knows what an Ibis is." The other three couldn't suppress a grin as Ron looked back down at his book.

"Hey listen to this," said Ron, "It says here, *'It is said that Thoth wrote books in which he set forth a fabulous knowledge of magic and incantation, and then concealed them in a crypt.'* That must be another reference to the secret chambers of Thoth."

"And there's another reference in my book," said Harry, "Listen - *'Thoth wrote down the mysteries of the heavens in sacred books, which he hid here on Earth, intending that they should be searched for by future generations, but found only by the worthy.'*"

"But where *are* the secret chambers," said Ginny, "There's nothing in the book I'm reading about where they may be."

"You don't seriously think it'll be that easy do you Ginny?" asked Ron, "Nothing's been easy up to now, so why should this be any different?"

"Hold on a minute Ron," said Hermione, who sat bolt upright in her chair, "I think I might have something here. Listen to this, *'Thoth's principal sanctuary was at Khmun. It is located*

by a small village called El Ashmunein and was also called Hermopolis. He was worshiped there at the great temple to Thoth, but little now remains of the structure. The main monuments are a ruined Roman agora and its early Christian basilica, along with a small museum.' This is the best lead we've had, and don't you think that the name Hermopolis is a bit too much of a coincidence with Thoth's sanctuary being named after Hermes? And of course! Wait a minute."

She delved into her robes and retrieved the little book about the Westcar Papyrus; opening it to the page she'd marked earlier. She scanned the text and then gasped, "Yes! I thought that's what it said. Listen, *'This Djedi knows the number of the secret chambers of the sanctuary of Thoth.'* The sanctuary of Thoth! It must be in Hermopolis - the principal sanctuary of Thoth!"

"Come on," said Harry, "Let's go and see Dumbledore."

A few minutes later, the four sat at the headmaster's desk, "I take it you've found something interesting?" he asked, looking at Hermione.

"Yes Professor," she said, "We've found where the principal sanctuary of Thoth is."

"It's at Hermopolis," said Harry, "On the banks of the Nile. We think that Thoth's secret chambers are hidden there somewhere. Professor Dumbledore, we've got to go there."

Dumbledore thought for a few minutes, "Yes, I agree, but not just yet. You'll have a few days off for half term early next week, and in the mean time we can make the necessary arrangements for you and the protectors to Portkey to the site. Now let's see, who do we know in Egypt?" He looked slyly out of the corner of his eye at Ron and Ginny.

"Bill!" they both shouted together.

"Bill can set up the Portkey," said Ron, "And I'm sure he'll act as our guide as well. He told Charlie that he'd like to help with the quest."

"So I'll leave it to you and Ginny then," said Dumbledore, "If you go next Saturday, that gives you four days to make the arrangements. I'll let Sirius and the others know, and no doubt they'll want to speak to you all before you leave."

Down in the Slytherin common room, Draco Malfoy sat with his two goons, Crabbe and Goyle, and the atmosphere wasn't very cheerful.

"I haven't heard from my father for ages," said Draco gloomily, "He's off on some search for... well, let's just say he's on an important mission." Draco hadn't told his two friends that his father was with Voldemort, or that he was spying for them at Hogwarts. He didn't trust his dim-witted fellow Slytherins to keep their mouths firmly shut - not that they'd do it on purpose, of course, but there was always the chance that they'd blurt something during their many episodes of boasting about the Dark Side.

"That's funny," said Crabbe, "My father's been away for ages too, but Mum will only say that he's on some important business trip." Draco grinned - even Crabbe's mother didn't trust him to keep quiet.

"Are you coming up for dinner?" asked Goyle.

"No, you two go ahead," replied Draco, "I'll be up a bit later."

He watched the two large boys go out into the corridor, and then turned his mind back to more pressing matters. He hadn't been able to find out what Potter and his friends had been up to, and he knew that as soon as his father returned home he'd want some information. But it wasn't through any lack of activity on Draco's part. He'd followed the four around under his invisibility cloak, and he'd even spent hour after hour hidden in the library, trying to listen in on their conversations. But all they seemed to do was read. Always reading, but not talking very much. He'd looked at the books they were reading, but Hermetic Philosophy didn't seem a very likely subject to give any clue about their second quest.

He wracked his brains, trying to decide on the best course of action, but he couldn't think of anything better than he'd already been doing. He sighed and got up from the chair, and then walked up to the Great Hall for his dinner.

After breakfast the next morning, Harry and Ron waved to Hermione as she made her way up to her Arithmancy class, then they went on their long trudge up to the Divinations classroom.

Hermione entered the classroom to find that all her fellow students were there - all 6 of them. Arithmancy was perceived to be so complicated and boring that few students opted to take the subject. Not so Hermione, however. She loved all the complex calculations, and Professor Vector even managed to make the odd lesson very entertaining. Almost all the other students, however, only opted for Arithmancy because they couldn't stomach Divination.

Hermione took her seat as Professor Vector came into the room carrying a large board, which he propped up against the front of his desk. On the board was a large drawing of a pyramid, below which were a number of very complicated calculations.

"Today," began the professor, "We shall study the mathematics of the Great Pyramid of Giza, which as you all know, or at least you should know, is the only one of the seven ancient wonders of the world still standing today."

Hermione rubbed her hands with eager anticipation, primarily because of the reading she'd already done about the structure, and also because they'd be going to Egypt in a few days time.

"Before we take a look at the very complicated mathematics involved," continued Professor Vector, "I'll tell you some facts about the Great Pyramid that you most probably haven't heard before, even you Hermione.

"First, let's get one of the great misconceptions out of the way. Whatever book you read on the subject, it always starts off by saying that it was the greatest tomb ever built by the Egyptians." He paused as he looked at each of the seven students, "But it was not a tomb. No body has ever been found in it, or in the other two pyramids on the Giza plateau if it comes to that, and there are no funerary objects or writings inside it."

One of the students stuck her hand in the air, "Professor Vector, wasn't it emptied by tomb robbers?"

"No, I've never heard of any tomb robber bothering to completely obliterate the funerary writings on the walls of a tomb, and they always leave something behind, even if they destroy it - but there were no signs of this at all. And what's more, the exit from the so called King's chamber is so small that only the smallest objects could have been removed." He again paused, "So if it's not a tomb, what is it? During this and the next several lessons, we hope to shed some light on the mystery, and the tool we'll use to unravel the puzzle is Arithmancy."

Hermione thrust her hand in the air, "Professor Vector, all the Egyptologists insist that Khufu built the Great Pyramid, even though their assertion is based on a fraud. Why do you think that is?"

The professor smiled, "For the same reason they insist on calling it a tomb, Hermione. You see, back in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it was a great mystery to everyone; no one could fathom out why such a monumental structure was ever built. So one day, an Egyptologist suggested it might have been a tomb, and ever since, because there wasn't a better guess forthcoming, that guess solidified into fact. It's fairly typical of the way Egyptologists think and act - if they can't supply an explanation for what they find, they either ignore it and hope it goes away, or cotton on to the best guess answer. And once established, the guess/fact is rarely challenged because of the ridicule they tend to pour on any alternative answer.

"Now a few more curious facts about the Great Pyramid. It is the most accurately aligned structure in existence and faces true north with only a minute degree of error. It is located exactly at the centre of the Earth's land mass - the east/west parallel that crosses the most land and the north/south meridian that crosses the most land intersect in only two places on Earth, one in the ocean and the other at the Great Pyramid.

"Now for the really interesting facts. The relationship of the base divided by twice the height equals Pi to five decimal places - this mathematical relationship was thought to have been discovered first by Archimedes in 300 B.C. The ratio of the face slant height to half the base side equals 1.618. Can anybody tell me what that is?"

Hermione's hand shot straight into the air, "Except you, Hermione. Your exploits in solving the route through the labyrinth are now well documented. No other takers? It's Phi, the golden ratio, and that ratio was not generally publicised until 1200 A.D. And what's more, there is evidence that the Egyptians had worked out a relationship between Pi and Phi; that is Pi equals six fifths of Phi squared. So you see, the ancient Egyptians did some pretty advanced mathematics, but of course the Egyptologists don't agree, they just ignore it and put it down to coincidence. Right, let's get down to the more complicated mathematical properties of the Great Pyramid..."

Hermione remained in a state of ecstasy for the rest of the lesson and couldn't wait for the next one to find out more about the amazing exploits of the ancient Egyptians.

Margot Denarnaud was smiling as she walked down the lane towards the church that only six months ago had been the scene of some momentous events. Some of the signs of the magical

spells used that day still showed on many of the gravestones and on the front of the church, but no one knew how those marks had been caused. No one in the little village of Rennes-le-Chateau could remember, except for Margot and her family.

Margot had been talking to one of the young village boys, Serge Mercier, who never lost an opportunity to ask her to go out with him. He was a good-looking boy, and seemed quite sensitive, but she wondered how he'd react if he found out that Margot was a witch.

It was a beautiful morning, and there was only the smallest hint of a chill in the slight breeze that pointed to the imminent arrival of autumn. Margot had just been to the little shop in the centre of the village to buy a fresh loaf of bread, her mother having little time to bake as she normally did each morning. Margot's parents had just left to visit her aunt who lived on the outskirts of Carcassonne. Aunt Claire hadn't been well of late, and they were all a bit concerned. Margot wasn't allowed to go with them, however - she had her schoolwork to do.

She turned to the left as she reached the church and walked quickly towards the house where she lived with her parents and paternal grandfather - Jules Denarnaud. She loved the Villa Bethania; the house built by her great-great-grandfather, Berenger Sauniere, and ever since she could remember, loved to browse through the old priest's extensive library that had been moved to the house many years ago from the Magdala Tower at the other end of the garden.

She opened the front door and went into the kitchen, where she placed the loaf into the bread bin. Then she walked through the hallway and opened the door of the room that served as her classroom. Margot's parents and grandfather had decided not to send Margot to Beauxbatons; they felt that her development as a seer would not be properly nurtured there because of a lack of teaching talent in that field. So they'd decided that it was in her best interests if she stayed at home and received her magical education from her erudite grandfather, Jules.

Jules was well versed in the arts of teaching magical subjects, especially Divination. He had great hopes for his beautiful granddaughter, whose rapid progress in that very rare art was a continual source of pleasure to him. He hadn't yet told her about his dream that she'd one day take over the mantle of responsibility from his shoulders - a dream that looked increasingly unlikely. He'd tried to change the way things were done in the inner circle, tried to get them to accept that their ancient order should be open to witches as well as wizards, but he constantly felt that he was banging his head against a brick wall.

He sighed as he prepared the days lessons, doubtful that he'd ever change the long tradition of only a wizard holding the lofty position of Grand Master of the Priory of Sion.

He turned as he heard the classroom door open, and smiled as he saw Margot enter.

"Bon matin grand-père. Comment allez-vous aujourd'hui?" she said brightly, smiling fondly at him.

"Margot!" said Jules sternly, "In English please. I thought we'd agreed that we'd only speak English during your lessons. Don't forget that you were the one who wanted to become more fluent in the language."

"Sorry grandfather," she said, "I'll start again shall I? Good morning grandfather. How are you today?"

"That's better," he replied smiling, "And I'm very well, thank you Margot."

Margot smiled. She'd wanted to improve her English because of the dream she'd had when she returned home from The Burrow earlier that summer. In her dream, she'd been told that she would become more and more involved in the quests of the Anima Summas, and she didn't want her limited knowledge of English to get in the way of communicating with them. Her accent was now near perfect, thanks to her grandfather and the ancient spells he possessed, spells passed down to him from previous Grand Masters of the Priory of Sion. She was very proud that her grandfather was the head of the order that was the spiritual protectors of the secret of Rhedae.

"We'll start off this morning with more English vocabulary," said Jules, "You've got the grammar firmly fixed now, but we need to build up your range of words."

"Yes grandfather," she said as she stood and walked towards him. Jules placed his wand on the top of her head and said an ancient spell in the same unfamiliar language that Margot had heard him use before. A dim silvery light left his wand and covered Margot's head for a few moments before disappearing. She sat back down at the sole desk in the room and waited. She knew from past experience that the spell would take about two minutes to fully attune her brain to the condition that would render it ultra-receptive to the information it would soon be receiving. She never ceased to be amazed at the power of the ancient learning-enhancing spell and the sheer amount of knowledge that was placed permanently in her memory in such a short time. She listened as her grandfather quickly read from an English vocabulary textbook, and she was stunned to see that there were only a few pages left to read. She'd only started learning from that book a week or so ago.

In no time at all, Jules closed the book and looked up, "That's it Margot. You've now learned everything I can teach you about the language. We'll cover Defence Against the Dark Arts next, and before lunch, well practice Transfiguration techniques. We can concentrate on Divination this afternoon."

Margot felt tired at the end of the day's lessons. The learning-enhancing spell tended to wear her out, which was why her grandfather used it only intermittently, generally only once every three days. Margot lay on her bed before dinner thinking about the Anima Summas. She smiled as she tried to visualise what Hermione would think of the spell - she knew about her love of learning, but she couldn't decide whether Hermione would entirely approve of the method. On the one hand, she'd probably relish the thought of being able to absorb an enormous amount of knowledge very quickly, but on the other, she'd most likely miss the delights of working through things and coming to a full understanding at her own pace.

She gave up thinking about it and closed her eyes. A vision of Serge Mercier filled her mind and she smiled. She hadn't been out with a boy before, even though she'd just turned sixteen, and she wondered what it would be like. She'd seen people kissing before, of course, and being a very tactile family, was constantly kissing, and being kissed, by her parents. She wondered what it would feel like with Serge. Would it be very different?

She sometimes, inevitably, felt a bit left out of things and wondered what it would have been like if she'd gone to Beauxbatons and mixed with youngsters of her own kind.

'Perhaps Mum and Dad will let me go on to University when grandfather teaches me all he knows,' she thought, 'I really would like the company of people my own age, get to know how they think, what they do...'

Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ginny walked out of the Great Hall after breakfast on Saturday morning, and went outside to meet their protectors, who were gathered on the lawn waiting for them, "Come on you four," said Sirius, "We've only got a few minutes before the Portkey is activated."

As they all stood waiting, Fred and George walked up the path to the school, holding their wands in front of them as they levitated a number of large sacks and boxes.

"You're early," said Remus, "Expecting a lot of custom today are you?"

"Yes Mooney," said George, "And we've got to cope all on our own - Lee, Angelina and Alicia are back at the shop trying to keep up with the orders from the ministry."

"Oh, before we forget," said Fred reaching into one of the sacks, "Compliments of Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes - you might find these useful on your visit to Egypt."

Sirius and Remus took the box of Whammos from Fred, "Thanks Fred," said Ceri, "It'll make our job a lot easier."

"Heard anything from America yet?" asked Charlie

"Not yet Charlie," said George, "But when we do, we're going to need a lot more help. You and Nadine don't fancy a job do you?"

Nadine laughed, "We've already got our hands full with these four George. Why don't you ask some of the seventh year students if they want to earn a bit of cash on the weekends?"

"Hey, that's not a bad idea," said Fred looking thoughtful, "I'll have a chat with Dumbledore and see what he thinks about it."

"Come on," said Sirius, "It's nearly time. Grab hold of the broomstick."

"Say hello to Bill for us," shouted George as the group disappeared with a 'pop'.

The first thing they became aware of when they suddenly materialised behind a pile of ancient fallen columns in Hermopolis was the heat. The second thing was the grinning face of Bill Weasley standing just to one side of them.

"Bill!" shouted Ginny as she ran over and hugged her brother, "She pulled back and looked at him appraisingly, "I must say I like the image Bill."

Bill did a twirl for his sister, showing off the white native robes he wore, and the red fez with a black tassel on his head.

"Gone native have you Bill?" asked Nadine as she kissed him on the cheek. Charlie shook his hand warmly and turned back to the others.

"Now let's see. You know Harry and Hermione of course, but I don't think you've met the others. Let me introduce you."

Bill looked towards Sirius, Remus and Ceri, "This is Sirius Black," said Charlie as they shook hands, "And this is Remus Lupin."

"And who is this lovely lady?" asked Bill after shaking Remus' hand, his admiration for the pretty American clear to see.

Charlie glanced nervously at Sirius, who stood scowling at Bill. No one else seemed to notice though. "Uh, this is Ceri Jones Bill. The American Magical Congress seconded her to the team some time ago, and she's been working with Sirius since the summer last year.

Bill took Ceri's hand and looked deeply into her eyes. Ceri, however, ignored the attention and just smiled, "Hello Bill, pleased to meet you," she said as she extricated her hand from Bill's rather over-intimate grip.

Bill dragged himself reluctantly away from Ceri and turned to the others, "Well this is Hermopolis, or what's left of it," he said as he pointed to the extensive ruins, "I've had a good scout around but I couldn't see any dark-cloaked foreigners about. It seems they've left you alone again."

"What are these ruins Bill?" asked Hermione looking at the huge columns, some still standing.

"These are the remains of the Roman basilica built in the third century," he replied.

"And what about those large stone statues over there?" asked Harry.

"That I don't know," said Bill, "Let's take a closer look."

They walked over to the two large statues, made of quartzite, and saw they were statues of animals, "They're baboons!" shouted Hermione, "They must have once guarded the entrance to the great temple of Thoth - the Egyptians sometimes depicted him as a baboon."

"But where's the temple?" asked Ron, who looked beyond the statues to see just a pile of rubble. There were no discernable structures there at all.

"It must have been completely destroyed or just fallen down over the last few thousand years," said Ginny gloomily, "So where do we go from here?"

"Let's see if there's anything magical here," said Harry, "Let's walk between the statues and see if we can feel anything."

As the four youngsters slowly walked between the two baboons, Sirius said, "We'll spread out around the site and make sure no one turns up unexpectedly. He turned back to the others to lead them away but then turned quickly back towards the statues as he felt, rather than heard,

a strange sort of vibration in the air. Harry and the others were no longer standing between the baboons - they'd disappeared.

"There they go again," said Nadine resignedly.

"Come on," said Sirius, "Let's spread out and keep our eyes peeled for anything nasty"

They walked towards the perimeter of the site and started to spread out around it, Sirius, Remus and Nadine to the right and Ceri, Charlie and Bill to the left. As they went, Charlie put his arm on Bill's shoulder, speaking quietly, "Uh Bill. I ought to warn you that Sirius likes Ceri."

Bill turned to face his brother, "And does she like him back?"

"Uh, I'm not sure. But Nadine seems to think so."

"So there's nothing going on between them then," said Bill with a grin.

"Look I wouldn't want to see any... unpleasantness Bill."

"Well you know me Charlie. Remember my motto? All's fair in love and war."

Charlie groaned, knowing he'd have to keep an eye on his freewheeling brother and Sirius. He groaned even more when he saw Bill walk quickly in Ceri's direction.

Harry and the other three youngsters staggered slightly as they felt a slight disorientation. Then they looked about in surprise as a building suddenly materialised around them. They stood inside a covered courtyard, in front of some marble steps that led up to small building, adorned with paintings of Ibises and baboons.

"This must be Thoth's temple," said Hermione, "But don't ask me how we got here."

"That could be the inner sanctum," said Harry pointing to the decorated building at the top of the steps, "I wonder if Thoth's there?"

"There's only one way to find out," said Ron as he started towards the steps. He'd only taken a few steps before he stopped dead in his tracks, staring at the entrance into the building. He quickly stepped back to join his friends as a figure appeared through the entrance and walked slowly to the top of the steps.

"Is that Thoth?" asked Ginny as she strained to make out the facial features of the figure.

"Not unless he's had a sex change," said Harry, "That's most definitely a woman."

"And what a woman," breathed Ron, his eyes nearly popping out of his head. The figure had now advanced to the top of the marble steps, and started to walk down them, her graceful movements bringing a gasp of admiration from Harry and Ron, and an admiring but envious stare from the girls.

The woman was dressed in the style of the ancient Egyptians, her leopard skin dress clinging tightly to her feminine curves. She wore coloured sandals, but her most striking adornment

was the curious headdress that sat atop her flowing shiny black hair that curved delicately about her shoulders. It appeared to be a wand, rising from a jewelled crescent headband, and ending in a seven-pointed star.

"Close your mouths, you two," hissed Hermione as she glanced at the boys.

Ginny giggled but quickly took on a more serious look as the woman reached the bottom of the steps and stood in front of them, about ten feet away. She looked at the four appraisingly and smiled a smile that lit up her beautiful face.

"Welcome to the Sanctuary of Thoth," she said with a melodious and hypnotic voice, "I greet you, Anima Summas and brave helpers. It is pleasing that you have found your way to this place."

"We... we are searching for Thoth," said Harry nervously, "Have we come to the end of our quest?"

"Not so, Anima Summa," she replied, "My father is no longer here. He has gone to another place, to his secret chambers where he guards the wisdom of the ages. That is the place that you must find."

"Your father?" asked Hermione.

The woman turned to look directly at Hermione and smiled, *"Yes wise one. Thoth is my father. I am called Seshat; I am known as the Queen of feminine spirits, the patron of libraries, all forms of writing, and the measurement of time. I was once known as the Mistress of the House of Books, the guardian of the sacred writings of my father."*

Hermione stared at Seshat, overcome with joy that she was standing before the daughter of the original scribe - her kindred spirit. She wanted to ask her so much; she needed to know all about the origins of writing. But she stopped short of voicing her desires, wanting to know more about their quest.

Seshat smiled once more at Hermione, *"Yes, we are indeed kindred spirits, wise one, and we both share a thirst that can only be quenched by knowing all. But your time is short, you must all proceed with your quest to search for my father - he is waiting for you, waiting to impart the knowledge that will send you on your way to the final quest and your destiny."*

"Can you tell us where he is?" asked Harry.

"I have already told you Anima Summa. He is waiting for you in his secret chambers. You must find your own way to that place, but I will give you what assistance I can. Listen carefully."

Seshat paused for a few moments before continuing; *"You must follow the path of the Hunter on his journey through the Duat beneath ancient Rostau. You must seek the place where he left his Earthly existence and rose to his destiny in the stars to look down in the company of his beloved consort on the affairs of man. At the start of your dread journey you will meet the spirits of the Hunter and his consort, who will instruct you."*

Ginny quickly wrote Seshat's words onto a piece of parchment, then looked up as she spoke once more, her voice and face full of compassion, *"Be aware that the way is dangerous and will fill you with fear. You will face ancient forces that will be beyond your comprehension. But armed with what you already have, and the spells that are writ in the tombs of the departed, you will have the protection you need to gain the sanctuary of my father."*

"Where can we find these spells, Seshat?" asked Hermione.

"You must find your way to those yourselves," she replied, *"But you can start at the tomb of the Hunter."*

"We have found out that there were other Anima Summas before us, back in your time on Earth," said Ron, "Can you tell us who they were?"

Seshat smiled, this time at Ron, *"No brave one, you will discover that for yourselves."*

She turned and walked back up the marble steps, and when she reached the top she turned back to the four, *"It is time for you to go. I wish you safe journey, and I hope to see you again when you meet my father."*

And then she was gone. And so was the temple. They found themselves standing between the statues of the two baboons, gazing at the ruins that were once the magnificent temple of Thoth.

Oliver and Katie sat outside the large cabin in the middle of the New Forest in Hampshire. It served as the headquarters for their group of five teams of aurors who provided a badly needed defence for that part of Southern England. Only Phil Brace's team were there at that particular time, the other four teams having gone on routine patrols around the county.

"So what are you going to do tonight Katie?" asked Oliver.

"I really need to write to my parents Oliver. I haven't spoken to them in ages, and I owe them a letter."

"Have you given any more thought to trying to find out about your real father?"

"Well yes. But the only thing I can think of is tackling my parents about it again, and from the way they reacted last time, I'm not really looking forward to it."

"There is another way, you know," said Oliver quietly.

Katie looked at him pointedly, "What other way?"

"Well you said that your real father was at Hogwarts when your mother was there, so you could think about asking Professor Dumbledore. He wasn't the headmaster back then but he was one of the professors, and he may well know all about it."

Katie stared at the ground deep in thought for a minute or two, then, "I really hadn't thought of that, and I suppose there's a chance he'd know who my father is. But I don't know if he'd tell

me even if he knew. And how am I going to find the time to go to Hogwarts with all this Death Eater activity going on?"

"That's a problem, I'll admit, but we'll get some leave eventually and we can go there then. You could be right that Dumbledore won't want to tell you anything, but knowing him, he'll want to do what he can to help. He may even speak to your parents and try to persuade them to tell you."

"Yes, he may well do. Uh Oliver, what do you mean *we'll* go to Hogwarts? Surely you've got better things to do than get involved in my problems."

"Well I haven't Katie, apart from paying a quick visit to my parents."

"Isn't there a girl you'd want to visit? Surely an up and coming Quidditch star like you would have plenty of girls after him?"

Oliver looked embarrassed and self-consciously plucked a piece of grass from the ground and started to twirl it around in his hand, "There's no one Katie. At least, no one I'd want to spend time with rather than help you with finding your father."

"That's sweet Oliver," she replied, reaching out to cover his hand with her own. Oliver looked into Katie's eyes, trying to look into her mind. Trying to see if she felt the same way about him as he did about her.

He took a deep breath, "Katie... I..."

They both jumped as Phil Brace came storming out of the cabin, followed by the rest of the team, now back to their full strength of twenty.

"Come on you two," he said hurriedly, "We've got to get to a little place outside Winchester. I've just had an urgent call about a group of Death Eaters massing in a wood not far from a Muggle village."

He waited until all his team gathered around him, and then gave the coordinates to Apparate to a spot at the edge of the woods. A few seconds later, they arrived and immediately dropped to the ground, looking around for any signs of activity, but there was nobody in sight.

"Come with me Oliver," said Phil quietly, "The rest of you stay here and spread out along the edge of the wood."

Phil and Oliver moved slowly into the wood, being careful not to step on any fallen twigs, and stopped every now and again to listen for any sounds of movement. They'd gone about a quarter of a mile when Phil grabbed Oliver's arm and dragged him to the ground. He pointed to their left, and started crawling slowly through a gap in the trees towards a rise in the ground. They reached it and looked cautiously over the top into a small expanse of open ground. They just had time to see a group of Death Eaters disappearing into the trees to their left, walking in the direction where the rest of Phil's team were waiting. They'd only seen the backs of about ten of the black-cloaked figures, but there was no way of telling their full strength.

"Come on, we've got to get back and warn the others," said Phil hurriedly, rising to his feet.

"Noooo..." shouted Oliver as he spotted movement from the opposite end of the clearing. Phil turned sharply around, but before he or Oliver could do anything, a sickly beam of green light snaked across the clearing and caught Phil in the chest. Too late, Oliver aimed his wand at the lone Death Eater and sent the spell that dropped him to the ground, stunned.

When he was sure there were no more Death Eaters lurking at the other end of the clearing, he quickly caught hold of Phil's shoulder and turned him over onto his back. He sucked in his breath sharply when he saw the blank stare, and cursed quietly to himself. Then he pulled himself together and stared at the spot where he'd last seen the Death Eaters. He let out a low anguished cry, "Katie..."

Oliver ran quickly back the way he'd come, all the while looking across to his right to make sure he wasn't spotted. He was about fifty yards from the edge of the wood when he heard the sound of spells and curses being thrown. He stooped low as he ran towards the place where the rest of the team were, and quickly took in the scene. The team were pinned down in an exposed position by two groups of black-cloaked figures to the left, each group containing about fifteen Death Eaters, who had the cover of the trees.

Oliver crawled over to a group of five aurors closest to him and called for them to follow him back into the cover of the trees. He quickly told them what had happened to Phil, and then explained his plan of getting around the back of the nearest group of Death Eaters and exposing them to a crossfire. He led the group quietly, but swiftly, in an arc to their right and soon came to a spot where they could clearly see the first group. Oliver nodded and six Stupefy spells found their mark. Another three fell in the second volley of spells, and the remaining Death Eaters ran frantically over towards the second group, but only three made it under the concentrated fire of Oliver and the others.

Oliver then walked further back into the woods, quickly followed by his colleagues, and started to circle around towards the last enemy position. He suddenly dropped to the ground and waved for the others to follow. A few moments later, they saw three black-cloaked figures running back along a path towards the clearing, and were quickly rendered unconscious as they passed the spot where the aurors lay in wait. Oliver motioned to the others and they crossed the line of the path and moved quickly to the right, aiming to outflank the remainder of the enemy. Oliver cautiously walked to the edge of the wood and looked back along the line of trees and saw that the rest of the team were in a much better position, having gained the cover of a dip in the ground. He walked back into the woods and pointed towards the enemy position, stooped low, and led the other five slowly towards them. They were twenty yards away when Oliver directed the aurors to fan out on either side of him, and then nodded to start their attack.

Surprised by the spells coming from their rear, the Death Eaters panicked and started to run back into the woods. Five of them fell to the ground, stunned by the fire from Oliver's group, and five more soon followed, caught in the crossfire when the rest of the team arrived. The remaining five Death Eaters dropped their wands and raised their arms in the air.

Oliver looked frantically around to see if he could see Katie, but he couldn't see her at first. He quickly moved among his colleagues asking them where she was and turned sharply as he heard a voice behind him, "Looking for me Oliver?"

Oliver let out a sigh of relief as he saw the grinning Katie standing before him, "Oh Katie, " he said, "I thought...."

"Never mind what you thought," she said as she reached out and held his hand for the second time that night, "You saved us. Saved us all." She stretched up and kissed him on the cheek, but stepped back quickly as she heard a chorus of catcalls and whistles from the rest of the team, her face glowing a bright pink.

Oliver stared at her, not believing she'd kissed him, but turned when one of the aurors, John Ballot, approached him, "What do you want us to do Oliver?"

Oliver blinked, "Me? Why me John?"

"Because you've got what it takes," he glanced around at the rest of the team, "We all think you should take charge here now that poor old Phil has gone."

Oliver thought frantically, "Ok. You five secure all the prisoners," he said pointing at the nearest five aurors, "And the rest of you come with me. We've got to make sure there's no more of them around, like the one that killed Phil back at the clearing."

Oliver led the team, Katie close by his side, towards the clearing and searched the surrounding area. When it was clear that there were no more of the enemy in the vicinity, Oliver led the team to the place where Phil Brace lay. They all stared sadly down at their fallen team leader and waited until a white cloak was placed over his body.

"He was a good team leader. The best," said Oliver, "The reason he died was because he was too anxious to get back and make sure you weren't caught in a trap. He was always thinking of his team."

They carried Phil back out of the woods and laid him reverently on the ground, awaiting the arrival of the medics, and a relief team to take the prisoners back to divisional headquarters. Then they Apparated back to their camp in the New Forest for a well-earned rest.

The next morning, Oliver was called into the group commander's little office. He knocked and walked in to see Arnold Wise sitting at his desk, reading the report that Oliver had written late the previous night. The slightly balding, middle-aged man looked up and smiled, then gestured for Oliver to sit in the chair in front of his desk.

"I'm very sorry about Phil Brace," he said, "He was one of our best team leaders and we're all going to miss him, me in particular. Apart from being a good friend, I relied a lot on Phil to help with the running of the group, and to work out a lot of our tactical strategies. You haven't been here very long, but I know that you both got on very well. I don't know if Phil ever told you, Oliver, but he had a lot of respect for the way you conduct yourself, and he'd started to look on you as his second in command."

"I had a lot of respect for him too commander," Oliver replied, "And I know that Alastor Moody's going to miss him. They were friends from the old days."

The commander nodded sadly and then looked back down at the report on his desk, "This is a good report Oliver; concise and to the point. I'm looking for a new team leader now, and I can't think of anyone better than you. Will you take it on?"

Oliver looked stunned, "But... but I'm new here commander, surely there are more experienced aurors that are better suited for it?"

"Don't talk yourself down Oliver. Only yesterday, 'Mad Eye' was telling me about the leadership qualities you showed in abundance at camp Merlin, and as I told you, Phil had a very high regard for your tactical awareness. I debriefed the other members of your team early this morning and they told me how you took the initiative after poor Phil was killed. You saved the team yesterday Oliver, and they all hold you in the highest esteem. I know you can handle this, so what do you say?"

"I... I'm flattered commander," Oliver thought for a few moments, "All right, I'll give it my best shot."

"Excellent. But there's one thing I want to warn you about, the thing that ages our field commanders way before their time. Oliver, you'll be responsible for the well being of your team and you're inevitably going to lose some of them. No one fully comes to terms with that; not even Phil. I spent many a long night trying to console him after some of his men were killed in action - he always thought it was his fault. He always thought that if he did things a little differently, they'd still be alive. But it never was his fault. You'll do well to follow his philosophy when you find yourself having to deploy the team in the field. His prime consideration was to use a tactical strategy in each situation that gave the best chances of victory, with the maximum safety for his team. Follow that and you won't go far wrong."

"Thank you commander. I know that Phil always worried about the safety of the team, but I didn't know that it affected him so much."

"Right Oliver. Come on, I'll introduce the team to their new leader."

It was the early hours of the morning and Margot tossed and turned in her bed, gripped by the terrible dream she was having. Then she woke with a start and gasped, looking fearfully around the room as she sat up, her face a bath of sweat.

As she started to calm down, she tried to remember the details of her dream and the message that she'd heard after the visions had stopped. She reached for some parchment and quill to write down the message - she could still hear it reverberating in her head - 'Tell the Anima Summas and their mentor. They will know what to do.'

'Who is their mentor?' she thought, 'I've got to go to Hogwarts first thing in the morning. Harry and Hermione have to be told about this straight away. Grandfather will be able to set up the Portkey.'

She shuddered as she replayed in her head the vision she'd seen in her dream...

It was a dark place lit only by the flickering light of four magical flames at the corner of a black altar. Strange pictures moved on the walls, pictures from a time long past. At the top of the marble steps leading up to the altar was a terrible figure. It was a man clad in black robes with a hideous face that reminded her of a snake. But it was what the figure was doing that filled her with dread. He held a large black book in both his hands, his arms stretched above his head. He was cackling with mad elation as he looked down on four other black-cloaked figures that knelt at the bottom of the altar, each looking up with an adoring but fearful gaze. There was a name on the spine of the book, but Margot couldn't see it clearly enough to read. She could just make out the first letter, which was written in gold - 'N'.

Confusion, wavering images, and then light. Now the terrible figure walked at the head of a number of other black-cloaked figures. He led them down... always down, until they came to a hot dry desolate place. There was nothing to say the name of that dreaded place... no landmark... no sign. But something behind the vision, beyond sight, revealed the nature of the place in her dream. In her inner being she knew she was looking at the bottom of the Earth.

Chapter 7 The Bottom of the Earth

Sirius and Charlie sat eating a late breakfast in the Great Hall, while Nadine and Ceri were at the other end of the table, talking animatedly. After they returned from Egypt and had given Dumbledore their report on what happened, they'd just had time to grab a late supper before the protectors and the four friends sank wearily into their beds, and inevitably, they'd all got up late that morning.

"Sirius," said Charlie, "I'm sorry about the way Bill acted in Hermopolis. I hope you didn't get too mad at him."

"Why should I get mad at Bill?" he replied, "Ceri's a free agent Charlie. She can do whatever she likes."

"I know Sirius, but I thought that you... well you know..."

"No I don't know Charlie. Look, I've got to see Dumbledore about some spying reports. I'll see you later."

Charlie shook his head as he watched Sirius walk out of the Great Hall, 'I wish he'd loosen up a bit,' he thought. He looked over at his girlfriend and Ceri, made to go to join them, and then changed his mind. He got up and made his way towards the owlery to send a note to his parents - he wanted to tell them that their latest excursion had ended safely.

"So what did he say?" asked an exasperated Nadine. She'd spent almost the entire breakfast trying to find out what she and Bill had been up to while they waited for Harry and the others to reappear.

"Not a lot," said Ceri in an offhand manner, "He just asked me if I'd like to go out on a date with him sometime."

"What?" shouted Nadine, looking around to see if anyone had heard, "And what did you say?"

Ceri grinned slyly at her friend, "Not a lot."

"Come on Ceri!" Nadine was now nearly pulling her hair out, "You can't tell me that - you must have given him some sort of reply."

Ceri looked askance at Nadine, "Why are you so interested?"

"You know why! Sirius must have felt terrible watching you two flirting."

"I was not flirting! Bill might have been, but I wasn't."

"Ah! So you said no then."

"I didn't say that!" Ceri grinned at Nadine, and felt a bit guilty at stringing her along, "All right Nadine, I said no."

"And a good job too!" exclaimed the French girl, "So what did he say when you said no?"

"Nadine!" Ceri hissed, "Enough!"

"So there's nothing going on, or is likely to go on, between you?"

"Of course not. Bill's a lot of fun, but he *is* a bit of a lad with the women - or at least that's what Charlie told me. And anyway, I've finished with all that - I told you before."

"Hmmm," said Nadine, a smile finally lighting up her face.

Later that morning, Ceri met up with Sirius in the school grounds to do their security checks along the edge of the Forbidden Forest. Whenever they were at the school, they made a point of making frequent, but irregular, checks ever since the attack at the beginning of last summer. They reached the edge of the forest and transformed into their animagus forms - they found it much quicker to cover the ground that way, and they could make use of their ultra sensitive hearing.

After an hour's search, they met back up and transformed, "Not a sign of anything," said Ceri.

"Me neither," said Sirius, and started walking back up to the school. Ceri ran to catch up with him and looked at his unsmiling face.

"Anything wrong?" she asked.

"Nothing," was the terse reply.

"Come on Sirius, I think I know you better than that - something's bothering you."

Sirius stopped and turned to face her, "Look Ceri... I... Did you and ..." He let out a sigh and continued walking back up to the school.

Ceri had a wry smile on her face as she followed - she had a pretty good idea what was bothering him, but she didn't feel it was her place to drag it out of him.

Up in Gryffindor common room, Harry and Hermione sat across a table from Ron and Ginny. Between them was the parchment on which Ginny had written down everything that Seshat had told them.

"What do you think Hermi?" asked Ron, "You've been the one to decipher cryptic messages up to now. Any idea what it means?"

"Well she told us quite a few things," said Hermione, "We have to go where the Hunter went - through somewhere called the Duat which is underneath a place called Rostau. And it looks like we've got to find the place where he died and went to heaven. And it seems that his consort - presumably that means his wife - was with him."

"And she said that we'd meet their spirits at the beginning of the journey - so it looks like we'll get some help," said Harry.

"But look at this," said Ginny, "She said it was a dread journey - that sounds awfully like our trip through the Labyrinth."

"Yes," said Ron, "And she also said that the trip will fill us with fear, and we'll come up against some ancient forces that we won't be able to understand. I wonder what she meant by that?"

"But at least we'll get some protection from those spells she talked about, if we can find them," said Harry.

"So let's look at it logically," said Hermione, "First, we've got to find those spells, and Seshat told us they're written in the tombs of the dead. And she also told us to start looking for them at the Hunter's tomb."

"And that brings us back full circle to the Hunter," said Ron, "Who the bloody hell is he anyway?"

"Ron!" gasped Hermione; "I swear your language is getting worse by the day."

"Sorry," he said sheepishly, "But why can't they just come out and tell us in plain English what we've got to do?"

"You know why Ron," she replied, "We've talked about it before."

"All right," said Ginny, stepping in to stop another acid remark that seemed to be on the tip of her brother's tongue, "So we can't do anything until we've found out who the Hunter is. I suggest we concentrate on that, and leave the rest of the message until we've solved that bit."

"I don't know about that Ginny," said Hermione, "I think we might have to find out more about the Duat and Rostau before we can even begin to work out who the Hunter is."

"So where do we start?" asked Harry.

The four looked at each other for a few moments and then they all said together, "Professor Dumbledore's books."

They all started laughing, but Harry, Hermione and Ginny stopped as they saw the look that suddenly came over Ron's face. From where he was sitting, he was facing the common room portrait hole, and he was staring at it with eyes wide, mouth slightly agape, and a pink flush that began to spread through his cheeks.

"What's the matter Ron?" asked Harry. But when he turned towards the portrait hole to see what he was staring at, he knew exactly what the matter was. Standing there, looking quite nervous, was a tall girl, almost as tall as Ron. Her long white hair framed a face of exquisite beauty, with startling green eyes, a cute nose, full sensuous lips and clear, fair complexion.

"Margot!" he exclaimed at the same time as Hermione. The two rushed across the room to greet the beautiful French girl, wondering why she was here, and how she'd managed to get into the common room.

"I'm sorry to intrude on you like this," she said tentatively, "A boy called Neville gave the password to let me in. I hope you don't mind."

"Of course we don't mind Margot," said Harry, smiling, "It's great to see you again."

"Margot! Your accent!" exclaimed Hermione, "Or should I say your lack of one. Your English is perfect - how did you manage that?"

"I have to thank my grandfather for that," she replied, "He's an excellent teacher."

"So why are you here, Margot?" asked Harry, "The last time we saw you it was to give us a message. Does this mean you've got another message for us?"

"Yes Harry, I have to tell you about a dream I had but it's also for your mentor. Do you know who that is?"

"That's our headmaster, Professor Dumbledore," he replied, "We'll take you up to see him in a moment, but let me introduce you to my friends first."

Ginny got up from her chair and walked across to Margot, grinning as she held out her hand. "I'm Ginny. I've heard a lot about you Margot."

"Pleased to meet you Ginny," said Margot, smiling as she held the redhead's hand. She looked across the room and saw that Ron was still sitting at the table, looking at her with a far-away expression on his face.

"Come on over and meet Margot Ron," urged Hermione.

Ron stood up quickly from his chair, sending it crashing to the floor behind him, then started to walk across the room, not taking his eyes from the vision of beauty before him. He reached the end of the table and somehow managed to catch his foot on the leg; he stumbled, but saved himself from falling, then straightened and continued over to the others, his face now bright red.

Harry, Hermione and Ginny stared at him, wondering what had come over him - they knew he wasn't prone to such awkwardness. Margot raised a hand to her mouth, trying to hide the tinkling laughter, but couldn't quite manage it. She looked at Ron with kind, warm eyes as he came up to her.

"I saw you last Easter," she said, holding out her hand, "flying off to fight those terrible men. You were very brave."

"Uh, I was?" said Ron as he took her hand in the gentlest of grips, looking at it as if he was afraid it would break if he applied too much pressure.

"Yes, you were," she replied

Ron looked back up into Margot's eyes and suddenly felt weak at the knees. He just stared into the mesmerising eyes, seemingly incapable of stringing two words together to say to her.

"Ron!" hissed Ginny, "Let go of Margot's hand."

Ron looked down and quickly took his hand away and let it drop to his side.

Harry and Hermione grinned at each other, recognising the telltale signs that Ron was completely smitten by Margot. They glanced at Margot and were pleased to see her still looking at Ron, the smile still playing around her lips.

"We'd better go up to the headmaster's office," said Ginny, looking at her brother in an odd sort of way.

"You four go on ahead," said Harry, "I'll find Sirius and the others - I think they'd better hear what Margot has to say."

A little later, Harry, Sirius, Ceri, Remus, Charlie and Nadine walked into the headmaster's office, where they found the four teenagers sitting to one side of Dumbledore's desk. The headmaster, McGonagall, Snape and Flitwick were already there, and Hermione was just finishing the introductions. As they took their seats, Hermione introduced Margot to the latest arrivals - Margot looked a bit nervous, she wasn't used to being in a room with so many people.

"Professor Dumbledore," said Harry, "Margot's had a dream that she needs to tell us about."

Dumbledore nodded and looked at Margot, "This dream was about the Anima Summas?"

"Well it wasn't about them sir," said Margot quietly, "But I was told to tell them and their mentor about it, and you'd know what to do. You are their mentor Professor?"

"Yes, I suppose I am," he replied.

"Well it was a strange and terrible dream..." Margot told them what she had seen, and the feelings of dread she'd had. She shuddered as she finished her story and Ron, who was sitting next to her, leaned over and squeezed her hand, a look of sympathy on his face. Margot turned and smiled at him, grateful for his support.

As he heard the first part of the dream, Dumbledore's face took on a grim expression. He looked across at Remus and Snape, who also wore the same grim expression. When she'd finished, Snape was the first to speak, "I can see that you and Lupin are thinking the same thing as me Headmaster," he said.

"Yes I'm afraid so Severus," he replied.

"But do you think it's possible?" asked Remus, looking quite ill.

"It certainly seems to fit," said Snape.

"Would you three mind telling the rest of us what this is all about?" said Sirius impatiently.

Dumbledore raised his hand in acknowledgment and nodded, "The vivid descriptions that Margot told us about in the first part of her dream can only mean one thing. Voldemort has found the fabled book of the Dark Arts - the Necronomicon."

Snape and Remus nodded grimly as the rest let out a gasp, apart from the five youngsters who looked confused.

"Harry," said Dumbledore gently, "For your benefit and that of your four friends, this is something that is not taught in wizarding schools. It remains as a specialised subject in Wizarding University, studied only by those specialising in Defence Against the Dark Arts. The Necronomicon is said to be the most evil book ever written, and is supposed to contain the most evil and unimaginable spells and magical procedures."

"But Headmaster," said Flitwick, "Surely the book, and what people think it contains, is purely a myth?"

"I'm afraid not," he replied, "Certainly there has been no sign of it for hundreds of years, and we all thought that it was destroyed or lost forever, but I don't think there can be any doubt about it, Voldemort wouldn't be so ecstatic unless it was a very powerful and evil book."

"What about the second part of the dream?" asked Harry, "What's so significant about the bottom of the Earth?"

"Ah, if only we knew that," replied Dumbledore, "But Voldemort wouldn't be in such a place unless he was looking for something. I think he's on a quest of his own, but for what - that's the question. If it's connected with the Necronomicon, it can only mean great danger for us all - but I fear we may not know what it is until he finds it and starts to use it against us. Have you heard any whispers Severus?"

"Well I did hear that he hadn't been seen for some time, and a few of the people who normally attend the meetings I go to haven't been there for the last couple of times. But other than that, nothing."

"Where do you think the bottom of the Earth is?" asked Ceri, "I've never heard of a place referred to by that before."

"It sounds as if it's some sort of desert area," said Sirius, "But I haven't got a clue other than that. But there's one thing I know, he's got to be stopped somehow. If what he's after is as dangerous to us as you say Headmaster, we've got to try to prevent him getting it."

"I agree Sirius," said Dumbledore, "although I don't think you are the ones who should do it. But before we decide that, we've got to find out where that place is." Dumbledore grinned and looked at Hermione, "No doubt someone will find out where it is. And when that someone does, we can decide what best to do." Then he looked towards the young French girl, "What are your plans Margot? Are you going back to France?"

"Yes Professor Dumbledore," she replied, "I can't stay long I'm afraid."

"But you'll have lunch with us before you go? It should be ready in about an hour."

"Oh I'd love to Professor," she replied, "But I'm expected back at Rennes-le-Chateau."

Ron's face fell, and he said quickly, "But you haven't had anything to eat or drink. Surely you can have a cup of tea or something before you go?"

"Why thank you Ron," she replied, "I should have enough time for that."

"Harry," said Dumbledore, "why don't you and the others take Margot up to Gryffindor common room. It'll be more comfortable there, and you can get better acquainted before she has to leave. I've a feeling, somehow, that we'll be seeing a lot more of her in the future."

A little later, the five youngsters sat around the fire in the common room drinking tea and talking about Rennes-le-Chateau and the quests. All too soon, Margot got up from her chair, "I have to go back now, but it's been great speaking to you all."

"When will you be coming back Margot?" asked Ron tentatively.

Margot grinned, "I don't know Ron. It all depends on whether I get any more dreams and messages about your quest."

"Well make sure you get plenty of sleep then," he said with a grin.

Margot smiled at Ron and enigmatically raised an eyebrow. Then she turned to the others, "I hope I'll see you all again soon."

She walked towards the portrait hole, but before going out she turned back and looked at Ron, "À bientôt, mon petit chevalier rouge." Then she was gone.

"What?" said Ron, "What did she say Hermi?"

Hermione grinned as she translated, "She said, 'see you soon, my little red knight.'"

A grin slowly spread over Ron's face, "Do you think she likes me then?"

"Well I don't know about that," said Ginny grinning, "But you made it painfully obvious that you're completely smitten with Margot."

Hermione put her hand on Ron's arm, "I think she does Ron. She did say *MY* little red knight."

"Yes she did, didn't she? She's the most beautiful girl I've ever seen," he said quietly, "I think she's even more beautiful than Seshat."

Harry rolled his eyes, "On no, here we go again. Ron - next time you see her, come right out and ask her if she likes you. I don't know if I can stand you moping around the place all the time wondering what she thinks about you."

Ron looked indignantly at Harry, "And I suppose you'd do that if you were in my position?"

Harry just wrinkled his nose and shrugged.

"Hey come on," said Ginny, "we'd better go and get some of Dumbledore's books on Egypt. We've still got a lot of research to do."

"Hang on Ginny," said Hermione, "You're forgetting that we've got something more urgent to look for first. Professor Dumbledore made it quite clear that he expects me to find where the

bottom of the Earth is, and by his tone, he seems very worried about what 'You Know Who' is up to."

"Where are we going to find out about it though?" asked Harry, "I can't even begin to think where we can look."

"Well I suppose we can start by looking at the geography books in the Muggle section of the library," said Ginny, looking at her friends hopefully.

"Not more books!" exclaimed Ron.

"Come on Ron," said Harry, "It'll help to take your mind off Margot."

"I don't want to take my mind off her Harry," he said dreamily, but jumped as Ginny slapped him hard on his arm.

"Get real Ron," she said, "We've got work to do."

It was just before dinner that evening, and Ron leant back in his chair at the library table rubbing his eyes wearily, "That's the last one, and not a hint about the bottom of the Earth."

"This is hopeless," said Harry, "We've checked all the geography books - where do we look next?"

Hermione and Ginny shook their heads in resignation, "I felt sure we'd find something," said Hermione.

"We'd better get down to dinner," said Ginny, "Perhaps we'll think of something later."

They felt a lot better after they'd eaten their dinner, but try as they might, they couldn't think where to look.

"I think we can take a break," said Harry, "Let's just lounge around for the rest of the night. Maybe we'll think of something in the morning after a good night's sleep."

"Good idea Harry," said Ron, "Come on, I'll give you a game of wizarding chess."

"Well I'm going to get an early night," said Ginny, "I'm *so* tired. What about you, Hermi?"

Hermione thought for a few moments and then brightened, "I haven't looked at the books about the Dead Sea Scrolls my parents sent me for my birthday yet. I think I'll have a browse and see if I can find out who The Liar is."

"Haven't you done enough reading today?" asked Ron, grinning.

"I won't even bother to answer that," she replied as she walked up to her dorm.

Hermione pulled the books out of her trunk and settled down on her bed to read, grinning to herself as she contemplated several hours of uninterrupted pleasure. She'd been intrigued about *The Liar* ever since the spirit of Jesus had mentioned it.

She picked up one of the books and thumbed through it, getting a feel for its style and presentation. Then she looked in the index at the back of the book, wondering if there was any reference to *The Liar*, and surprisingly she found it. She quickly turned to the page and began to read, first noting that it was the author's commentary on one of the Dead Sea Scrolls. After ten minutes, Hermione put down the book and stared up at the ceiling, 'I would never have thought it possible,' she thought, again going over in her head what the author had written.

'The Liar, the opponent of the Church of James and the apostles of Jesus, is mentioned many times in the scrolls, although not by name, but after a while it becomes fairly clear to whom they are referring. James, the brother of Jesus, took over the leadership of his teachings, and established a church in Jerusalem. The apostles supported him, but The Liar had his own agenda. He continually derided the newly established church, and threw scorn on the teachings of The Torah upon which Jesus had based his own teachings.'

'It is also surprising that The Liar never once showed remorse or offered any apology for the atrocities he carried out against the Jews before he was converted to Christianity. One can only speculate on his true motives, but it is true that without his input, Christianity would most probably have died following the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans after the Jewish uprising in the first century.'

'So The Liar was the one who brought Christianity to the world, albeit not the same version of Christianity taught by Jesus. For this, St. Paul has to be commended, but I leave it to you, the reader, to reach your own conclusions on the matter.'

Hermione looked back down at the book, and started to rifle through the pages, stopping every now and again to read a fragment of scroll translation and the author's commentary. After she'd read one item, her brow creased in thought, and she read it again, together with the author's comments...

'He will deliver all the captives from the power of the Dark one, and from the power of all the spirits destined to him. Allied with him will be all the righteous divine helpers who will wrest the evil object of power from the followers of the darkness' - 'This passage has consistently baffled the scholars, since no one can identify who 'HE' is, and it has now been cast onto the scrap heap of those sayings that are regarded as mere fantasy.'

"I wonder..." Hermione muttered to herself, and then turned and picked up the parchment and quill that was always on her bedside table and wrote down the item.

She put the book down and looked at the next one, hoping to find more about the enigmatic passage. She looked at the introduction to get a flavour of what was in the book and started to read. After two minutes, she sat bolt upright, her eyes almost popping out of her head, "Ahhhh," she cried and still clutching the book, picked up her notes and rushed out onto the landing outside her dormitory.

"I've found something," she shouted down to Harry and Ron and then rushed into Ginny's dorm.

The two boys, their unfinished chess game forgotten, stared at Hermione as she rushed down the spiral staircase, dragging a sleepy-eyed Ginny behind her.

"What a piece of luck," she said breathlessly as the two girls sat down, "Listen to this. It's part of the introduction to one of the books my parents sent me for my birthday." She opened the book and started to read...

'The Dead Sea Scrolls were written by the religious sect called the Essenes, who once occupied the now ruined buildings at Qumran in a remote part of the Judean Desert. The famous scrolls were discovered in a cave by a Bedouin shepherd in 1947, and since then, more scrolls have been unearthed in a number of other caves that riddle the cliffs standing alongside the northern edge of the Dead Sea. The scrolls were sealed within earthenware jars, and preserved by the arid conditions and unique atmosphere of the area. The Dead Sea is the lowest point on Earth, almost a quarter of a mile below sea level...'

"There it is! The bottom of the Earth!" Hermione looked at the others excitedly, "and listen to this other item I found in one of the other books..."

She read out the enigmatic text and looked expectantly at Harry and her two friends, "What do you think?"

Ron and Ginny looked baffled, but Harry said, "I think we'd better see Dumbledore straight away. I think it speaks about the Anima Summas, and the evil object of power must be what Voldemort is looking for. He's got to be stopped."

"I agree Harry," said Hermione, "Come on, let's go."

"One moment Hermi," said Harry as he walked up to her. He put his arms around her waist and pulled her close, kissing her tenderly on the lips, "You've done it again. Always on hand to solve a problem when it looks like we're beaten - you're amazing."

Hermione blushed prettily, then put her hand behind her back and caught Harry's hand, pulling him towards the portrait hole.

"I'm sorry, but I absolutely forbid it," said Dumbledore as he looked at the four youngsters sitting in front of his desk, "And I'm sure that Sirius and the others will agree with me. It's far too dangerous to go charging off into such a hostile place with Voldemort and his Death Eaters roaming about."

"But Professor," said Harry, looking pleadingly at the headmaster, "Voldemort is obviously looking for this evil object of power, whatever that is, and you said yourself that once he gets his hands on it, none of us will be safe. And Margot's message said we've got to do something about it."

"No Harry, Margot said we'll know what to do, not that we've got to do it ourselves. Look, you can't be deflected from your task now. It's just as important that you complete your quest as it is for Voldemort to be prevented from finding this object. And what's more, it's equally important that you continue with your education as well. I'll get onto the minister straight away and tell him about this. I'm certain he'll send some of his best aurors to the Dead Sea area to stop Voldemort."

"Yes Professor," said Harry, a bit dejectedly.

"Can we borrow some more of your books on Egypt Professor?" asked Ginny, "We've got to try to find out what Seshat told us in Hermopolis."

"Of course, Ginny. You can take whatever you think will be useful."

"It's too late to start reading these books," said Harry as they walked back up to their common room, "We'll start tomorrow after afternoon classes."

"Come in Oliver," shouted Arnold Wise as he heard a knock on his office door. He looked up as Oliver walked in and gestured him to the seat in front of his desk, "How are things going?" he asked.

"Quite well commander," answered Oliver, "Although we haven't seen any action since I took over as team leader. Our last two shouts turned out to be false alarms."

"Yes, teams all around the country are reporting something similar. It looks like the magical community is getting a bit jumpy, but we don't want to discourage their reports - it's better to be safe than sorry. Oliver, minister Fudge has been in touch with divisional headquarters. It seems that something big is going down with 'You Know Who', and he's asked for five of our best teams to go on a mission. I'd like you to represent our group, but I want you to know that it's likely to be very dangerous. I'm not ordering you to be part of this thing, so if you want to refuse I'll quite understand."

"What's it about sir?"

"Professor Dumbledore from Hogwarts has had information that 'You Know Who' is on some sort of quest to find an evil object of great power, although he doesn't know what it is. He knows that he's searching in the desert around the Dead Sea in Israel, and there's a lot of agitation coming from the top that if he finds it, it could mean the end of us all. We've been asked to stop him by any means necessary. What do you say?"

"I'm honoured that you've chosen my team, commander, and I'll be happy to go," Oliver hesitated, "But since it involves 'You Know Who' I think it's only fair to talk to my team first - some of them have got wives and kids so it's only fair that they be given the chance to give this one a miss."

"Of course Oliver, I wouldn't have it any other way. Come back and see me within the next two hours, I need an answer quickly because of the urgency attached to the mission."

One hour later, Oliver walked into the group commander's office, "We'll do it sir," he said, "But four of the team have asked, reluctantly I'll add, to cry off this one. All four of them have got young babies, so I quite understand their position."

"I thought we'd have a few cry off," said Wise, "so I've already lined up some replacements to bring your team up to strength. I've got ten volunteers from our best aurors in the other four teams, so you can take your pick. Now down to business, you'll have to Apparate to divisional headquarters in about an hour to meet the other four teams on the mission and get your

detailed instructions, but in the meantime, I've managed to get hold of a map of the Dead Sea area," he took out a folded sheet of paper from his desk drawer and spread it out on the table, "Come and have a look."

Oliver and the commander leaned over the map, which showed the outline of the Dead Sea, with three places marked on the west bank - Mesada to the south, Ein Gedi in the middle and Qumran at the north-western end.

"Have we got any idea where 'You Know Who' is?" asked Oliver.

"None, I'm afraid, but from the descriptions in the seer's visions, it's most likely on the north-western side, the desert's pretty harsh and rugged around there. I imagine that you'll concentrate your search in that area."

"Who'll be commanding the task force sir?"

"Dave Henson from the Midlands division. He's a good man, I knew him when we were at the ministry together. He's a good choice since he knows this area quite well; he spent a few seasons excavating around Qumran just after he left Hogwarts."

They pored over the map for a little while longer, Oliver trying to commit the main features of the northwestern section to memory.

"You'd better get your team together Oliver," said Wise as he reached over to shake Oliver's hand, "I know you'll do just fine, but make sure you come back in one piece. Good luck."

Oliver walked out of the office looking pensive, his mind full of conflicting thoughts and emotions. He was elated that he'd get a chance to make a significant contribution in the conflict, but he feared for the safety of his team and especially for Katie. It was a bit daunting to know that they'd probably meet up with the darkest wizard of the age.

Fifteen minutes later, he'd finished briefing his team on what he knew of the task and instructed them to Apparate to divisional headquarters, a magically hidden group of buildings in the middle of Salisbury Plain. They materialised at their designated point and looked around to see a lot of activity going on around them.

A tall, middle-aged wizard walked up to the group, "Oliver Wood?"

Oliver stepped forward and held out his hand, "I'm Dave Henson," said the man as he shook Oliver's hand, "I'll be commanding the task force to the Dead Sea area."

"Pleased to meet you," said Oliver, who then introduced the rest of his team.

"You'd better follow me. The last team is due to arrive shortly and we'll get the briefing under way."

They chatted as they walked across the grass to one of the buildings that stood a little apart from the main headquarters, "How do you feel about this Oliver? Call me Dave, by the way."

"A bit mixed Dave," replied Oliver, "Glad to have a chance to make a difference in this conflict, but I know it's going to be very dangerous with 'You Know Who' out there."

Dave Henson grinned, "That's about what everybody feels that I've spoken to."

They entered the building and joined three other teams sitting in front of a raised dais, a map of the Dead Sea area hanging on the wall behind. Oliver noted that the map was a more detailed version of the one he and Arnold Wise had looked at a little earlier. Photographs of the Dead Sea area were pinned to the wall, surrounding the map. The last team to arrive soon filed into the room and took their seats and Henson walked to the front and stepped up onto the dais to begin his briefing.

"Welcome everybody. I've met you all so I'll get straight down to business. First, I'm sure you're all aware that the task on which we're about to embark is very dangerous."

Oliver glanced at Katie, who sat next to him, and gave her a reassuring grin. Dave then proceeded to brief the team on their mission and the desolate terrain in which they'd soon find themselves.

"I'll assign each team to search an area around the north-western end of the Dead Sea, using the old ruins at Qumran as a central point. If the team leaders will step up to the map, I'll allocate each of you one of the sections I've marked on the map. We'll keep in touch by using these Muggle devices," he handed a small radio communicator to each of the team leaders as they gathered around the map, "If you see any Death Eaters, then 'You Know Who' won't be far away. Your orders are to keep yourselves under cover and contact me by radio. We won't attack until all five teams are together. Right, the rest of you come up and take a closer look at the map and these pictures of the general area. Our Portkeys, one for each team, will be activated in half an hour, and don't forget to collect the plastic water tanks that are stacked outside the building - we're going to need them in that heat. Good luck everybody."

Dave called the five team leaders over as the rest of the aurors gathered around the map and photographs, "I don't want any heroics out there," he told them quietly, "If you spot him, call me straight away. For all we know, by the time we find him he'll already have got to this device he's after. So caution is the name of the game - understood?"

All five team leaders nodded gravely, then went back to join their teams.

Half an hour later, the group of one hundred aurors materialised in a small wadi, a short distance from the stark and crumbling ruins that once housed the religious sect of the Essenes at Qumran. The first thing that struck them was the stifling heat, something that the photographs they'd looked at couldn't convey.

"Woo," said Katie, "I think we're in for an uncomfortable time here, and not a bath or shower in sight! But doesn't the air taste a bit strange?"

Oliver grinned, "That's because the Dead Sea area has ten times the amount of oxygen in the atmosphere than any other place on Earth. Dave told me back at headquarters." He turned and called to his team to Apparate to their designated area just to the south of the ruins.

"I've found something about the Duat. It's right here in this book," said Ron. The four were sitting around their accustomed table in the library, reading the books on Egypt that they'd borrowed from Dumbledore.

"I've got something too," said Ginny excitedly, "It's about Rostau - and the Duat."

"Read it out Ginny," said Hermione.

"What about me?" said Ron, looking aggrieved, "I've found something too you know."

"Ladies first Ron," said Harry, grinning at his friend, "Ginny?"

"Well I won't read it word for word, but it says here that the Duat is in the sky. It's a place where the spirits of the dead go, up among the stars. And Rostau is the ancient Egyptian name for the Giza Plateau - where the pyramids and the sphinx are."

Harry's forehead creased as he looked at Ginny, confused, "That doesn't make any sense Ginny. Seshat said that the Duat is *beneath* Rostau - *underneath* the Giza Plateau, so how can it be in the sky?"

Hermione had a knowing smile on her face, "Didn't you take in anything from those books on Hermetic Philosophy? It's the same as the last part of the message that Margot gave us back at The Burrow. It's as plain as the nose on your face. One of the main tenets of Alchemy is 'as above, so below'. As above, so below - the re-creation of heaven on Earth. The Egyptians must have tried to re-create the Duat beneath the Giza Plateau - it's obvious."

"It might be to you Hermi," said Ron doubtfully, "But it's not to me. And anyway, how can they build the sky underneath the ground?"

"That I don't know Ron. Let's keep reading and we might find out more."

Some time later, the four walked down to the Great Hall for dinner, chatting about what they had, and hadn't found.

"Well at least we know about the Duat now," said Harry, "But it sounds a pretty weird place."

"If those books are to be believed, it certainly is," said Ginny, "An underground network of chambers and tunnels that the spirit of the dead Pharaoh had to negotiate to reach his place in the stars above."

"But nobody has found anything there," said Ron, "If such an elaborate network is underneath Giza, surely it would have been found by the archaeologists a long time ago."

"Not if it was a magical place Ron," said Hermione, "Don't forget, no one's found the secret chamber under Rennes-le-Chateau either - except us, of course."

"So how do we get in?" asked Ginny.

"I've no idea," said Hermione, "But don't forget, we've got a lot to find out before we get to that stage. First of all, we've got to find out about the Hunter. And there's nothing in the books I've read so far about that!"

"So I suppose it's more reading then," said Ron, looking dejected.

"I'm afraid so Ron," said Harry, looking equally dejected.

The four friends took a break from their research the next evening. Sirius, Ceri and Charlie had, for quite a while now, been badgering Harry and Hermione to try to perfect their Zapparate talent, so they finally agreed to devote the rest of the evening before dinner to doing just that. The protectors knew that if they could perfect the technique, it would provide a very effective safety net if any Death Eaters managed to get past the protectors. They all walked down towards the lake in the school grounds, where Ron and Ginny stood to one side, Harry and Hermione about forty yards away with the protectors standing behind them.

Harry and Hermione joined hands, making sure the rings were touching, and closed their eyes. Hermione sent her thoughts to Harry, 'Remember what we did last time, when it nearly worked. Try to send soothing thoughts across to me when we visualise getting to Ron and Ginny, and I'll do the same to you.'

They both concentrated on sending each other relaxing thoughts at the same time as visualising Ron and Ginny. Then they tried to ease themselves over towards their friends. Again, they felt the same strange feeling as they had before - a feeling of being in two places at the same time. After a few moments they opened their eyes, but were disappointed to find that they hadn't moved from their original positions.

"You're almost there!" shouted Ginny, "Like the last time, you both appeared beside us for the briefest of moments."

"That's right," said Nadine, "You sort of blinked out where you're standing now and the next instant you were with Ron and Ginny, but only for an instant."

"Have another go," said Ceri, "I'm sure you'll be able to master it."

Again, Harry and Hermione went through the same routine, with exactly the same results. They tried it three more times, but could still only manage to arrive and stay at their friends' side for an instant.

"We're missing something here," said Hermione thoughtfully as the group gathered around the pair, "There's some vital ingredient to all this that we're not doing. Something we did when we managed to Zapparate to Dumbledore, that we're not doing now. But what?"

She looked at Harry pleadingly, "Think Harry. Try to remember what we did exactly."

Harry thought for a few moments as he tried to remember what exactly they had done, "Well we were talking about Margot's message and we decided we had to get to Dumbledore quickly. Then we held hands and the rings touched, and we were there. I can't think of anything else we did or thought about."

"I wonder if that's it," said Remus suddenly, "I wonder if you have to have a strong desire to be someplace because of some urgent need. You had an urgent need to speak to the headmaster because you wanted to unravel the message. Perhaps that's it."

"Hmm. You could be right," said Harry. "What do you think Hermi?"

"It makes sense," she replied, "But how are we going to practice it without having some urgent need to get to Ron and Ginny?"

Ginny grinned and glanced at her brother, "Go and throw yourself in the lake Ron. That'll give them an urgent need to get to you to stop you drowning."

"Very funny," said Ron, pulling a face at his sister, "That won't work anyway - Harry knows I can swim. Why don't you throw yourself in?"

"I don't think so Ron," said Harry, glancing at Ginny, "It's a bit too cold to go swimming in the lake."

"Yes you're right," said Charlie looking thoughtfully at the pair, "But Ginny's made a very good point. What can we do that'll give you an urgent reason to reach one of us? What if one of us walks into the Forbidden Forest and gets lost or something? Do you think that might work?"

Hermione looked at Charlie dubiously and shook her head, "But we'd know it was a put-up job, so it wouldn't be the same."

"Help! Harry, Hermione come quick! There's something wrong with Sirius!" shouted Ceri.

The pair turned around to see Ceri waving at them frantically over by the Quidditch pitch, leaning over the prone figure of Sirius.

"Quick Hermi," hissed Harry, "Join hands!"

The next instant, Harry and Hermione materialised beside Ceri, and they both knelt down anxiously at Sirius' side. He opened his eyes and grinned, "Well now we know, don't we? You've got to have a very good reason to Zapparate."

"Sirius!" exclaimed Harry and Hermione together, "That was a terrible thing to do," said Hermione.

"We thought you were badly hurt, or worse!" shouted Harry, punching his godfather painfully on his arm.

They all stood, Sirius massaging his arm ruefully, as the rest came running up, grinning, "Sorry about that," said Charlie, "But we had to do something to solve the problem."

"You were all in on this weren't you?" said Hermione.

"Afraid so," said Ron, "But it wasn't easy distracting you both to give Ceri and Sirius enough time to get as far away as possible."

Harry looked at his friend with narrowed eyes, "You can be a devious sod on times Ron."

"Thanks for the compliment Harry," he said, grinning.

"Well at least we know we can do it if the need arises," said Hermione, "But what we don't know is whether we can take Ron and Ginny with us. If the four of us find ourselves in a bit of a pickle, can we save them as well as ourselves?"

"I don't see why not," said Ceri, "After all, we can Apparate other people by holding on to them, so why can't you Zapparate the same way?"

"I suppose so," said Hermione, "But we won't know for sure until the need arises and I'm not sure I want to take that chance. Can you think of any way we can try it?"

"Well it's pointless trying to do what we just did, you'll be waiting for it," said Sirius, "And to be honest, I really can't think what we can do that'll make you take Ron and Ginny with you. I'm afraid we'll just have to trust that you can do it."

"I think we've done enough for tonight," said Remus, "Come on, it's dinner time."

As they all walked into the Great Hall, Colin and Clare pounced on Harry and Hermione, "We've had a load of mail for you both today Harry," said Colin, "Can you spare us a minute?"

"We want to know what to say to everybody when we reply," said Clare, "Nearly everybody wants to know how soon you'll be able to defeat 'You Know Who', and we really need you to give us some idea."

Harry glanced at Hermione, a worried expression on his face, "All you can say for the moment," said Hermione carefully, "is that we're working as hard as we can on the second quest, and we've made a lot of progress. But we really can't say when we'll be ready - just tell them to keep faith with us, and to never forget that the Light is on our side."

"Is that ok?" asked Harry.

Colin and Clare grinned, "I think so. Thanks Hermione," said Colin as he and the pretty second year walked back to their seats at the Gryffindor table.

"How much longer must we search this hell hole!" shouted Voldemort as he led his Death Eaters across the barren desert to the next grid on the map, "We've been over a month and there hasn't been the slightest hint that the Disc is near."

His mood over their month or so of searching hadn't really got worse, but it hadn't improved either. Patience certainly wasn't one of Lord Voldemort's virtues, but then neither was any of the other accepted virtues. They had covered the majority of the area on their map, and were now almost in sight of the ruins of Qumran. The cliffs that stood some way back from the Dead Sea had steadily come into sight over the past few days, and the stretch of desert to be covered between them and the sea was becoming narrower.

Voldemort stopped and raised his wand, muttering the spell that would illuminate his wand if the artefacts were close by. He gasped in frustration yet again as the tip of his wand remained inert. Lucius crossed out the grid on the map and then ran to catch up with his master as he moved to the next point, over towards the cliffs.

Two miles away, at the base of the cliffs, Oliver strained his eyes as he looked out over the desert towards the Dead Sea. He quickly waved to his team to drop to the ground when he thought he saw something moving in the distance. He called Katie and John Ballot to join him and they dropped to the rough ground at his side, just behind a slight rise. They were glad of the little bit of excitement after searching fruitlessly for almost a week.

"I think there's something moving out there," he said, "About two miles away, towards the sea just south of that funny little rock sticking out of the desert floor."

John and Katie shielded their eyes from the sun's glare and peered intently at the spot that Oliver had indicated, "There's definitely something out there," said John as he tried to make out any details in the shimmering heat haze that covered the desert in the distance.

After a few minutes, Katie said, "I think there're about ten, no wait a minute... there's more, about fifteen figures dressed in black walking towards our position."

"Well it can't be any of our group," said John, "That's our search area, and in any case, they're dressed in black robes. I think it might be 'You Know Who' and his men, Oliver."

"I agree John," said Oliver as he raised his little radio to his mouth and pressed the 'transmit' button, "Come in commander," he said, releasing the button.

After a few moments, Dave Henson's voice, sounding strange amid the crackling of the radio, answered, "Is that you Oliver?"

"Yes Dave, We've got about fifteen black-cloaked figures walking towards our position. They're about two miles away out in the desert."

"Give me a fix on your position Oliver. I'll get in touch with the other teams and we'll be with you in a few minutes."

Five minutes later, Dave Henson and Oliver looked out over the desert where Voldemort and his men could now be clearly seen. They'd stopped and were gathered around the Dark Lord, who had his wand raised in the air. After a few moments, the group started moving again, but this time towards the north in the direction of the Qumran ruins.

"We'll just track them for the time being," said Dave, "We'll be heading into a lot of rough ground a bit further north and there should be plenty of cover."

Fifteen minutes later, with the ruins of Qumran now in plain sight, Dave called a halt when he saw Voldemort go through the same strange ritual as before, raising his wand in the air. This time however, he saw the group moving about excitedly as a faint dark green light appeared at the tip of the wand. He saw Voldemort turn slowly around in a circle, as if he was trying to sense a direction. Then he turned towards the cliffs and started striding with great purpose towards them.

Dave called Oliver and the other team leaders to his side, "They're up to something. I think 'You Know Who' has got a fix on what he's looking for - look at the way they're striding over to the cliffs. If they keep in that direction, they'll get to the cliff face about half a mile in front of our present position."

"They're probably heading towards a gap in the cliffs," said Oliver, "It leads into a winding canyon that cuts into the plateau - we checked it out two days ago."

"Can you remember the terrain around that gap?" asked Dave, "If we move quickly we can set up an ambush."

"There's a fairly shallow wadi running just this side of the gap, and continues on into the canyon for about a hundred yards. If we can get there before them, we can get into the canyon undetected - there're loads of places in there where we can hide."

"Good work Oliver," said Dave. He turned to the other team leaders, "We'll follow Oliver and his team into the wadi and move along it into the canyon. We'd better get a move on, but for goodness sake, make sure everybody keeps out of sight."

Oliver and Dave led the group, running quickly along the shallow depression at the base of the cliffs. They reached the wadi and quickly jumped down into it, moving into the narrow winding canyon. Dave and Oliver peered cautiously over the top of the wadi and were relieved to see that Voldemort and his group were still about half a mile away from the canyon entrance.

Hidden safely away around the first bend in the canyon, Dave deployed his team among the crumbling rocks at the base of the canyon walls, three teams on one side, and two on the other. Then they settled down to wait for Voldemort and his followers to appear.

They didn't have long to wait, and ducked down behind their cover when they heard the loud laughter of the Dark Lord just around the other side of the bend.

"It won't be long now," said Voldemort excitedly to his men, "In a few moments I will hold the most powerful object in the world!"

He led his Death Eaters around the bend in the canyon and looked up at the stark crumbling walls of rock. He held up his hand to halt the procession and again turned his wand to both sides, looking intently at the green light at its tip.

"Straight ahead," he said and started walking quickly up the narrow canyon. They'd only gone about a hundred yards when they were met by a furious barrage of stunning spells. Five of the Death Eaters dropped unconscious to the ground immediately, quickly followed by two more.

"Agggghh," shouted Voldemort as he saw the ranks of ministry aurors on both sides of the canyon. He quickly took stock of their hopeless position and raised his wand in the air, shouting words in a strange language.

Oliver never really knew what happened next. Like the rest of the aurors in the canyon, his vision was completely obscured by a deathly black light. It was as if day had suddenly been turned into night, except that there were no moon or stars to see by. "What the hell?" shouted Dave Henson as he instinctively dropped to the ground behind a rock.

It was five minutes before any of them started to see again, the black light slowly lifting to be replaced by the late afternoon sunshine. Dave looked at the spot where the Death Eaters had been standing, but all that remained were the seven black-cloaked figures they'd stunned a

few minutes ago. Of Voldemort and the rest there was no sign. He looked into the shadowy depths of the canyon but could detect no sign of movement. The Dark lord had escaped.

"What was that?" asked Oliver as he walked up to his commander's side, "Did you hear that strange spell he used?"

"I've never heard or seen anything like it before," said Dave, "He's obviously got hold of some pretty powerful dark magic to be able to do that." He turned to the rest of the group, "Gather around me please."

He waited until everyone came close, "Is everyone all right?" All five team leaders checked their aurors and nodded to the commander.

"I think it's fairly certain that he's gone further into the canyon - that's the way he was headed when we attacked. Oliver, assign five of your people to secure the prisoners and guard them, the rest of you follow me."

They moved cautiously up the canyon, Oliver's team to the fore, spread around both sides to take what cover there was in the shade of the cliffs.

A short distance away, Voldemort watched the aurors as they passed below him. He and the rest of his men were hiding in one of the many caves that dotted the cliff face. They had climbed up to it over a wedge-shaped jumble of rock that had fallen in times past from the top of the cliff, almost covering the entrance to the dark cavern. When he saw the aurors walk around the next bend in the canyon and safely out of sight, he again raised his wand and spoke the searching spell. The dark green light now glowed brightly at its tip.

"It's close, very close," he hissed. He turned and walked to the back of the cave, where he saw a narrow cleft in the rock wall. He squeezed his thin body part way into the cleft and stretched his wand into the gloom beyond. The green light suddenly burst into a very bright, almost blinding, red.

"It's here!" he exclaimed, squeezing through the cleft and entering a small cave, which was enclosed on all sides by rock that seemed a lot darker than the rock in the first cave.

Lucius, Wormtail, Travis and Crabbe quickly followed at the Dark Lord's command and started examining the walls and floor in the light from their wands. Wormtail walked to the middle of the cave and held his wand low to examine the floor at the centre. He suddenly jumped back, his wand flying from his hand, staring fearfully at the ground.

"What was that, Wormtail?" asked Voldemort.

"There's something there, my Lord," he said, a tremor in his voice, pointing at the spot in the centre of the cave floor, "I had a terrible feeling when I bent and held my wand close to it - I can't really describe what it was like, just a sort of feeling of dread."

"Check it out Travis," said Voldemort quietly.

Travis cautiously bent down and held his illuminated wand over the centre of the cave floor. Like Wormtail before him, Travis suddenly jumped back, staring with fear in his eyes.

"Out, all of you," hissed Voldemort, "I'll deal with this myself." The Death Eaters gratefully squeezed out of the dreaded place and back to the connecting cave where they kept watch on the canyon floor below, happy to let their master deal with whatever horror lay in wait.

Voldemort knelt on the ground, close to the place that had caused his followers so much fear, and started brushing away the dust and dirt from the area. Soon, a circular white cover stone was exposed, covered in a strange script the likes of which, Voldemort had never seen before. It glowered with an eerie silvery light, and he felt something of the dread that his men had felt earlier. He quickly got to his feet and looked down at the strange stone.

Voldemort pulled out the parchment from his robes, the parchment on which he'd written the special spells given to him by the Guardian of the Gate. He studied them for a few moments, going over the correct pronunciations in his head until he was sure he had it right. Then he stood at a spot furthest from the centre of the cave, close to the cleft, and raised his wand, aiming it at the cover stone. He cleared his mind and concentrated hard, willing his power to build, reaching into the very depths of his being. He lifted his head in elation as he felt the raw power surge through his mind. He opened his mouth and spoke the spell as he pushed the raw power into his wand.

"KU KUR - GAZ NURUM"

A dense black light flashed from Voldemort's wand and hit the cover stone. He watched in fascination as a dark glow began to build, surrounding a circular patch of about one foot in diameter on the ground. Then he recoiled as a terrible screeching filled the small space, and a silvery blue light began to dance over the dark glow. He moved quickly back through the cleft into the first cave and walked over to Lucius and the others.

"I have set in motion the ancient spell that will crush the thing that guards the Disc of Gates," he said, "It may take some time, but in the end it will prevail and the disc will be mine."

They could all now hear the screeching and wailing from the next cave, and covered their ears. Lucius and the others cowered on the dusty floor of the cave, while Voldemort raised his head and laughed, a demented laugh. After a few minutes, the terrible sounds stopped, to be replaced by a deep pulsing noise that was almost beyond their hearing limit.

"The first battle has been won," said Voldemort, "The next will take several hours to complete. Keep a watch below in case any of the aurors come this way - I don't want to be disturbed now that my hour of triumph is so near."

Darkness had fallen over the desert as the sun finally set, bringing relief to the sweat-covered aurors camped at the far end of the canyon. Dave Henson sat with his five team leaders discussing their next actions. They had failed, in the few remaining hours of daylight after their ambush, to find any trace of Voldemort and his Death Eaters.

"Perhaps he's given up and gone back to his cave," said one of the men.

"I don't think so," said Dave, "He's spent a long time searching for this thing, whatever it is, and now he's come close he won't be giving up that easily."

"He might have gone back out into the desert," said one of the other team leaders, "waiting until we give up the search before he comes back."

"That's a possibility, but I don't think so. What about you Oliver? What would you do if you were in the Dark Lord's shoes?"

Oliver thought for a few moments, "He'd most probably use the time when we were blinded to get around the next bend in the canyon and look for a good hiding place. These cliff walls are riddled with caves."

Dave nodded, "That's my assessment as well." He turned to one of his team leaders, "Jerry, take your team down to the other end of the canyon and join up with Oliver's five aurors. Make sure you're well hidden, and post guards at all times. I don't want him creeping back into the desert in the dark. Use some Whammos just in case. The rest of us will move back down towards your position at first light, and we'll search every cave we come across."

Jerry nodded and walked over to his team. Soon they were walking cautiously back along the canyon towards the gap in the cliff wall. They arrived half an hour later and were relieved to see that Oliver's five aurors were still there guarding the prisoners. They soon placed the Whammos along the ground about fifty yards back up the canyon, and settled down, some to sleep and some to keep watch.

Only a hundred yards or so back up the canyon, Voldemort waited for the low pulsing to stop. They'd seen, in the dim light given off by the stars, the team of aurors passing below them a few hours ago and knew that their exit from the canyon was blocked.

It wasn't until dawn that the pulsing stopped, signalling that the fight between the Light and Dark spells was over. Voldemort squeezed through the cleft and looked inside the second cave. He saw that the stone cover lay to one side of the cave, and the writing on its face was blackened and smouldering. He walked cautiously over to the dark hole in the centre of the floor and held his illuminated wand to peer inside. His eyes grew wide when he saw the object resting at the bottom of the small chamber, and he quickly knelt down, put his hand into the hole, and felt the Disc of Gates. He lifted it carefully and held it up in front of his eyes.

He hissed as he studied the Disc. It looked exactly as it had been painted in the temple at Irem - a disc-shaped piece of black substance, with a black crystal in the middle, and attached to it were thin chains made of the same black substance. He pulled the chains over his head and let the Disc rest on the top half of his chest.

The elation in Voldemort's eyes was plain to see as he went back to his followers in the other cave, "I have it!" he exclaimed, "Now we need to find the spells that will activate it." He lifted his wand again and said the seeking spell, although this time the words were slightly different. He hoped that the place where the spells were hidden was close by. He grunted with satisfaction when the tip of his wand glowed with the same dark green light as before.

"It's close," he said, "Within four hundred yards of where we stand." He turned and noted the direction that caused the green light to glow slightly more brightly, "It's further up the canyon, probably in one of the other caves. Come on, we'll try to get there before the rest of the aurors show up."

He led his remaining eight Death Eaters out of the cave and down to the rocky ground of the canyon floor, being careful to remain hidden from the aurors that were stationed at the canyon opening behind a buttress of rock that stood out from the cliff. He sent Travis on ahead and then walked quickly behind. Travis stopped at the next bend and peered around its ragged edge. He held up his hand and walked back to the group, "My Lord, There are about seventy aurors searching the caves and canyon floor up ahead, and they're coming this way."

Voldemort slapped his thigh in frustration, "We'll go back into the desert and find a place to hide until they give up the search," he said, "Then we'll come back and get the spells. Apparate to those ruins just to the north of here and look for a suitable place."

A few seconds later, the aurors had the canyon completely to themselves, but they still searched for the Dark Lord. Oliver's team had been assigned to search a group of caves in the right-hand cliff, and he now stood at the apex of a pile of rocks, looking up at a cave about six feet above his head.

"John, Katie, will you come here please?"

The two scrambled up the loose rock and stood just below Oliver, "John, if you scramble up and stand on my shoulders, you should be able to lift yourself into that cave. You can follow John, Katie, and then help him to lift me up." He bent down to allow John Ballot to climb onto his back, and then step up onto his shoulders. Oliver shakily stood up and braced himself against the cliff wall. John reached up and put his hands onto the floor of the cave and heaved himself up. Oliver helped by grabbing the soles of his shoes and pushing until the auror managed to drag himself into the cave. Katie soon followed, and then she and John reached down and grasped Oliver's hands, supporting him as he scrambled up the crumbly rock.

They stood slightly out of breath, looking into the depths of the cave that stretched darkly back into the cliff. Oliver walked into the cave, his wand raised to provide light, with Katie and John following closely. After about thirty yards, the cave became a lot narrower and the ceiling dropped down to just below head height. Oliver stopped and held his wand in front of him, then stooped and moved into the narrow corridor that stretched further into the rock, telling the other two to wait.

The sand and dust was thick around his feet as he stepped slowly down the tunnel. After he'd gone ten yards or so, it came to an abrupt end, and he stood facing bare rock. He turned and started his way back, but noticed, low to the ground on his left hand side, a dark and narrow opening, which had been hidden by the protruding rock wall when he'd entered. He bent down and held his wand into the opening and saw that it led, via a low connecting tunnel of about five feet in length, into a larger space beyond, but he couldn't make out any further details. He called for the other two to join him and showed them what he'd found.

"I'll crawl through and see what's in there," he said, "You grab my feet and get ready to pull me back out if I shout."

He got down on the floor and eased himself slowly into the tunnel, using his elbows to pull himself forward. He soon reached the end of the tunnel and cautiously peered inside. He saw a fairly small and roughly circular cave, and noted that it was completely empty. Suddenly, he stiffened and shouted for Katie and John to drag him back out.

"What's wrong Oliver, did you see any Death Eaters in there?" asked John. Oliver looked shaken as he slowly stood up and took a deep breath.

Katie put her hand on his shoulder, looking concerned, "What is it Oliver?"

"In there," he said slowly shaking his head, brushing the dust and sand from his robes, "It's nothing but an empty cave, but when I started to look around, I had the most urgent feeling to get out of there. It's difficult to explain, but I think there're some very strange forces at work in there. We'd better get Dave Henson to take a look, I think. He's done some excavating around this area and he might have come across something like this before."

They walked back to the cave entrance and looked out into the canyon below. Oliver called to one of his team who was keeping watch below the cave and asked him to fetch the commander, who had been with one of the other teams searching some caves further down towards the canyon entrance.

"What do you think it is?" asked John, "Could it be what 'You Know Who's been looking for?"

"I don't know John," Oliver replied, "But whatever it is, I haven't felt anything like it before."

They waited for half an hour before they saw the commander and the auror walking up the canyon towards their position. Dave scrambled up and stood below the cave, "Sorry I took so long Oliver," he said, "One of the teams found something in one of the caves back there." He shook his head grimly, "I think we might be too late; they found an empty chamber in the cave floor with a smouldering stone laid to one side. It had some sort of charred ancient-looking script written on it. I think the Dark Lord's found what he came for."

Oliver frowned with disappointment, "There's something odd back in this cave Dave. I'd like you to take a look and see what you make of it."

They helped the commander to scramble up into the cave and they led him into the narrow tunnel at the rear. Oliver pointed to the low connecting tunnel, "When I went in there, I had the strangest feeling, and an urge to get out. I'll go back in first - I know what to expect now."

Oliver crawled through the tunnel and pulled himself into the cave, standing to one side of the entrance to allow the commander to follow. He breathed deeply as he fought the feeling to flee from the cave, and then helped Dave to his feet as he entered.

"I see what you mean," said Dave as he looked at Oliver nervously, "There's ancient magic at work here - no doubt about it. Let's look towards the middle of the floor; that's where they found the chamber in the other cave, and there might be something similar here."

They both fought to control their fear as they knelt on the floor and began to clear away the sand and dust to reveal the rock beneath. After a few minutes, Oliver felt a strange sensation in his hand as he cleared away the sand at the centre of the cave floor. He steeled himself and quickly brushed more sand away to reveal a white-coloured circular stone, contrasting with the reddish-brown rock that made up the rest of the cave. He bent down and blew away the remaining dust and then stood back up.

"Look at this Dave," he said, a tremor in his voice, looking down at the glowing silvery script on the stone.

"It's almost exactly like the stone in the other cave," said Dave, "except that it hasn't been burned. The strange script looks to be the same as well. But this one hasn't been touched for a very long time"

"Could there be two things he's looking for?" asked Oliver.

"Could be, and if that's the case you can bet he won't be very far away."

"Any idea what that writing says?" asked Oliver.

Dave shook his head, "I've seen nothing like it before."

The commander walked back over to the tunnel and knelt down, "John," he shouted, "Bill Perry has the magical camera. Send one of the team to get it please - he's taking photos at the cave where we found the other chamber."

John shouted his assent and quickly walked back to the cave entrance. A little while later, John appeared through the low tunnel and Dave took the camera from his outstretched hand.

"I'll take a few pictures of this stone and script, maybe someone back at the ministry can decipher it." After a few minutes, Dave straightened, "I'll Portkey back to headquarters and get these developed. I'll make my report and come back here as soon as I can, hopefully with more men. I'm placing you in charge of the task force while I'm away Oliver. I want you to bring everybody back to this cave and set up defensive positions around it on both sides of the canyon. I don't want 'You Know Who' getting anywhere near this thing. Bring the rest of your team up into the cave and make sure no one gets past you."

They crawled out of the chamber and walked back out towards the entrance of the main cave. Dave shook hands with Oliver and then quickly went down to the canyon floor to speak briefly with the other team leaders. One hour later, he stood in the divisional commander's office on Salisbury Plain, watching him and several other wizards looking closely at the magical pictures he'd developed.

"I thought I knew just about all the scripts from antiquity," said an elderly white-haired wizard, shaking his head slowly, "But this has got me completely baffled. I haven't seen anything quite like this before."

"Do you know of anyone who might recognise it Angus?" asked the divisional commander.

"Not really," he replied, "The only person I can think of who might be able to help is Albus Dumbledore. He's got a lot of academic connections around the world, so he might be able to think of someone."

"Right. Dave, you and Angus go to Hogwarts and speak to Professor Dumbledore, and take the photographs with you. I don't have to tell you how important it is that we get this script translated as quickly as we can. Use the Floo Network - the chimney's in the outer office."

"Angus!" exclaimed Dumbledore as his old friend stepped out of the fireplace into his office at Hogwarts, "I haven't seen you for... how long is it?"

"Too long Albus," said Angus, smiling as he shook the headmaster's hand warmly, "This is Dave Henson," he said turning to introduce the middle-aged wizard who followed him from the fireplace, "He's the commander of the task force in the Dead Sea area and he's found something."

"Just a moment," said Dumbledore as he shook Dave's hand, "I'll get my team up here, I want them to hear what you have to say."

Ten minutes later, Dumbledore and his team sat around the table as Dave told them what had happened in the canyon. He spread the photographs on the table and everyone gathered round to scrutinise the strange script, and the images of the smouldering cover stone that had been opened.

Dumbledore looked grimly at the others in the room, "It's obvious that Voldemort's already got his hands on something, and it looks as if there's a second artefact buried under this stone. He's most probably after that as well - have you seen anything of him since your first encounter?"

Dave shook his head, "No Professor, but I've got a hundred aurors guarding the second cave. I doubt that even he'll want to take them on - he's probably waiting out in the desert somewhere, waiting for us to leave the canyon after we find no trace of him."

"Do you recognise this script Albus?" asked Angus, looking at one of the photos.

Dumbledore shook his head, "To be honest Angus, if you can't recognise it then no one can. But I wonder..."

Dumbledore toyed with his beard as he studied the strange writing once more, then he looked up, "Charlie, would you mind calling Harry and the other three here please? I'd like them to take a look at it."

Charlie nodded and walked out of the office. Not long after, Harry and the other three stood looking at the photographs on the table.

"It's just mumbo jumbo to me," said Ron, shaking his head. His three friends nodded their agreement with his initial assessment of the script.

Hermione was puzzled as she stared at the glowing silvery writing. She didn't know why, but she had the strangest feeling that she should know what the writing meant. She held out her hand to Harry and he instinctively held it in his own. She sent her thoughts and feelings to him, trying to convey the odd feelings she had about the photos. They looked into each other's eyes, searching for something buried deep within their minds. Then they had it.

"Stand back please," said Harry as he and Hermione held their hands over the magical image of the script. "*SHAJ*" they said the ancient spell together.

The others in the room watched in fascination as a silvery blue light fell from their outstretched hands and covered the magical photograph. Then a strange thing occurred. The

glowing silvery script rose from the photograph and shimmered in the air above. Slowly the script changed, moving and rearranging itself. Then it moved back down onto the photograph, but this time glowing with a blue light.

Angus gasped as he looked at the altered writing, "Hieroglyphics!" he exclaimed, "It's changed into hieroglyphics!"

Dumbledore smiled to himself. He'd earlier had a feeling that the incomprehensible script hid something else - and he'd had the distinct feeling that only the Anima Summas could reveal it.

"What does it say?" asked Ginny.

Dumbledore and Angus bent over the altered image and between them translated the message on the stone cover.

'BEWARE - THIS SMALL CHAMBER CONTAINS THE SPELLS THAT WILL ACTIVATE THE DREADED DISC OF GATES USED BY THE DARK SIDE MANY EONS AGO. THE DISC OF GATES HAS BEEN HIDDEN IN ANOTHER PLACE, KEPT SEPARATE FROM THESE SPELLS, FOR ONCE JOINED AND WIELDED BY ONE IN POSSESSION OF THE DARK POWER, THE FREEDOM OF ALL MEN WILL CEASE. IN THAT ANCIENT CONFLICT, MANY, MANY YEARS LONG PAST, THE LIGHT WAS ALL BUT EXTINGUISHED, BUT GREAT FORTUNE ALLOWED THE ANIMA SUMMAS OF THAT TIME TO CAPTURE THE DISC AND ITS SPELLS AND HIDE THEM - FOR THEY COULD NOT BE DESTROYED.

WHEN THE DARK SIDE GAINED KNOWLEDGE OF THEIR RESTING PLACE DURING THE CURRENT CONFLICT, WE REMOVED THEM AND BURIED THEM HERE AT THE BOTTOM OF THE EARTH TO REST FOR ALL TIME. ONLY THE ANCIENT NEPHILIM POSSESS THE KNOWLEDGE AND POWER TO RETRIEVE THE DISC AND THESE SPELLS BUT THEY HAVE LONG SINCE BEEN BANISHED TO THEIR UNEARTHLY REALM

YOU ARE STRONG AND KNOWING OF THE TRUE LIGHT TO BE ABLE TO READ THIS WARNING. BE SURE TO COVER THE CHAMBER AND LEAVE. TELL NO ONE WHAT YOU HAVE FOUND. IF THE NEPHILIM RETURN TO THIS REALM AND RETRIEVE THE DISC AND SPELLS, ALL HOPE WILL BE LOST.

WE ARE THE SERVANTS OF THE LIGHT

WE ARE THE ANIMA SUMMAS OF THIS TIME.'

Everyone sat enthralled as they listened to the message from across the ages, but were stunned by what it contained.

"The Nephilim! I don't believe it," said Remus, looking at Snape who appeared shaken.

"It can't be," said Snape quietly, "They are only a myth."

"It seems not, I'm afraid," said Dumbledore, "It appears that the Dark Realm and its evil inhabitants hinted at during our studies into the theoretical contents of the Necronomicon are only too real."

"You know what this means don't you?" said Remus, "The message says that only the Nephilim have the knowledge and power to retrieve the Disc and spells. They've found a way to come back!"

"I don't think so Remus," said Dumbledore thoughtfully, "But what I think it *does* mean is that Voldemort has found a way of contacting them. That's what Margot probably saw in her dream - Voldemort just after he'd contacted the Nephilim. How else would he be able to retrieve the Disc of Gates? This is bad, very bad. If he gets his hands on the spells as well as the Disc, he'll have awesome powers at his disposal. And I dread to think of the consequences if he finds a way to bring the Nephilim here from their Dark Realm. He has to be stopped."

Harry and Hermione felt a terrible sense of dread as they listened to Dumbledore, but they also felt a sense of awe and a strange elation. They were looking at a message written by their counterparts who lived a very long time ago.

"Do you think the Anima Summas who hid those things were Merlin and Morgana?" asked Harry.

"I don't know Harry," answered Hermione, "But the writing is ancient Egyptian. They may be two others - back in the time of the Pharaohs, or even earlier."

Harry looked determined as he spoke, "We've got to go there. We've got to stop Voldemort getting his hands on those spells. The Anima Summas hid them, and the Anima Summas have to protect them from the Dark Side. We've got to go."

"No Harry," said Dumbledore, "What you have to do is carry on with your quests. Now, more than ever, you and Hermione have to reach your full powers. I don't think you'll be able to stop him until you do."

"But Professor," said Harry, his face full of anguish, "That could take ages - you know how difficult it's been for us so far. We can't afford the time."

"You've got to trust me on this," said Dumbledore, "Nothing can deflect you from finishing what you've started." He turned to Angus and Dave, "Can you increase your forces around the cave?"

"We've got no choice," said Dave, "After listening to that message, it has to be our top priority to stop anyone getting anywhere near. When we get back, I'll request reinforcements."

"Please do that," said Dumbledore, "and I'll get in touch with Cornelius Fudge to make him aware of these developments. Harry, Hermione, we'll do everything in our power to protect those spells. You concentrate on completing your tasks. All right? "

"Yes Professor," said Harry and Hermione together.

Chapter 8 The Hunter

Harry and Ron took their usual seats at the back of the Divination classroom and waited for Professor Trelawney to appear, wondering what goodies were in store for them today. They didn't have long to wait before the professor swept into the room and sat at her desk. She looked up at the students with an air of mystery about her, and then reached into her robes and pulled out a pack of cards.

"The Tarot," she said, "one of the most popular tools of Divination. The origins of the ancient art of the Tarot are wrapped in a shroud of mystery, and one can only speculate how it came into being. But it remains one of the most reliable windows into the future. Today, I want to introduce you to the basic concepts, but first a demonstration. Harry, come down to the front and shuffle the pack of cards please."

"Oh no," breathed Harry as Ron sat silently laughing beside him. "Here we go again."

Harry walked to the front of the class and picked up the cards, gave them a quick shuffle, and handed them back to the professor.

"Sit back down Harry. I'll deal the cards in front of me and we'll see what lies ahead for you."

Professor Trelawney started to deal the cards face down onto her table, then placed the unused cards to one side and began to turn over each card. She looked up at the students as she uttered each of the card values.

"The Magician - that must be you Harry. Ohhh - The Devil - we all know who that is. Next, the Hanged Man - that signifies a sacrifice." She turned over the next card and looked up at Harry with a look of sympathy on her face. "Death." She turned over another card. "Judgment. Oh this is too much, I must stop now."

Trelawney had a haunted look on her face as she stood and addressed Harry. "There is great danger ahead of you dear boy. You must be very careful for there will surely be a death in the times ahead."

The class was silent as the students looked at the professor with eyes wide. Lavender and Parvati turned and cast sympathetic glances at Harry.

"This is a very powerful message," continued the professor. "Please take great care. Class dismissed, I have to rest now."

After the professor had left the classroom, Ron started laughing and turned to Harry. "Hey Harry, that was ..." Ron stopped as he saw the tortured look on Harry's face, "Y... You don't believe all that do you Harry?" he asked.

"She's been right before Ron."

"Come on Harry, she predicts that you'll die at least twice a month, but you're still here aren't you?"

"But that's just it Ron. She didn't say that *I* would be the one to die; she said that there'd be *a* death. That could mean any of us - me, you, Hermi, Ginny, Sirius or any one of the others."

"I don't like all this waiting John," said Katie as she and John Ballot sat outside one of the large tents one evening, erected on the canyon floor beneath the cave that had been dubbed 'The Cave of Spells' by the task force. "We're nearly into December, and I hope we're not going to be stuck here all over Christmas!"

"I know, Katie. I wish something would happen too," he replied. "It's frustrating just sitting around knowing they've got their hands full back in the U.K."

"Yes, but Oliver said that Dave Henson thinks that the increased Death Eater activity there is a ploy to draw some of us away from Qumran, making it easier for 'You Know Who' to get his hands on those spells."

"He's probably right Katie, but it doesn't make the waiting any easier, especially during the days - all that heat makes me too lethargic. Give me crisp and fresh mountain air any time!"

Katie laughed. "Well I can certainly get used to the lack of rain John. Oh, Oliver's back from his meeting."

They looked back down the canyon to see Oliver, a broad grin on his face, approaching them. Dave Henson had called a meeting of team leaders that evening to discuss their defensive strategy. The task force had been increased to ten teams, but even so, the topography of the canyon and surrounding terrain made it easy for a small group of Death Eaters to remain hidden.

Oliver called his team over to Katie and John's campfire and started his briefing. "We've worked out the places in the canyon that will be the most effective, defensively. We're going to use a lot of Whammos at the canyon entrance and beyond, and also along the top of these cliffs - one of the other teams are placing some above the cave site already. We'll still be guarding the Cave of Spells along with team five - we'll be using four alternating shifts of six hours."

He grinned as his team members groaned. "But now the good news. First, Dave's going to rig up a shower area in one of the caves, and second, because of the debilitating heat of this place, each team will get two days leave back in the U.K. - that's two days off every month, although I hope this thing doesn't go on that long. We'll be the first team to get a break - we're going back home first thing in the morning."

He again grinned at the excited buzz of conversation. They'd been stuck in the heat of the desert for a few weeks now, and this would be their first bit of relief.

"But it won't be all rest," he continued. "While we're there, we've got to help with the logistics of the operation - that means getting together water and food and the other things we need for a long stay in this place. I've got to go to Scotland to see about getting extra supplies of Whammos - it seems that they're running a bit short of them back at HQ."

Oliver and Katie sat slightly apart from the rest of the team later that night. He was pleased that his news had lifted the spirits of his Aurors, and he watched, smiling, as they sat around the campfire arguing good-naturedly about who would have won the Quidditch first division title if it hadn't been cancelled.

He turned to Katie, watching the light from the campfire play over her lovely face. He held his breath as he watched the little flickers of red and yellow dance in her beautiful blue eyes. Katie watched him staring at her through the corner of her eye, and her lips curled up in a shy grin as she turned towards him. "What!"

"Uh, I... I... I wanted to ask you Katie," Oliver looked uncomfortably at the ground, annoyed with himself that he'd been caught staring. "Would you like to come to Scotland with me tomorrow? I'll need some help to bring the Whammos back to HQ, and... well, we could see Professor Dumbledore at Hogwarts - ask him if he knows who your real father is."

"Oh I'd love to Oliver!" she exclaimed. "But are you sure we'll have enough time?"

"Of course we will," he replied. "I'll send an owl asking if we can see him, and it shouldn't take too long."

Katie reached out and put her hand on his arm. "Thank you Oliver. I really appreciate this."

"It's the least I can do Katie," he said as he glanced down, looking at the hand that seemed to send electric shocks all through his body. He looked back up at Katie, his mind in turmoil as he wrestled with his thoughts. 'Come on Oliver,' he thought, 'bite the bullet and tell her how you feel about her... But what if she doesn't feel the same way about me?'

They both jumped as they heard a loud explosion above their heads. They ducked instinctively as they looked towards the top of the cliff above the Cave of Spells, and saw the bright yellow light of one of the Whammos that had been triggered.

Oliver shouted to his team, "Quick, get tight against the cliff face, we'll be out of the line of fire there."

The canyon quickly became a hive of activity as most of the teams ran to take up their defensive positions, while Dave led two others towards the rocky and perilous path that wound up to the top of the cliff.

Voldemort stood looking down at the large contingent of Aurors in the canyon below, and hissed in frustration as he turned and glared at the yellow-streaked Wormtail. "You stupid, useless, clumsy rat!"

Wormtail shrank from the wrath of the Dark Lord as he swatted ineffectually at his robes, trying to brush off the yellow glow that lit him up for all to see.

"My Lord," said Lucius, a note of urgency in his voice, "there's too many of them for us to take. We'd better get out of here before they reach the top of the cliff."

"Come on," said Voldemort, "we'll Apparate back. Then I'm going to teach them a lesson they'll never forget! We're going back to Scotland, Lucius, and I want you to organise a major

attack - pick out a suitable target - but this time, I'll be leading it. It's about time they saw the awesome power of Lord Voldemort!"

Dave Henson peered cautiously over the top of the cliff and looked all around the rocky ground. "It seems to be all clear," he whispered to the two team-leaders at his side. "Come on, get your teams up here and start looking around for any signs - and make sure they deactivate the Whammos first."

An hour later, Dave called his team leaders together at the base of the cave back down in the canyon. "They were here, all right," he said, "but there's no sign of them now. They probably thought better about attacking when they saw how many they were up against."

"Do you think we'd better postpone our two days leave?" asked Oliver.

"No Oliver," Dave replied, "we need to get those supplies here fairly quickly, and I don't think they'll be back any time soon. We've given the Dark Lord a lot to think about, so I doubt if he'll just rush in here like that again."

Lord Voldemort stood on a hill overlooking the small town of Rocky Hollow. It was a pretty little town, nestling in a small valley in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains in Colorado. Voldemort was impervious to the beauty of the area however; his eyes gleamed only with the fanatical anticipation at what he was about to do. He placed his hand on the inert Disc of Gates that hung around his neck and looked at the leader of his American followers as they stood along the ridge, waiting to witness his demonstration of power.

Rocky Hollow had a population of only one hundred and fifty souls, some magical, but mostly Muggle, and neither faction had any idea that their worst nightmare stood on the hill above them.

The Dark Lord reached into his robes and pulled out the Necronomicon. He turned the pages until he came to the spell that had fascinated him ever since he'd read it back in his cave. He wasn't entirely sure what would happen when he unleashed the evil on the town, only that it would be swift, clinical and thoroughly nasty. Before unleashing the spell, he turned to his chief lieutenant. "Have they been placed where I told you?"

"Yes my Lord," he replied, "exactly where you told me, and the enchantments have been activated." In the dead of night, he and three of his Death Eaters had captured an unfortunate wizard and cut off his hands just before killing him. Then they'd placed the hands at both ends of the town and, after an hour-long ritual, had empowered the grisly appendages with an evil spell, given to them by Voldemort. Now they watched in fascination, eager to see the fruits of their endeavours.

Voldemort closed his eyes and felt the power build, using the techniques he'd read in the Necronomicon. When he was ready, he raised his wand and pointed it towards the outskirts of the town, on the right-hand side where one of the hands had been placed. "*DUG GAZ!*" he yelled. Then he pointed his wand at the left-hand side of the town and yelled the same spell. Then he stood back and watched with satisfaction as the evil consumed the hapless inhabitants.

It was as if a pair of giant hands squeezed the town flat between their awesome palms. One minute the town was there, the next it wasn't. All that remained was a flat pile of rubble, smoking and shimmering with the heat that had been generated.

Voldemort put back his head and laughed at the sky, "Tell all my followers in this country," he shouted at the watching Death Eaters. "Tell them what you have seen here today. Tell them that the time is approaching when they will be the ones to hold power in this land."

Then he was gone. Back to the site where he'd take the Portkey to the tip of Cornwall, where Lucius Malfoy patiently awaited his arrival.

There was very little that the American Aurors could do when they arrived at the smoking pile of debris that was once the town of Rocky Hollow. There were no bodies to retrieve - they'd all been reduced to ashes in the terrible power of the evil spell. They looked around the site with a feeling of helplessness - all they could do now was make their report to their superiors in Washington, with the observation that if the town had been protected by Whammos, some of the people might have had enough warning to escape before the town had been destroyed.

"My Lord," said Lucius, bowing to the Dark Lord as he materialised at the Portkey site, "did all go well in America?"

"Better than my wildest dreams Lucius," he replied. "Just wait until I get the spells that will activate the Disc of Gates - no one will be able to withstand my power. Take me to the village."

Lucius led his master over a low ridge and down through a small rocky valley. The valley soon broadened out onto a narrow band of sandy beach, the sand washed to a spotless white by the receding tide. An evil chuckle escaped his throat as Voldemort looked at the sand, the sand that would soon be stained red with the blood of his next victims.

"Is everything ready Lucius?" he asked.

"Yes my Lord, fifty Death Eaters are waiting for your signal to drive the village people down onto the beach, and another fifty are covering the far side just around the headland so that no one can escape that way."

Voldemort grunted in satisfaction as they walked around a rocky promontory. Thirty Death Eaters stood to attention as they approached and walked through their ranks, looking towards the pretty little fishing village in the distance. Portpollridge looked an idyllic holiday spot as the single row of whitewashed cottages sparkled in the early December sunshine. There were only fifty people living in the village, almost all of them Muggles.

Voldemort led his force a bit closer and raised his wand, letting loose the Dark Mark into the sky that was the signal for the attack to begin. Soon, they could hear and see the yellow explosions as the Whammos were activated by the line of fifty Death Eaters, who walked towards the village from the landward side. Voldemort smiled evilly as he saw about forty people, the vast majority looking confused and bewildered as they were led by several anxious wizards and witches, run down onto the beach in front of the cottages.

The terrified group turned in their direction and started running, but stopped when they saw the Dark Lord and his followers approach. They about-turned and started running in the opposite direction, but again pulled up short as they saw another line of black-robed figures. They looked back at the village and were thrown into utter confusion when they saw the line of fifty bright-yellow wizards blocking their only remaining means of escape.

The three wizards and five witches, two of them children, in the group of villagers did the only thing that they could under the circumstances. One of the witches clutched the two children and apparated away, leaving the remaining five to give what protection they could to the Muggles. They told their terrified friends to keep low to the ground as they started firing spells at the three lines of Death Eaters. They saw seven of the black-cloaked figures fall, but their token resistance lasted only for a few minutes. They were the first to go as Voldemort nonchalantly sent volley after volley of the killing curse at them.

Then the three lines of Death Eaters closed on the cringing Muggles and mercilessly sent the killing curses that ended their earthly existence.

When it was all over Voldemort walked back up the beach with Lucius. "Let that be a warning to them - perhaps now they'll think twice about standing in the way of my destiny.

"Come Lucius, back to my cave - I want to study the Necronomicon more closely now that I've seen the awesome power of the spells in its pages. And I want you to summon the inner circle - I want them to work on a strategy to get past the Aurors guarding the spells at Qumran."

Oliver and Katie walked into the main building at divisional headquarters on Salisbury Plain, leaving the rest of the team to gather the supplies together. He'd told them that when they'd finished the task, they could visit their friends and families before meeting up again tomorrow evening.

"Are you sure about this Katie?" asked Oliver as they approached the fireplace that would take them, via the Floo network, into the headmaster's office at Hogwarts.

"I've never been so sure of anything in my life," she replied, determined to succeed in her search for her biological father.

Five minutes later, they emerged from the fireplace in the headmaster's office to see Professor Dumbledore grinning at them. "Oliver, Katie - it's good to see you both again."

"It's nice to be back Professor," said Oliver as he and Katie were ushered to a pair of seats in front of the headmaster's desk.

"You've been doing some excellent work out in the field," said Dumbledore. "Alastor Moody's been keeping me up to date on your exploits. But I must admit I was rather intrigued when I had your owl. What do you want to see me about?"

"Well it's Katie that wants to speak to you Headmaster. Uh, do you want me to leave now Katie?"

"Of course I don't Oliver. I want you to stay. This is difficult for me Professor, but... I've been wondering about my father. I suppose you know that I was adopted when I was a baby. My parents told me about my mother, and that she was killed a long time ago. But they won't tell me anything about my father, except that he was at Hogwarts with my mother. I've really wanted to find him for some time now Professor - do you know who he is?"

Dumbledore scratched his chin, deep in thought, as he saw the pleading look in Katie's eyes. He spoke gently, "Katie, you must understand my position. It's really not my place to tell you who your biological father is - that decision must rest with your adoptive parents."

"But Professor, they won't tell me anything despite all my pleas to them. But... can you tell me if you know who he is?"

Dumbledore sighed, "Yes Katie, I do know. I was on the teaching staff when it happened, but your biological grandparents on your mother's side made us swear never to reveal the identity of your father. You see, they warned that they'd cause a lot of trouble back then, threatening to blacken the name of the school and urging parents to take their children away from what they perceived to be a den of iniquity. We had no choice but to agree to their demands, and we were compelled to swear to keep your father's identity a secret. Now you may argue that that is no longer valid, since your grandparents passed away some time ago, but I am morally bound not to reveal his identity against the wishes of your adoptive parents. Does that make sense to you Katie?"

"I suppose so Professor, but isn't there something you can do? Could you speak to them on my behalf?"

Dumbledore pondered for a few moments. "All right Katie, I'll do what I can. The work that you're doing deserves no less than all the support I can give you on this. I'll speak to your parents, but I can't promise you that I'll be able to change their minds. All I will promise is that I'll do my best."

"Thank you Professor," Katie smiled, but not without a small tear in her eye. "Can you... can you tell me if he's all right? Is he well?"

Dumbledore smiled in turn, "Yes Katie, he's well. But don't ask me any more about him. You do know, of course, that he doesn't even know he has a daughter?"

"I know sir, and that's one of the things that makes it so difficult for me. Surely he has a right to know about me, the same as I have a right to know about him?"

"I won't disagree with you Katie. Look, I'll try for as long and hard as I can to persuade your parents. I'll send you an owl when I have something decisive to tell you."

"Thank you Professor," said Katie, now filled with hope after the greatest wizard alive had pledged his support.

"Do you two want to stay for lunch?"

Oliver looked at his watch. "We'd better not, Professor, but thanks anyway. We've got to see Fred and George about getting more supplies of Whammos for our operation at Qumran. They must be rushed off their feet these days."

"Yes they are," replied Dumbledore, "but they've got some top class help now - I won't say from whom, but I dare say you'll have a pleasant surprise when you get to their shop."

The three were interrupted when a loud whoosh came from the fireplace at the back of the office. Dumbledore walked over to see a head bearing the grim expression of 'Mad Eye' Moody looking at him from the blue flames.

"Albus," he said, sounding very agitated, "bad news I'm afraid. I've just had two very disconcerting reports. A town in America has been completely destroyed along with all 150 inhabitants. The Aurors who investigated said they'd seen nothing like it before. There wasn't even a body left to identify - they've never seen such devastating destruction. Do you think that 'You Know Who' has managed to get that ancient weapon of his to work?"

"No Alastor, I don't. The activation spells are still safe. But it sounds like he's got his hands on some very powerful Dark Magic."

"You can say that again, Albus. The other report is from Cornwall. Voldemort and a large group of Death Eaters killed just over forty people in a small fishing village this morning. One of the witches managed to escape with two children, and she was in no doubt that the man himself led the attack. What's he up to Albus?"

"I wish I knew, Alastor. Maybe he's venting his anger because he can't get his hands on those spells."

"I've got to go now. Speak to you later."

"Wait a minute Alastor, I've got two of your..." He stopped when he saw the head disappear and the flames die down to nothing.

"Always in a rush," he muttered as he walked back to his two former pupils.

"If we've got enough time," said Oliver, "we're hoping to pay him a quick visit before we go back to Qumran tomorrow night. We have to go now Professor, thanks for all your help."

"You two make sure you take good care of yourselves," said Dumbledore as the two young Aurors walked out of his office.

"Oliver - Katie," shouted Harry as he saw them just about to walk out the main entrance. "What are you two doing here? I thought you were out in the desert somewhere."

Harry, Hermione, Ron and Ginny ran up to the pair, smiling. "It's great to see you again," said Harry.

"Great to see you four too," said Oliver, "We had a bit of business with the headmaster, and we're just off to see Fred and George about some supplies of their Whammos."

"You two are looking good," said Hermione. "Feeding you well are they?"

"It's all the training," replied Katie. "And not to mention the desert heat - if we spend much longer in that hell hole, I swear I'll melt away to nothing."

"Well you look pretty all right to me," said Ginny with a smirk. "Doesn't she Oliver?"

"Uh... well I suppose she does Ginny. Look, I'm sorry to rush away like this, but we need to see your brothers as soon as possible."

"Come to see us next time you're here," Harry shouted after the pair as they made a swift exit in the direction of Hogsmeade.

Oliver and Katie stood outside Zonko's old shop in Hogsmeade, grinning as they looked up at the sign over the door - 'Weasleys Wizard Wheezes'. They could hear a lot of noise coming from inside the shop and opened the door cautiously, peeping inside.

"Angelina, Alicia, Lee!" shouted Katie as she saw their three friends working away like beavers at a large table in the middle of the room. She and Oliver ran over as the three turned around in surprise.

"Katie, Oliver - where the hell did you come from?" shouted Lee as the five friends hugged each other in greeting.

"And where did you three come from?" said Oliver.

"We've been working here ever since Fred and George started getting orders for Whammos from the ministry," answered Alicia.

"Where's Fred and George?" asked Katie.

"Here we are!" They turned to see the two beaming faces of their former Quidditch team mates emerge from a room at the back of the shop.

"Do you two want a job?" asked George expectantly.

"We've already got one George," said Oliver, grinning. "That's why we're here. We've got a little thing going in the desert out by the Dead Sea, and we're running short of Whammos. We need some more supplies desperately. 'You Know Who' paid us a little visit last night, and we're running a bit short."

Angelina gasped, "You two be very careful. We've been thinking about you since we heard those reports."

"We've got a bit of a problem," said Fred, his smile fading. "Oh, we'll give you as many Whammos as we can spare, but we've just received a huge order from America. I don't know how we'll be able to make enough to keep both countries supplied."

"You'll have to expand," said Oliver. "You need to get bigger premises and more staff. Have you got any ideas?"

"Only getting help from the school," said George. "We've asked Dumbledore if we can employ some of the seventh years part time on the weekends, but he hasn't given us an answer yet. And we've been trying to find out who owns the Shrieking Shack; that'd be a great place to use - its reputation would keep out any prying eyes."

"Why don't you advertise for help in the Daily Prophet?" asked Katie.

"We can't do that Katie," answered Fred. "We're trying to keep as low a profile as possible. If the Death Eaters find out where the Whammos are being manufactured they'll soon be here in force. No, we only want people we know and trust."

"Well you'd better think of something soon, these little devices save lives you know," said Oliver.

George had a pained expression on his face. "We know that Oliver. But we'll think of something. But first, how about a spot of lunch, you're welcome to join us. We've just set the table in the back room."

"Thanks George, we'd like that," answered Katie, glancing at Oliver and smiling.

Oliver walked into the back room with Fred, George and Lee, but Angelina and Alicia held Katie back. "Come on, tell us all about it!" demanded Alicia.

"All about what?" Katie answered.

"Now don't go all coy and secretive with us Katie. We're your oldest friends, remember?" said Angelina.

"But I don't know what you mean."

"Katie Bell, you tell me the look on Oliver's face doesn't have 'smitten' written all over it," said Alicia in a low conspiratorial voice.

"What?" said Katie. "There's nothing going on between us Alicia."

"Well listen to me girl," said Angelina, "if there's not now, there soon will be. You listen to us - we've seen that look before. And come to think about it, you've been looking at Oliver a bit strangely as well. Come on Katie, you can tell us."

"But there's nothing. I'll admit that I *have* caught him looking at me a bit oddly, but he hasn't said anything to me. And the way I feel about him, well, when someone saves your life a few times, I suppose you've got to have a certain amount of respect for him, haven't you?"

"You listen to me," said Alicia. "The way you look at him has got nothing to do with respect, believe me."

Meanwhile, the boys sat at the table and started tucking in to the ample piles of food. "So Oliver," said Fred, "how long have you and Katie been an item?"

"What?" exclaimed Oliver. "We're not an item Fred, we're just colleagues, fellow Aurors"

"Pull the other one Oliver," said George. "It's perfectly clear what she thinks about you from the look on her face."

Oliver had an odd expression on his face. "Do you really think so George?"

"Oliver - you're bloody useless," said Lee grinning. "You've got one of the most beautiful girls living in your pocket almost, and you mean to tell me you haven't done anything about it?"

"Well we've been a bit busy Lee," said Oliver, looking abashed.

"Busy? Busy my arse!" exclaimed Fred. "You'd better pull your finger out Oliver, or some big hunk of an Auror will snatch her right from under your nose!"

"What are you three talking about?" asked Alicia as she and the other two girls sat at the table.

"Oh you know, this and that," said George making eyes in the direction of Oliver and Katie, who both kept their heads down, both looking slightly flushed, and both deep in thought about the same thing - Katie wondering if Oliver would tell her how he felt about her and Oliver wondering whether he'd be able to pluck up the courage to say it.

"Is that so?" said Angelina with a knowing look.

"I hope you two are not thinking about dashing off," said Fred. "You can spend the night here with us - you're going to have to wait for us to get your Whammos ready anyway. We'll have a great time, we can go down the Three Broomsticks tonight."

Oliver took a nervous glance at Katie, who smiled at him nervously. "Thanks Fred," he mumbled quietly. "I don't suppose we've got a lot of choice have we?"

"No you haven't," said George grinning.

Oliver groaned inwardly, steeling himself for the night of ragging that lay ahead.

Professor Dumbledore shrugged his shoulders resignedly as Harry and the other three walked into his office. They saw the reason for his odd gesture sitting at his desk - Cornelius Fudge wore a grim expression on his face as they sat at the seats next to him.

"I asked the headmaster to call you here," said Fudge. "I need to know how you're getting on with your quest. I suppose you've heard about the two terrible attacks both here and in the United States, and, well, both our ministries are under a lot of pressure to get some answers quickly. And the only real answer is the Anima Summas. Can you tell me how it's going?"

"We're making progress minister," Hermione answered. "We know where the second repository of ancient knowledge is, but we've still got to find the spells that'll give us protection and we've also got to find out how we get into the place."

Fudge smiled weakly at the four. "Please don't think that I'm putting any undue pressure on you, I know how difficult it must be for you all, but I just needed to get a feel for the progress you're making."

"Yes sir," said Harry. "We're spending all our spare time on the research, I only wish we could have more." He looked at Dumbledore pointedly.

"Will that be all Cornelius?" asked Dumbledore.

"Yes I think so Albus," he replied. "Thank you all for sparing me your time."

Dumbledore held out his hand to stop the four friends walking out of the room as the minister stepped back into the fireplace and vanished in a whoosh of blue flame.

"Sit down for a moment," he said. "Harry, I know how anxious you are to press on with this - we're all very anxious. But I know what I'm saying when I tell you that your studies are just as important as your research."

"I know Professor, and I'm sorry if I seemed a bit rude, but Fudge made me feel as if I'm responsible for all these attacks."

"Don't blame him too much Harry, but he's under a lot of pressure as well - more than you could know. He understands what you four have to do, but he has to be seen to be doing something; he's got a lot of worried people on his back."

"It's the same in all the mail we've been getting," said Ron. "Clare and Colin are starting to get very worried after reading all the pleas for us to finish our quests and get 'You Know Who'."

"I know Ron," Dumbledore replied. "I've already taken the decision to take those two kids off the job, and employ two witches who'll be better placed to handle all the doom and gloom."

"I think they'll be relieved Professor," said Ginny. "They enjoyed it before all the attacks started, but now I think it's getting to them."

It was the middle of December before the owl arrived from Hermione's parents, bearing a copy of the book about Edgar Cayce's visions. A note of apology was enclosed, explaining that the delay was due to her parents having great difficulty in getting their hands on the book.

The four rushed up to the common room and watched as Hermione quickly scanned through the pages, looking for a reference to the Secret Chamber. "This is terribly difficult to read," she said, "it's just a long list of readings given by Cayce, and there's thousands and thousands of them. Now let's see, they're grouped under a lot of main headings. Ancient Mysteries - there should be something about it there."

Hermione turned to the page and starting looking down the long list of readings. "Here's something. It says '*For the entity's tomb then was a part of the Hall of Records, which has not yet been uncovered. It lies between - or along that entrance from the Sphinx to the temple - or the pyramid; in a pyramid, of course, of its own.*'"

She looked up at the others. "It seems to suggest that the Hall of Records is somewhere between the Sphinx and the pyramid - but which of the three pyramids?"

"That doesn't tell us a hell of a lot more than we know already," said Ron.

"I'm sorry," said Hermione quietly. "I thought we'd find a lot more about it in this book."

Harry reached over and squeezed her hand. "It's not your fault Hermi. We've got to follow up on anything that seems useful. We'll just have to keep reading Dumbledore's books on Egypt."

Over the days leading up to the Christmas holidays, all their professors began to notice that the four weren't their usual selves during classes. At their weekly staff meeting, the professors made their concerns known to the headmaster.

"I was expecting something like this," he said worriedly. "The pressure of the second quest is calling to them, and it's beginning to prove a big distraction."

"I haven't seen Hermione like this," said McGonagall, "even when she was in the depths of despair over Harry, she still managed to be attentive in class. But now..."

"What can we do to help them Headmaster?" asked Flitwick.

"I don't think there's anything we can do for the moment," Dumbledore replied. "Christmas will be on us shortly, and I know that they intend using the time to do their research. We can only hope that they find something over the holiday period that will lift their spirits. For now, just keep an eye on things, and Severus, don't be too hard on them during their Potions classes."

"I won't Headmaster," he said. "I've already eased off on them, difficult though it has been."

The other professors grinned at the pained expression on Snape's face.

Margot tossed and turned in her bed, her sleep invaded by the vivid and disturbing dream. She thrashed about, her head rolling from side to side as she dreamt...

'The Dark Lord touched the strange object hanging on his chest. He looked up and stared with evil intent at Margot. 'The Disc of Gates,' he said, 'I have it in my possession. Now I will rule the world.' The scene changed to a dark and dusty cave. Voldemort cackled with glee as he reached down into a hole in the floor and stared at the objects he retrieved. Another shift in scene. The Dark Lord held the Disc of Gates above his head, the black central crystal glowing with an evil light. His eyes held a maniacal glint as he stared at something before him, but which remained hidden from Margot in the dream. He uttered several strange words and a powerful black light shot from the Disc and the Dark Lord laughed as he shouted a single word - Die!'

Margot woke in a bath of sweat, looking towards her bedroom window that let in the light of early dawn. She shuddered at the memory of her dream, but she didn't need to write anything down, it was firmly fixed in her mind. She quickly jumped out of bed, put on her dressing gown, and rushed across the landing to her grandfather's bedroom.

"Grandfather!" she said as she walked hastily into his bedroom, sat on the bed and gently shook him until he woke up. "Grandfather, I've had another vision about 'You Know Who'. I've got to get to Hogwarts straight away."

"Slowly Margot," he said, blinking the sleep from his eyes. "What did you see?"

Margot told him about the vision and the urgency that was manifest throughout the dream. "So you see, I've got to tell Harry and the others."

Jules nodded, "Come on Margot, you'd better get dressed. I'll tell your mother and father about the dream and then set up the Portkey for you."

Harry and Ron walked down the spiral staircase from their dormitory to the common room that morning, feeling tired after the night of reading some of Dumbledore's books. Harry bumped into Ron's back as the red-haired boy suddenly stopped dead in his tracks.

"Ron, get a move on," said Harry as he looked at Ron. Then he followed Ron's stare to the table in the middle of the common room, where Margot was sitting patiently.

"Margot!" shouted Ron as he leapt down the remaining stairs, running over to stand beside the beautiful French girl.

"Good morning Ron," she said sweetly, smiling up at his stunned face.

"What are you doing here Margot?" asked Harry. "And how did you get in?"

"Hello Harry. You should change your password more often - I used the same one as my last visit."

"Margot!" yelled Hermione and Ginny as they came down the stairs, quickly walking over to greet the girl. Ginny smirked as she saw the look of utter captivation on her brother's face.

"You've had another vision haven't you!" said Harry. She nodded, the smile fading from her face.

"Do you need to see Professor Dumbledore as well?" asked Hermione.

"I don't know. I think so," she replied.

"Come on then, we'll take you to his office," said Harry.

As they walked down the corridor, Ron sidled up besides Margot and whispered as he leaned close to her. "Margot? Why did you call me your little red knight the last time you were here?"

Margot turned her head and looked deeply into Ron's eyes, sending shivers of delight down his spine. "Because that's how I see you Ron."

Ron took a deep breath, "Does that mean you like me then?"

"Of course I like you Ron. I like Harry, Hermione and Ginny too. I think you're all very nice people."

"Oh," said Ron, the smile vanishing from his face. Margot turned and walked on ahead, hiding the sly grin that played around her sensuous lips. She could tell that Ron really liked her, of course, and she didn't quite know why she was teasing him. She really liked the tall red-haired boy, and thought that it must be some sort of feminine instinct coming to the fore,

perhaps some flaw in her character that hadn't had the opportunity to surface before. 'I really must try not to do that again,' she thought.

"Margot!" Harry shouted. She jumped and looked back at Harry and the others waiting at the gargoyle that led up to the headmaster's office. She'd been so engrossed in her thoughts that she'd walked right past.

"Hmmm, it seems that your dream relates to an event from the past - that's Voldemort holding the Disc of Gates - and to two events in the future, or at least a possible future. He's retrieving the ancient spells that will activate the Disc and finally using it's power to cause death and destruction. We know that the spells are safe for the moment, but the underlying message of urgency in your dream suggests that they won't be safe for much longer."

"We've got to do something Professor," said Harry. "We can't let him get his hands on those spells."

"I know Harry," said Dumbledore softly, "but we're doing all we can for now. I'll get in touch with Fudge, of course, and he'll warn his task force guarding the spells, but apart from that, there's not much more we can do."

"If only we had more time to do our research," said Hermione. "I know that we'll be able to use the Christmas holidays, but if we don't find anything our research time will be cut short again by our classes."

"I know Hermione," said Dumbledore with a note of sympathy in his voice, "but we've already agreed that you mustn't neglect your studies. They're very important to your ongoing development."

"Uh, perhaps I can help, Professor." The four friends and the headmaster looked at Margot for a few moments.

"How can you help, Margot?" asked Dumbledore, staring at the girl quizzically.

"Well I can't help personally, but I can ask my grandfather if he'll help with their learning. You may have wondered how I lost my strong French accent so quickly and suddenly acquired a good working knowledge of the English language. Well it was my grandfather who did that. You see he has access to certain ancient spells that can accelerate the learning process. That, added to the fact that he's a first class teacher anyway, will reduce the time you need to spend on your lessons and increase the time for your research. If you like, I can ask my grandfather if he'll help, but I'm sure he will."

"That sounds very interesting Margot," said Dumbledore. "May I ask how your grandfather came to be in possession of these spells?"

"I'm sorry Professor, but I can't tell you. You'll have to ask my grandfather."

"Very well. Please ask him Margot, it sounds like the ideal solution to our dilemma. But you four will still have to attend some of the classes as well. You can't neglect the practical aspects of your tuition. For example, you'll still have to attend a certain number of Potions lessons." The headmaster smiled at the loud groans that came from the four teens.

Harry looked at Margot suddenly. "Margot, why don't you join us here at Hogwarts? You're starting to get a lot of messages about our quest and Voldemort's activities, so wouldn't it be best if you stayed here? I'm sure that the Headmaster can arrange for a transfer from Beauxbatons?"

He looked at Dumbledore enquiringly, but before the headmaster could answer, Margot said quickly, "I don't go to Beauxbatons Harry. I get my tuition at home, from my grandfather. You see, good Divination professors are few and far between, and my parents felt that my grandfather would nurture my capabilities as a seer far better than at Wizarding School. Don't get me wrong - I'd love to come here and help with your quest, but I don't think the time is right."

"But if your grandfather comes here Margot," Ron cut in quickly and hopefully, "you'll have to come as well won't you? Otherwise you'll fall behind with your lessons."

"I suppose so..." she replied.

"Margot, if your father agrees to help," said Dumbledore, "then you're most welcome to stay with us here. You can sleep in either Hermione's or Ginny's dormitory."

"I'd like that Professor," said Margot grinning.

What happened next was completely unexpected, and completely out of character for the normally tongue-tied Ron when it came to girls. He drew himself up in his chair, took a deep breath, and launched into an initially stuttering, but then high-speed tirade.

"Margot... I... well.... Uh... well since you're now, or will be very shortly, an honorary student at Hogwarts, would you... do you think... oh bugger it, will-you-come-to-the-Yule-ball-with-me?" The last nine words came out as one long word.

Harry and Hermione stared at their friend open-mouthed, not believing what they'd just heard. Ginny, meanwhile, gasped, "Bloody hell! Sorry Professor."

Ron, meanwhile, sat with his eyes screwed shut, wearing a pained expression as if he were waiting for a blow to strike him. Margot, meanwhile, stared at Ron, a sly smile on her face. Dumbledore just sat looking at the youngsters, an amused expression on his face and a twinkle in his eye. For Ron, it seemed that time had suddenly stood still. He slowly opened one eye, and looked at Margot.

"Why do you want me to go to the Yule ball with you Ron?" she asked, but the next instant mentally admonished herself for again teasing Ron.

"Why?" he asked. "Well because I... well I..."

Margot mercifully spared his embarrassment. "Yes, I'd love to go with you. But I'll have to ask my parents first. And is it all right with you Professor?"

"Of course Margot, as Ron said, when you're here with us you'll be treated as a Hogwarts student. We'd love to have you."

For the next three days, Ron walked around the school in a daze. Hermione finally stopped badgering him to help with their research, giving it up as a lost cause until after the Yule ball.

Finally, the day of the Yule ball arrived and the female population of the school, as usual, acted as if they'd been let loose. This time, however, Ron didn't bother to comment on their antics, he didn't even notice them. In fact, he indulged in a few antics of his own.

"Do you think she really likes me Harry?"

"Well she did agree to go to the ball with you Ron."

"But when I asked her if she liked me, she said she did, but she said it as if she didn't like me THAT way."

"Ron! Stop worrying. Loosen up a bit or you're going to be awkward around her, and I'm sure she wouldn't like you stamping all over her feet when you dance."

"How close should I hold her? Do you think it'll be a bit forward if I hold her too close?"

"Ron. Just play it by ear. Follow her lead if you're not sure."

"Harry, I've never felt like this before. I'm afraid I'll make a fool of myself in front of her."

"Ron! If you carry on like this, you're quite likely to make a fool of yourself. Now stop worrying. Just be your normal self and everything should be ok. And you won't have long to wait now, the ball starts in just under an hour."

"Harry, Ron," Ginny called as she popped her head through the portrait hole. "Come on, Dumbledore wants to see us."

The four walked into the headmaster's office and saw two people sitting and talking to him. They immediately recognised Margot, and assumed that the second was her grandfather.

"Ah here they are," said Dumbledore. "I believe you've all met?"

"We haven't met Margot's grand..." Hermione stared as the man turned in his seat, astonished at who sat before her. She continued, "... master," her voice dropping in volume as she recognised the grand master of the Priory of Sion.

"Hello again. I'm Jules Denarnaud, Margot's grandfather, and it's ok - Professor Dumbledore knows who I am."

"Grand master," said Harry quietly. "We didn't know you were Margot's grandfather."

Jules smiled at the four astonished youngsters. "I was glad to hear that you found the secret. It took great courage and intelligence to do what you did that day. I'm proud of you, and I'm glad that Margot has found some friends of her own age at last. And I'll be seeing a lot more of you after Christmas. Professor Dumbledore has asked me to help with your studies. "

"That's great, grand master, we'll get a lot more time for our research now. Uh, what do we call you? We can't refer to you as grand master can we?"

"Uh no. Just call me Professor Denarnaud."

They looked at Margot then, and saw that she was dressed ready for the ball, her dark green robes matching her vivid green eyes perfectly. Ron stared with open admiration.

"Stop drooling Ron," whispered Ginny. "You're making me feel embarrassed."

"Jules," said Dumbledore, "you can join me and the other professors at the top table if you wish. Since you're here you might as well enjoy the occasion."

"Thank you Albus, I'd be glad to."

Ron felt ten feet tall as he led Margot into the Great Hall. He grinned at the envious stares of the boys who had already taken their seats at the many small dining tables spread around the outside of the room. Seamus Finnegan, who was with Parvati, called Harry, Hermione, Ron and Margot over to their table and they were soon followed by Ginny and Neville. After introducing Margot, they all settled down to eat the sumptuous banquet that appeared before them.

Soon, the ball was under way and everybody had a great time - except for Ron. Whenever he tried to speak to Margot, or ask her to dance, another boy would rush in and ask her to dance. Margot didn't intentionally try to upset Ron - she was simply overwhelmed by all the attention she was getting - she hadn't known anything like it before. There seemed to be a queue of boys waiting to ask her to dance, and on more than one occasion Harry had to drag Ron back by his robes to stop him having a go at them.

Margot looked shocked when Hermione, who was dancing close to her with Harry, whispered in her ear that she hadn't given Ron much of a look in. She made a point of refusing all offers from the other boys after that, and made eyes at Ron, silently urging him to ask her to dance. Ron, however, had worked himself into a monumental sulk and Harry, contemplating the end of a beautiful but brief friendship between Ron and Margot, had to drag him to his feet and push him towards the French girl.

He stood in front of her, a scowl on his face, but finally asked her to dance after Harry kicked him in the shin. It happened to be a very slow number, but they didn't dance very close together.

Margot had a worried frown on her face. "Have I upset you Ron?"

"Upset me? No, not at all, I just love to see you dancing with all the other boys."

"Ron, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you. Please understand, this is the first dance I've ever been to and I suppose I got carried away with all the attention I was getting."

"Well it's not every day that a strange and very beautiful girl makes an appearance at Hogwarts. What did you expect?"

"You think I'm beautiful Ron?"

"Of course I do," he said quickly, still in a stomp. "You're the most beautiful girl I've ever seen, and when I get a chance to show you off, you're suddenly off dancing with everybody in sight."

Ron melted when Margot's lips twisted into that sensuous and thoroughly irresistible smile of hers. He pulled her a bit closer to him, close enough for her to whisper in his ear, "And do you think I'm strange too?"

"No Margot, of course I don't. I meant strange as in stranger not as in odd."

"Well I'm glad to hear it. Uh Ron, I think the music's stopped."

Ron suddenly stopped dancing and looked around to see that the other couples were walking back to their seats. He led Margot across the dance floor, but groaned when he heard a familiar voice behind him.

"Well what have we here? What's a beautiful girl like you doing with a loser like Weasley?"

Ron and Margot turned around to see the sneering face of Draco Malfoy. "Why don't you introduce us Weasley?"

"He's not a loser," said Margot quietly. "He's the bravest boy I know."

"Bog off Malfoy," said Ron. "I wouldn't introduce a rat to you."

Draco ignored Ron's remark and stared at Margot, his eyes travelling from the top of her head to the tips of her toes. "Why don't you come over to my table, you'll have a much better time with me."

Margot frowned with distaste and Ron, with a calm but deadly voice said, "I don't want to spoil the night by bashing you Malfoy, but one more remark like that and I won't have any choice in the matter."

Draco sneered, but thought better about saying anything more. He turned on his heel and walked back to his table.

"Who was that horrible boy?" asked Margot.

"That was Draco Malfoy, his father's 'You Know Who's right hand man. He's a nasty piece of work and a Slytherin. You'd best keep out of his way Margot."

"What was that all about?" asked Harry as they sat back down.

"Just Draco being his usual objectionable self," said Ron.

The rest of the night went off without a hitch and all too soon, Margot's grandfather came to collect her to take the Portkey back to Rennes-le-Chateau. The four went down into the school grounds to see them off, but before going Margot leaned close and whispered in Ron's ear, "Bon soir, mon petit chevalier rouge". Then she kissed him lightly on the cheek before walking over to her grandfather.

Ron held his hand to the spot on his cheek where she'd kissed him, and stared at the empty space where Margot had stood only moments before. His three friends grinned as they observed his reaction.

"Thoroughly smitten," said Ginny, shaking her head.

"Head over heels," said Hermione, also shaking her head.

"But it was nearly a very different story," said Harry. "Ron - if you react like that again she may not be so forgiving."

"React? What do you mean Harry?"

"That dirty great pout you had earlier!"

"Hmmm. That was a bit stupid of me wasn't it! She's a wonderful girl Harry. Do you really think she likes me?"

Harry and the two girls groaned.

Charlie was in one of his philosophical moods as he, Nadine, Sirius and Ceri sat in the Great Hall after dinner drinking coffee. All the students and professors had left, so they had the place to themselves.

"What drives a man like 'You Know Who' to be so evil?" he asked the others.

"The need for absolute power," suggested Sirius.

"The need to control everything around him," said Ceri.

"Insanity?" asked Nadine.

"Well I think it's basically a sexual thing," said Charlie, drawing gasps from Ceri and Nadine.

Sirius just grinned and raised his eyebrows. "Care to explain that one Charlie?"

"Well think about it. If the anthropologists are right, the Neanderthals and other pre-human species were driven by it. Every male wanted to be top dog, and they'd resort to violence to achieve their goal. And to what end? To make sure he built up his harem with the most attractive females so that he could produce offspring in his own image - that's a sexual thing."

"Well I suppose so," said Ceri. "But what's that got to do with 'You Know Who'?"

"He's doing the exact same thing as the alpha males of pre-history! But instead of building up a harem, he's replaced it with a lust for power - he wants to be top dog and he resorts to violence to get it. It's still basically a sexual thing!"

"Come on Charlie," said Sirius, grinning, "you mean to tell me that 'You Know Who' is as he is because of his hormones?"

"Don't laugh Sirius. I really think that's the case. So you could say that after thousands and thousands of years of evolution, 'You Know Who' and people like him simple haven't evolved. They're still acting like Neanderthals, unable to control their primal urges. I sometimes think that the theory of evolution is flawed, especially when you see so many people driven by such prehistoric urges."

Nadine had a sly grin on her pretty face as she tapped her boyfriend on the arm. "So you wouldn't class yourself with such people Charlie?"

"Certainly not Nadine!"

"So does that mean you haven't got strong sexual urges?" she asked, her eyebrows raised, waiting for a response. Ceri and Sirius tried to hide their grins as they waited for Charlie to answer.

"That's different Nadine!" he exclaimed.

"Why is it different Charlie?" she asked sweetly, unwilling to let him off the hook.

Charlie's expression changed when he saw the others looking at him with some amusement. "You're a very naughty girl Nadine," he said, breaking into a grin. "Come with me and you decide if I've evolved beyond the primal stages."

Nadine squealed as Charlie caught hold of her hand and dragged her towards the doorway.

"Where are you going?" Ceri called after them.

"We're going to study evolution I think Ceri," Nadine shouted back.

"They're funny aren't they," said Sirius.

"Nadine can twist him round her little finger when she feels the need," she replied. "But it's great to see them together - they're so much in love."

"Hmm talking about love," said Sirius, causing Ceri to glance at him sharply. "I've been meaning to ask you something."

"Yeeesssss?" she asked slowly.

"What went on between you and Bill back in Hermopolis?"

Ceri stiffened, not expecting Sirius to say that. "Why do you want to know Sirius?"

"I'm... well... just interested."

"Are you now. Well what if I told you that he asked me to go on a date with him?"

"Did he?"

"Yes, he did."

"And what did you say?"

'Uh oh,' thought Ceri, 'there's a bit of déjà vu going on here.'

"Sirius Black, what I do with my personal life is my own business, and what I said or didn't say to Bill is none of yours."

Sirius held up his hands as if to ward off an alley cat. "Ok, ok. Don't get your knickers in a twist. I only tried to show a bit of interest."

"So I'll ask you again. Why are you so interested in what Bill and I got up to in Egypt?"

Sirius didn't answer for a while; then he got up and started to walk towards the doorway. Half way across the hall he stopped and turned back to Ceri. "Because I am!" he said vehemently, turning once again and walking quickly out of the room.

Ceri grinned at Sirius' retreating form. 'Well at least he's getting it off his chest,' she thought to herself.

The night air had turned quite cool in the canyon near Qumran. Most of Oliver's team sat outside around the campfire, quietly singing a medley of Christmas Carols, but Oliver and Katie sat on the bunk in his tent, something that they'd done more and more often since returning from Hogsmeade several days ago.

It was Christmas Eve, and the team felt a bit melancholy having to spend it in the desert. They thought about their families back in the U.K. and wished they were with them, but to their credit, they tried to generate a seasonal atmosphere in their little corner of the dead zone.

Katie sighed as she listened to the singing, and looked at Oliver who once again seemed to be mentally struggling with something. They'd both been given a lot to think about after their visit to their friends, and both had been urged to do something about their obvious attraction for each other. As is the way of things, however, Oliver wasn't convinced that Katie felt the same way as he did. Katie, on the other hand, felt sure that Oliver had feelings for her, and the last few nights had been an agony of anticipation for her, waiting for Oliver to say something, anything that would give her the initiative to take things further.

On this night of all nights, Katie hoped that Oliver would make a move, but it was approaching the time when everyone retired for the night, and still he'd said nothing. She was almost at the end of her tether, and started to think of ways to move things along, when Oliver took a deep breath and turned towards her.

"Katie. I... I've done a lot of thinking lately."

"Yes Oliver?"

"About... well, about..." he let out a long sigh of frustration as he struggled to find the right words.

"About us Oliver?"

"Well... I... "

"Oliver?"

"Yes Katie?"

"Shut up!"

Katie reached out her arms and hooked her hands behind Oliver's head. Then she slowly drew him towards her, their eyes locked together all the while. Katie paused when their lips were no more than an inch apart, savouring the moment. Then she gently brushed her lips against Oliver's, a fleeting touch that sent shivers of pleasure all through his body. She drew back once more, looked deeply into his eyes, and finally crushed her lips against his, breathing deeply with the passion of the moment.

"Oliver, have you got.... Oh sorry."

They broke apart to see John Ballot move quickly out of the tent. They looked at each other once more and started laughing.

"It'll be all over the camp in five minutes flat," said Oliver.

"You don't mind do you Oliver?"

"Do I hell!" This time it was Oliver's turn to take the initiative, pulling Katie tightly against his body, savouring the delicate aroma of her perfume. He kissed her forehead, then her eyes, her nose, and finally her lips. Katie gave in to the wonderful feelings that were released throughout her body, lost in the depths of Oliver's passionate kiss.

They felt a cool breeze wash over their fevered skin, opened their eyes, and looked towards the tent flap, which was being held open by two of his team. The rest, together with Dave Henson, started clapping and cheering, bringing a bright red flush to both their faces.

"We thought you'd never get together," said a grinning Dave Henson. "Do you know we'd even started taking bets on when you'd both finally see the light? This calls for a small celebration, especially since it's Christmas Eve. Come on out here, we've got a couple of bottles of wine to crack open - I've been saving them for a special occasion."

The blushing pair walked out of the tent to see about eighty Aurors, the full complement of the four teams not on duty that night, grinning at them and calling out words of encouragement and congratulations, interspersed with some less than flattering comments. The rest of the night certainly wasn't silent, and neither was it cold and frosty, and everyone did their level best to extract the maximum amount of enjoyment from the little gathering, spurred on by the knowledge that there probably wouldn't be many such nights in the dark times that lay ahead.

The gathering in the Great Hall was larger than it normally was to eat Christmas dinner. Apart from Dumbledore, McGonagall and Snape, the ranks were swelled by the four friends, their

protectors, Fred, George, Lee, Angelina and Alicia and the ten seventh year students who'd elected to work over Christmas at Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes to earn some extra cash.

Twenty-seven witches and wizards eagerly awaited the arrival of the banquet as they talked animatedly among themselves. Dumbledore smiled as he looked forward to one of the best Christmas days at the school for a long time.

An hour later, they all sat slumped in their chairs, completely full and unable to move. The table was liberally strewn with half-empty bottles of the delicious wine sent over by Nadine's brother for the occasion. "This is the best wine I've ever tasted," said Ceri as she sat talking to Nadine. "You'll have to thank your brother for us Nadine."

"Yes I will. He was hoping to visit today, but he cried off at the last minute. He didn't say why, but I've got a feeling he's met someone. I could spot the tell-tale signs when I spoke to him the other day."

"Lucky girl," said Charlie. "Demont's a great bloke. Pity he missed this though, he'd have enjoyed himself."

"What are you four going to do this afternoon?" asked Sirius as he looked across the table at Harry and the others.

"We're going to do some more reading Sirius," he replied.

"What, on Christmas day?"

"Well I don't suppose Voldemort will be celebrating Christmas," replied Harry. "You can bet your life he'll be working on a plan to get at those spells, and we haven't got any time to lose."

That dampened the mood of the gathering somewhat as they looked at Harry and his three friends with some sympathy. Fred, however, decided to lighten things up a bit when he leaned close and spoke in a low and conspiratorial voice, "Before we go back to the shops, George and I are planning to leave our calling card."

"What are you two up to now?" asked Remus, grinning.

George looked around to make sure that Snape wasn't trying to listen in on the conversation. "We're going down to the Slytherin dungeon - we want to try out a new prank. We've put a magical timer on it so that it won't work until the first day of the school term, and we've got a few of our seventh year helpers to take notes of all the effects it produces. Pity Fred and I won't be here to see it ourselves though."

"So what's going to happen?" asked Ginny, smiling in anticipation.

Fred tapped the side of his nose and glanced slyly up the table at Snape. "That's a secret for now. Just keep your eyes open when you come down for breakfast on the first day of term."

Everyone looked up as they heard the sound of fluttering wings. Through the windows high up in the Great Hall several owls, struggling under the weight of the packages they carried, swooped down and one by one dropped their heavy packages in front of Hermione. They

quickly flew back out and up to the owlery, hoping that the other owls hadn't eaten all the special Christmas treats.

"It's from Mum and Dad!" exclaimed Hermione excitedly, "I thought they'd forgotten to get me a present this Christmas." She quickly ripped open the packages and gazed hungrily at the piles of books that were uncovered.

Harry, Ron and Ginny looked at the titles. "Books on Egypt," said Ron with a pained look on his face. "Hermi, you've got books about Egypt for Christmas?"

"Yes - brilliant isn't it!"

"But we've got loads of those from Professor Dumbledore," said Ginny.

"Ah, but not ones like these Ginny," she replied. "I made a list of the ones in the headmaster's office and sent it to my parents. I asked them to get as many books as they could that weren't on the list - my Christmas present!"

Harry smiled at his girlfriend's shining face and leaned close to kiss her tenderly on her forehead. She glanced at Harry and smiled, then she grabbed his hand and pulled him from his seat. "Come on you lot, let's get started on these."

"Can't we stay a bit longer?" groaned Ron.

"No Ron, now come on! The sooner we find the Hunter the better."

The four spent the remainder of the Christmas holiday in the common room, reading Hermione's new books. Some of them contained material they'd not seen in Dumbledore's books, mainly about the newest archaeological discoveries and the latest theories about the many aspects of the ancient land and its enigmatic ancient inhabitants.

However, they could find nothing about the Hunter. However hard they tried, however many books they read, there was no reference to him at all. On the last day of the school holiday, they started to get despondent.

"Where the hell is he?" asked Ron. "Do you think we misheard what Seshat said? Perhaps she said the Hurter, or the Punter or something."

"No Ron," said Hermione. "I remember everything she said, it's ingrained in my memory. And Ginny wrote it down as well - no she definitely said the Hunter."

"This is crazy," said Harry. "Perhaps we should look at the sections on Egyptian religious mythology more closely, Seshat's message was a bit weird so it must be there somewhere."

"I've read everything I can find on that Harry," said Hermione, "but there's nothing there about the Hunter."

"Well I give up," said Ron. "We're just going round in circles and getting nowhere."

"We can't give up Ron," said Harry. "There's got to be something about the Hunter somewhere - Seshat wouldn't give us something that's impossible to find. Look," he said turning to the others, "let's get an early night for a change. School starts back tomorrow."

They went to their dormitories with heavy hearts that night, but in the morning they felt better, buoyed by the knowledge that the prank planted by Fred and George was due to be triggered that morning.

They walked down to breakfast early, and told as many non-Slytherins as they could that something was going to happen. The Gryffindor, Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff tables were full, the students glancing at the door between mouthfuls of bacon and egg, eagerly awaiting the arrival of the Slytherins.

"Where the hell are they?" asked Ron after fifteen minutes of waiting. "You don't think they've made them disappear do you?"

Ginny grinned. "I don't think so Ron. Those two wouldn't do anything that couldn't be seen and appreciated."

The professors at the top table had also noticed the non-arrival of the Slytherin students. Dumbledore got up and walked along the table to Snape. "Severus, what's happened to your students this morning? They're usually among the first to arrive for breakfast."

"I don't know Headmaster. I'd better go and see what's wrong."

A buzz went up from the room as they saw Professor Snape stride imperiously from the Great Hall. "It won't be long now," said Harry.

After ten minutes, the Slytherins had still not put in an appearance. And neither had Snape. Another excited buzz went up as Dumbledore himself got up and walked out of the room, heading in the direction of the dungeons.

"I hope he doesn't disappear as well," said Hermione anxiously.

A few minutes later, three of the seventh years staggered into the room, each holding a parchment and quill. They were laughing so much they could hardly walk. "They're coming!" one of them managed to squeak.

Every head in the room turned towards the doorway, eager to see what had caused such mirth. The headmaster and Snape stood just outside the door and seemed to be arguing - the students became very quiet as they tried to hear what was being said.

"But Headmaster," said Snape pleadingly, "you can't expect them to go in there in that state?"

"I can Severus. They need to have a good breakfast before classes start this morning. Now I know it might be a bit embarrassing for them, but their need for sustenance far outweighs that."

Snape's shoulders sagged. "Well if you insist Headmaster." He turned and shouted towards the corridor leading into the dungeons, "Come on you lot. Quickly now, the sooner you get it over with the better."

Dumbledore and Snape walked back to the top table and took their seats. Every head pointed towards the doorway, and there was a deathly hush in the room. Then a gasp went up from the students sitting at the far end of the table nearest the door - they had seen the first Slytherin student, Draco Malfoy, about to enter. As he walked in, closely followed by Crabbe and Goyle, a gasp went up from everyone in the room.

"Bloody hell!" exclaimed Ron, just before he collapsed to the floor in fits of laughter. "Malfoy's turned into an angel!"

The sight that greeted the sitting students was probably the funniest they'd ever seen in their lives. All the Slytherins wore shining white clothes, glowing white halos over their heads, large silvery wings on their backs, and pretty little fairy wands in their hands, the sparkling stems ending in a pretty, white star which gave off showers of sparkling magical light. As Ron had remarked, they were dressed exactly like angels, or at least like they were portrayed in most paintings they'd seen.

The Slytherin girls looked quite pretty in their long flowing white gowns, but the cause of most of the mirth was the apparel of the boys, who weren't dressed quite the same as the girls. There were no long flowing gowns for them - oh no, Fred and George were far too devious for that! As Ginny said later, the boys looked just as much like ballet dancers as they did angels - and female ballet dancers at that. Malfoy's frilly little dress wobbled seductively atop his pretty white tights as he walked to his table, but although his appearance was angelic, his face most certainly wasn't. The dark scowl he wore on his angry face would have been better placed on a Death Eater rather than on an angel.

Perhaps the sight that caused the greatest hilarity among the students was that of Crabbe and Goyle, who moved with a far from graceful gait as they walked to their seats. Their wands were quite pretty though.

After their initial astonishment and the period of laughter that followed, Remus and Sirius spoke in glowing terms about the two perpetrators of the prank.

"Quite clever really Mooney," said Sirius.

"Very much so Padfoot," he replied. "Who but Fred and George would give angelic personas to that lot - the antithesis of the Slytherin psyche. Very clever, I must say."

"Hey Snape!" Sirius shouted to the other end of the table. "It looks like you've got a load of reformed characters on your hands. How are you going to cope with that? You'd better get some counselling sessions started pretty soon, or you'll end up with a load of schizophrenics."

"Sirius!" Ceri whispered. "Don't tease him like that. You can see he's not very happy."

"Ceri," said Remus, "Snape's never very happy."

Nadine sat laughing, hanging onto Charlie's arm to prevent herself toppling to the floor.

"Your brothers are brilliant Charlie, I've never seen anything like this before. It would never be allowed to happen at Beauxbatons."

"Albus," whispered McGonagall, "if I didn't know better, I'd say that Fred and George were behind this."

"So would I Minerva," he replied, "and don't forget they were here for Christmas dinner. But don't put that thought into Severus' head, he'll want to close their weekend shop, and at the moment, that's one of the main things keeping up the spirits of the student body."

Word soon got around that Fred and George were behind the prank, and it certainly did them no harm in a business sense. They could rest assured that their next weekend would be very busy indeed.

"I just had a word with one of their seventh year helpers," said Ginny as the four walked out into the hallway, ready to go to their first class of the term. "They'll stay dressed like that for about two hours."

"I wonder if Professor Sinistra will cope with it," said Hermione. "Did you see the way she was laughing up at the top table? I thought she'd explode."

"Pity she didn't," said Ron. "At least we wouldn't have a boring old Astronomy lesson first thing this morning."

"When's Margot and her grandfather coming Ron?"

"They'll be here sometime this afternoon thank goodness. I hope that accelerated learning thing will work, we'll only have to spend one day a week in classes if it does."

Hermione groaned. "I know it's the best thing, but I hate having to miss all those classes."

"Come on," said Harry, "we'd better get up to the Astronomy tower. We've only got ten minutes before the class starts."

They waved to Ginny as she joined her fifth year classmates on their way to her Potions class. "I wouldn't like to be in Ginny's shoes this morning," said Harry as they walked up the stairs. "Snape'll be in a filthy mood so she'd better watch out."

They continued on their way up to the Astronomy tower, little realising that they'd soon get the big breakthrough they'd been striving for over the holidays.

They walked into the classroom to see Professor Sinistra sitting at her desk, chuckling to herself.

"This lesson might not be so bad after all," whispered Ron as he saw the surly-looking Slytherins sitting at the far end of the room.

"Good morning everybody," said the Professor. "I hope you're all refreshed after the holiday? Because this morning, we'll be covering a fresh topic - the mythology of the stellar constellations."

Hermione stuck her hand in the air. "Professor, how can the stars be mythical? I mean, they're up there aren't they?"

"Quite so, Hermione. What we'll be studying is the role the stars played in ancient times, when our distant ancestors tried to make sense of them by finding all sorts of strange pattern in the heavens - patterns to which they attributed the characteristics of their gods." He looked

at the Slytherin end of the room with a smirk on her face. "But we won't be looking for angels or fairies in the stars this morning."

The Gryffindor once again doubled up with laughter, drawing evil glares from the unfortunate Slytherins.

The professor visibly shook herself, and made a valiant effort to wipe the big grin off her face, but for most of the class, she just couldn't resist making comments about angels and fairies. Ron had been right; it was probably the best Astronomy lesson the Gryffindors had ever attended.

"Right," said Sinistra, unfurling a large star chart and hanging it on the wall at the front of the class. "This chart shows the main constellations in the Northern hemisphere. Now what would you say was the most prominent one, let's see - Harry?"

"Uh, the Great Bear professor. It's directly over head all throughout the year, and it points to the Pole star."

"Very good, Harry. But I wouldn't say that was quite the most prominent one. Let's see, who shall I ask next - Fairy? Uh sorry, Crabbe?"

Again more laughter. "I don't know. I've never taken much notice of the stars," said the surly Crabbe.

"Hmm, typical," whispered the professor. "Hermione?"

"Orion, professor. Although it's low down in the Southern sky, its distinctive shape makes it one of the most recognisable constellations in the night sky."

"Excellent Hermione, I quite agree with you. Now does anyone know anything about the mythology of Orion?" Everyone shook their heads.

"No? Right, I'd better tell you then. Many ancient cultures attributed its mythology to the constellation of Orion. According to Greek mythology, the stars in this region of the sky are labelled Orion, in honour of a great hunter, son of Neptune and the nymph Eurayle. Uh, yes Hermione?"

At the word 'hunter' the three friends sat bolt upright, and Hermione immediately stuck her hand in the air. "Did you say the Hunter, Professor?"

"Yes Hermione, the constellation's known as Orion the Hunter. Why do you ask?"

"Did the ancient Egyptians place any significance in Orion?"

"Oh yes, Hermione," replied the professor. "Orion played a big part in their ancient religion. It was associated with the god Osiris, who is said to have ascended to the stars in the constellation of Orion. And his wife, Isis, is also there as his companion. She's associated with the Dog Star, the brightest star in the sky, Sirius, in the constellation of Canis Major. She follows Orion in their eternal dance through the heavens."

"That's weird," whispered Harry. "Sirius, the Dog Star - Sirius' animagus form is a dog. Do you think there's any connection?"

"I don't know Harry," she whispered back.

Later at lunch, Hermione and the other three huddled together talking about their discovery. Ginny was thrilled that they'd found out who the Hunter was, and from such an unexpected source. It lifted the gloom that had settled on her after a most horrendous Potions class that morning.

"Well we've found out who the Hunter is at last - the god Osiris," said Hermione. "And I know there's plenty about him and Isis in most of the books we've read."

"Don't tell me we've got to read them again?" asked Ron.

"Of course Ron. We know what we're looking for now. Remember what Seshat told us - start with the tomb of the Hunter. We've got to find out where the tomb of Osiris is - and that's just for starters!"

Chapter 9 The Seers' Curse

After lunch, the four were called to Dumbledore's office, where Margot and her grandfather sat waiting. They rushed over and greeted them warmly, especially Ron, who entered his usual state of captivated distraction as soon as he laid eyes on the beautiful Margot.

"Sit down, all of you," said Dumbledore from the other side of his desk. "We have to work out how we're going to approach the accelerated learning process. Have you got any firm ideas on how to proceed Jules?"

"Well I thought that the best way to start is for me to speak to all the professors to see exactly where these four are with their studies, and what topics will be covered for the rest of this term. Then I'll be able to work out a schedule for them."

"That sounds good Jules," said the headmaster. "I'll set up a meeting when afternoon classes are over. How soon do you think you'll be able to make a start?"

"If everything goes to plan," replied Jules, "we should be able to hold the first session tomorrow afternoon. I anticipate that one afternoon session should cover a normal week's tuition."

Dumbledore fiddled with his beard, deep in thought. "They'll still need to attend some classes to cover the practical aspects of certain subjects. Let's see... they'll need to cover Potions, Transfigurations, Charms and DADA I think. That should take a full day, so that leaves five and a half days a week for research and any trips they'll need to make. How does that sound to you four?"

"Fine Professor," answered Harry.

"Uh, are you sure we have to do Potions Professor?" asked Ron with a pained expression on his face.

Dumbledore chuckled. "I'm afraid so Ron. You know as well as I that a large part of the Potions class is devoted to the brewing process. Tell me Jules, what about Margot? It might be a good idea, if you agree of course, to have her attend these classes with the other four. What do you think?"

"Oh please grandfather," urged Margot. "I'd love to get involved."

"You might change your mind after your first Potions lesson Margot," whispered Ron.

Jules thought for a few moments. "Yes, I think that might be a very good idea Albus. It'll give her an insight into how things work in a normal school, and the practical aspects will most probably be better than I'm able to give her - I hear that Professor Snape is the top Potions professor in Europe. Yes, I agree."

"Will she have to be sorted into a house Headmaster?" asked Harry.

"Oh I don't think that's necessary Harry," he replied. "After all, she's not here permanently."

The four grinned, happy that Margot wouldn't have to spend her time at Hogwarts in Ravenclaw or Hufflepuff - they didn't even contemplate that she'd have been placed in Slytherin.

"There is one thing that bothers me about all this Jules," said Dumbledore. "In my experience, there's no gain without pain so to speak. Will there be any adverse side effects to your learning process?"

"Well yes," Jules answered. "Margot becomes very tired after one of our sessions, and I fully expect the same reaction from these four. But that's only to be expected - after all, a full week's learning will be crammed into one afternoon's session."

"That's not a very high price to pay," said Hermione, hoping that the headmaster wouldn't change his mind about the arrangement.

Dumbledore smiled. "No, I don't suppose it is."

"What about this afternoon's classes Professor?" asked Hermione. "We've had a breakthrough with the Hunter, thanks to Professor Sinistra, and we want to follow it through as soon as we can."

"I think you can be excused from classes this afternoon and tomorrow morning," he replied. "The sooner you find a solution to this quest the better as far as I'm concerned."

The four grinned excitedly at each other, and started to get up from their seats to rush up to the common room. They stopped, however, when Margot, looking very downcast, whispered, "What about me? What shall I do this afternoon?" She'd caught the excitement of her friends and felt that she'd be left out of it all.

Ron looked stricken at the sad expression on Margot's face. "Do you think she can help us with the research?" he asked, looking from his friends to the headmaster.

"Hmm. Well she's already involved in your quest," said Dumbledore thoughtfully. "So I can't see any reason why she can't be involved in your research. But be warned, there's absolutely no way that she can go with you when you leave the confines of Hogwarts. You know that it must only be you four who witness the result of your second quest. Do you understand?"

"We understand that Professor," Ron answered for all four. "And it would be much too dangerous for her anyway."

Margot bristled slightly at that, but decided not to press the matter at this stage.

"I think it would be a good thing for you to get involved with the research Margot," said Jules. "It might give you a better insight into what they're looking for, and that may trigger more dreams and visions. It could help more than we think."

"Welcome to the team then Margot," said Ron, a big smile on his face.

"Uh, just one thing," said Ginny, a smirk playing around her lips. "We'll all be glad of Margot's help, but what about you Ron? Are you going to be fully involved in the research or are you going to be researching Margot's pretty face the whole time?"

"Ginny!" shouted Ron. Margot put her head down and smiled weakly, a pink flush rising up her face. Harry and Hermione just grinned at each other, and Jules and Dumbledore exchanged amused, but knowing, glances.

That afternoon, the five friends sat in Gryffindor common room looking through the piles of books on Egypt that were stacked on the table over by the window. They'd found many references to Osiris and Isis, but they hadn't found where his tomb was yet.

Harry looked up at the window and thought for a few moments. "Margot, I've been meaning to ask you. Why did you come to Hogwarts looking up at my window back last spring? I know you had to deliver a message when the time was right, but why didn't you stay in France until then?"

"I was told to come, Harry. In my vision, there was a powerful voice urging me to make sure I showed myself to you from a distance, but not to speak to you until you'd joined with your Anima Summa. I don't think I was meant to speak to you either, Hermione, that's why I appeared a bit vague and confused when you spoke to me at the edge of the forest."

"I think I know what that was about," said Hermione. "It was meant to throw Harry off the scent, in case he started to see me as his Anima Summa before he was meant to."

"Hey!" shouted Ginny, looking up from the book she was reading. "I've found a passage in this book that explains the legend of Osiris and Isis."

"Read it out to us Ginny," said Harry.

"Right - are you listening Ron?" She'd spotted Ron casting long glances at Margot as she spoke to Harry and Hermione.

"Ok, I'll read it out as it is; I haven't got Hermi's talent for instant summaries. *'Isis and Osiris were two of the children born to the sun god Ra and his wife, the sky goddess Nut. They had two other children, Seth and Nephtys. Osiris married Isis and they became the first rulers of Egypt.'*"

"What?" shouted Ron looking strangely at Ginny. "He married his sister? Yuk!"

"Ron," said Hermione patiently. "I've read about that, and back in those times it wasn't considered bad. In fact, a lot of Pharaohs married their sister. You see, it was a matrilineal society back then - that is, the royal line was perceived to flow through the blood of the females, so if a son wanted to become the new Pharaoh after his father died, he had to marry his sister. See?"

"Well no, but carry on Ginny," said Ron.

"Right, *'When he was 28, Osiris was brutally murdered by his brother Seth, who'd become jealous of him, and Seth cut his body into fourteen pieces and cast them adrift in a wooden box on the river Nile. Devastated, Isis went in search of the remains of her husband and recovered all the pieces of Osiris' body except for...'*" Ginny became very quiet and just stared at the book, her face slowly turning pink. "I can't say the next bit," she said quietly.

"Give it here, Ginny," said Hermione. "I'll carry on. Now let's see, oh yes, *'Except for his...'* Oh I see what you mean Ginny," Hermione also coloured up, but was determined to continue. "Let's just say 'except for his naughty bit'."

"His what Hermi?" shouted Harry, grinning.

"His naughty bit Harry. You know!" she replied.

"I think we do Hermi," said Harry, looking at Ron and Margot who stared fixedly at the floor.

"Anyway, let me carry on. *'...Which she couldn't find.'* Ginny! What did you say?"

Ginny managed to speak through the fit of giggles that had overtaken her. "I said perhaps it was too small for her to find."

"Ginny! Honestly," breathed Hermione, looking askance at her giggling friend. "Anyway, to continue, *'Isis managed to fashion an artificial... naughty bit... for Osiris, placed herself... Oh I'm skipping this part, just use your imaginations... and became pregnant. Then she went into hiding in the marshes of the Nile and gave birth to her son, Horus. His sisters, Isis and Nephtys, then attended Osiris and he entered the hidden portals on his journey to the stars in the constellation of Orion. When he grew up, Horus took revenge on Seth and fought him in a mighty battle. Seth cut out Horus' eye and in return, Horus cut off Seth's left...'* Oh I've had enough of this. If you want to know more, read it yourselves!"

Harry grinned at his girlfriend, whose face was now as red as Ginny's hair. "Well the legend seems to confirm what Seshat told us - we've got to follow Osiris on his journey to the stars."

"I hope you won't have to go through what Osiris did though Harry," said Ginny, again lapsing into a fit of giggles.

"This is all very well," said Ron, looking embarrassed, "but it doesn't say where his tomb is."

"We'll just keep looking then," said Hermione.

That evening after dinner, the five took a break from reading their books and sat in their usual corner of the common room, talking about what they'd found so far.

"We've learned a lot about Isis and Osiris, but we still haven't found where Osiris' tomb is," said Hermione. "But I'm sure it's just a matter of time before we come across it."

"Well there's still a load of books to go through," said Harry. The three waited for Ron to groan and make his usual complaint about more reading, but looked at each other in surprise when he said nothing. Ginny could see that Ron probably hadn't heard a word that was said - his eyes had a far-away look as he stared at Margot.

"Uh, Harry, Hermione - could you help me with something I can't quite grasp in my DADA class? If you come up to my dormitory for a few minutes, I'll show you the entry in my textbook. We shan't be long Margot."

Hermione and Harry looked puzzled, knowing that Ginny was very good in DADA, but followed her up the spiral staircase. Margot watched them go, but Ron only had eyes for the

pretty French girl. He wasn't even aware that they were alone until she snapped her fingers in front of his eyes.

"Ron. Ron!"

"Uh, sorry Margot, I was daydreaming then," said Ron, looking around. "Where did the others go?"

Margot grinned. "They've just gone upstairs for a few minutes."

Ginny led Harry and Hermione into her dormitory, and quickly closed the door. "Did you see the way Ron was looking at Margot?"

"So that's what this is all about," said Hermione. "You wanted to get them on their own."

Ginny grinned. "Do you think anything will happen?"

"No way," said Harry. "Ron's probably having kittens, or at least he will when he realises we're not there any more."

"Don't be cruel Harry," said Hermione. "I don't remember you having kittens when you led me out of the common room and out into the grounds."

"That was different Hermi," he said softly. "I'd just realised that I'd been in love with you without even knowing it, and I knew that you loved me - the telepathy thing."

Hermione moved close to Harry and hugged him tightly, then lifted her face to his, smiling. "And do you still love me Harry?"

"You know the answer to that."

"Uh, don't mind me you two," said Ginny, "but I'm running out of rooms to hide in."

"Sorry Ginny," said Harry as he planted a quick kiss on Hermione's lips. "We'll try to behave."

Back in the common room, Ron was far from having kittens. He felt a glow deep inside as he sat talking to Margot.

"What are you going to do when your schooling's over Margot?"

"I don't really know, Ron. My grandfather wants me to become involved with the Priory of Sion I think, but I know they don't allow girls into their organisation."

"You could teach Divination. They're crying out for seers who know what they're talking about."

"Perhaps Ron, but I really don't know yet. What are you going to do?"

"Me? I haven't got the foggiest idea. I can't think beyond helping Harry and Hermione with their quests."

"Why did you say you didn't want me with you when you go on the quests?"

"I told you Margot, it's too dangerous."

"But your sister's with you, aren't you afraid for her too?"

"Of course I am, but that's different. We've been told that we both have to be with Harry and Hermione, but you don't."

"So it's because you don't want to see me get hurt?"

"That's right Margot. If anything happened to you, I wouldn't be able to forgive myself."

"That's very sweet Ron, but haven't you thought that I can look after myself?"

"I'm sure you can Margot, but you haven't found yourself in the sorts of dangerous situations we've been placed in. It's very scary, I can tell you."

"I'm sure it is."

They both looked at each other a bit self-consciously, wondering where their conversation would lead, and both a little shy to take it to a more intimate level. Margot felt strangely elated. Since meeting the four friends, her world had turned upside down, from being mostly alone to suddenly being thrust into the middle of the Anima Summas' quest was exciting - more exciting than anything she'd experienced before. And the attention she'd received from the young male population of the school was also exciting. She looked at Ron and started to compare him to Serge, the boy she sometimes spoke to in Rennes-le-Chateau.

Serge was very forthright, always trying to get Margot to go out with him, but Ron was shy around girls. But he was brave and true. As she sat looking at him, she came to understand that Ron was very exceptional for one so young. He wouldn't just ask a girl out for a good time, he'd only ask her out if he cared about her a lot.

"What are you thinking Ron?" Margot broke the silence.

"I'm thinking that I'm very comfortable talking to you Margot. Normally, I'm all fingers and thumbs and tongue-tied when I get close to a beautiful girl, but when I'm with you it seems different somehow."

"You still think I'm beautiful then?"

"You're the most beautiful girl I've ever seen Margot," said Ron quietly. "And your beauty isn't only on the outside. To me, you're like Hermione and Ginny rolled into one, and up till now, they're the two girls I've loved and respected more than anyone."

Margot smiled as she looked shyly down at the floor. No one had ever said anything like that to her before. They continued to look silently at each other, each trying to see into the other's mind and savouring their nearness.

"Come on you two," shouted Harry from the top of the spiral staircase. "Do you know what time it is? We've got a heavy day tomorrow."

Ron and Margot walked up the staircase side by side and stopped when they reached the top. "Goodnight Ron," she said softly, looking into his eyes.

"See you in the morning Margot," said Ron shyly. They stood close for a few moments, each knowing that they should do something, but both too shy to do it. Finally, Margot sighed and walked up to Ginny's dormitory.

Ron opened the door to his dormitory and walked inside as if in a dream. He had a permanent smile on his face as he undressed and sat on his bed.

"Well?"

Ron shook himself from his thoughts and looked up to see Harry standing by his bedside. "Well what?"

"Did you... you know?" asked Harry, grinning.

"Did I what Harry?"

"Come on Ron, give!"

"There's nothing to tell Harry. We talked a lot, that's all."

"You mean you were sitting alone with Margot all this time and all you did was talk?"

Ron's grin changed to a pained look. "Harry. Can I ask you something?"

"Course you can Ron. What is it?"

"How... I mean, how do you go about kissing a girl?"

Harry burst out laughing. "Come on Ron, you just put your lips in this sort of position and..."

"Harry! I know *how* to kiss a girl, but I don't know how to go about it."

"You mean, you're not sure whether to make the first move or not?"

"Well yes! I don't want to seem too pushy or anything, and risk scaring her off."

"The only thing I can tell you, Ron, is what I've experienced myself, and you know I haven't had much of that. What I've found is that it just sort of happens naturally. You don't need to force anything, just wait for the right time - and the way you two are acting, I don't think that time is very far away."

"But Harry, how will I know it's the right time?"

"Believe me Ron, you just will."

Ron rolled his eyes and slammed his body back onto the bed, feeling even more confused.

Margot walked into Ginny's dorm to find Hermione and the redhead waiting for her. They looked at her expectantly, waiting for her to say something.

"Come on Margot!" said Ginny urgently. "What did he do? What did he say?"

"He didn't do anything Ginny. He said a lot, but we mostly sat looking at each other."

"You did?" asked Hermione, a grin spreading over her beautiful face.

"Yes. It was... interesting."

"Interesting!" gasped Ginny. "My brother has never been interesting in his life! What did he say to you?"

"He's a very nice and thoughtful boy Ginny, and he *is* very interesting. He seemed so mature tonight - he said things that I hadn't really expected him to say. You should get to know your brother a bit better Ginny, you'll be surprised."

"Hah! Come on Margot," said Ginny, trying without much success to keep her excitement in check, "get to the interesting bits - did he kiss you?"

Margot looked down at her hands a little sadly. "No. When we stood at the top of the stairs, I thought he wanted to, but I think he was too shy."

"Oh that... that..." gasped Ginny.

"Do you like him Margot? I mean, like him *THAT* way?" asked Hermione gently.

"Yes Hermione," she replied quietly. "I think I do."

Ginny loudly let out the breath she'd been holding while she waited for Margot's answer. "Well thank god for that! Do you want me to prod him into some action Margot? You know he's absolutely smitten by you don't you?"

Margot smiled. "I think he's made his feelings pretty obvious Ginny, but please don't do anything. If anything happens, I want Ron to do it because he really wants to, not that he feels he should because he's been badgered into it. Can you understand what I'm trying to say? I've never been in this position before, and it's all a bit strange and scary - but it's exciting too."

"We understand," said Hermione, looking daggers at Ginny. "And Ginny won't go on her usual match-making crusade. We'll just let things take their course, won't we Ginny?"

"If you say so Hermi," said Ginny sullenly.

The next afternoon, the five teens walked into the spare classroom that would be their place of accelerated learning for the foreseeable future. Jules had decided that Margot would be learning the same things as the other four, since their level of tuition was at roughly the same stage. He had a pile of books on the desk at the front of the classroom covering all the subjects he would be teaching them.

"I've worked out a schedule with your professors," he said after the five had taken their seats. "And this afternoon, I'll give you everything they'll be teaching the other fifth and six years this week. Ginny, of course, will only be covering fifth year topics. Now after I've placed the spell on you, I'll give you your textbooks to read. You'll find that you'll be able to read the books at an incredibly fast rate, and everything you read will remain in your memory. Now we'll have three one-hour sessions this afternoon, three-quarters of the time will be spent reading, and the rest I'll answer any questions you may have, because although you'll retain all the facts, you may need clarification on some of the more difficult concepts. Ready?"

Jules walked over to the five and placed his wand on the top of each of their heads as he said the ancient spell. Each time, a dim silvery light left his wand and covered his or her head for a few moments before disappearing. Then he waited for two minutes until the spell became fully active.

Although Margot was familiar with the procedure, the other four were amazed and excited by the whole experience. At the end of the afternoon, Hermione in particular couldn't curb her excitement as she spoke to Jules Denarnaud. Although very tired, the adrenalin coursed through her body as she spoke animatedly to the grand master.

"Professor Denarnaud, that was the most incredible experience. Just think, if we could do this more often we'd be able to accumulate more knowledge that we could during the rest of our lives! We could cover subjects that we'd never be able to do in a lifetime of study."

Jules smiled at Hermione's infectious manner. "Don't forget what I said Hermione, it comes with a price, and I predict you'll all be sleeping in about one hour, once the spell wears off. And you won't wake up until quite late in the morning. I'm not doing this lightly you know; I know that it will drain you more than you can understand at the moment - that's why I'm restricting the sessions to once a week."

"I understand Professor, but it's so exciting!"

"I suggest you all get something to eat now, while you're still conscious."

Jules' prediction proved right, and after eating a pile of sandwiches the five slowly trudged up to their dorms, their minds aching with tiredness.

The next morning, they woke quite late and just managed to catch a late breakfast in the Great Hall. Then they walked up to the library to resume their research. They still felt a bit tired after the previous days' study, and came to realise the truth of what Jules had told them about there being a price to pay. They only entered into the spirit of the research when it was close to lunchtime and decided, with Madam Pince's grudging approval, to ask Dobby to bring them a plate of sandwiches to eat while they continued to read their books.

Half an hour into the lunch break, the library began to fill up with the students who wanted to get some work done before afternoon classes. One student, however, was there not for the purpose of studying. In fact, no one knew he was there at all.

Draco Malfoy sat under the cover of his Invisibility Cloak at the end of the table occupied by the five friends, listening to everything they said. He also noticed the way Ron and Margot cast long sideways glances at each other, usually when the other had their head buried in one of the books.

Margot's concentration was constantly interrupted that lunchtime by a stream of fifth, sixth and seventh year boys, the ones with a more confident approach to life, as they walked up to her and asked her to go out on dates with them. She refused them all, and kept glancing at Ron, who seemed to become more and more sad with each solicitous approach.

Ron had that terrible sinking feeling in his stomach as he watched the boys' advances. His mind was in turmoil and he felt he'd have to do something soon or he'd lose Margot. But what could he do? At least, he thought, Margot hadn't accepted any offers yet.

"There's more here about the legend of Isis and Osiris," said Ginny suddenly. "Do you want to hear it?"

"Not if it's anything like the one you tried to read the other day Ginny," said Harry, grinning.

"It's not Harry. Don't worry I won't embarrass you. Listen, it says here that Thoth helped Isis put Osiris back together again after she found the scattered bits of his body, and Thoth also healed Horus after he'd fought the battle with Seth. That means that Thoth was around at the same time as Osiris and Isis."

"Hmm, yes," said Hermione. She'd been engrossed in the book she was reading.

"I've found something!" Margot suddenly exclaimed. "It's here - where the tomb of Osiris is!"

The others looked up, waiting for Margot to continue.

"The chapter I'm reading is about the temple of Seti the first, one of the Pharaohs. It says here that while the archaeologists were excavating the temple, they accidentally came across another building constructed at a much lower level than the foundations of the temple. I'll read out the next bit, *'although orthodox Egyptologists regard the two structures as contemporary, there is ample evidence that this is definitely NOT the case. The style is much older than the temple of Seti and resembles the structures on the Giza plateau known as the temple of the Sphinx and the Valley temple, both of which use huge monoliths in their construction, and are thought to have been built during the Old Kingdom or even in pre-dynastic times. The Osireion is also known as the Tomb of Osiris. Abydos was the chief seat of worship of Osiris, Lord of the Underworld. Osiris, his sister Isis, and their son Horus were fundamental figures in the religion of ancient Egypt - they were Neterw, a race of divine beings that ruled Egypt from way before the 1st Dynasty, from a period known as Zep Tepi, the "First Time".'*"

Margot paused before reading the next section. "I... I... the next piece reads, *'A long dark corridor leads from a spot a few hundred yards to the west of Seti's temple down into the Osireion. Excavations on the South side passage revealed funerary texts from the Book of the Gates and the Book of What is in the Duat, which depict the dangers of the Underworld, which the deceased has to overcome on his journey to the Hall of Ma'at. The serpent Apep, lakes of pitch and fire and gates guarded by dangerous monsters are depicted on the walls.'*"

Margot read the final passage very quietly, and looked up at her newfound friends with a stricken look in her eyes.

"That's it!" said Harry, grinning at Margot. "The Hunter's tomb is in Abydos. That's where we have to go next. And it says that there are funerary texts on the walls - Seshat told us we have

to look at the tomb to find our way to the spells." Harry paused as he saw the look on Margot's face, "'What's wrong Margot?'"

"I... I can't help feeling scared for you all. You heard what it said about serpents, monsters and all manner of awful things you'll have to face on your quest."

Ron reached over and placed his hand over Margot's. "Don't worry Margot. We'll be all right - we faced just as bad in the labyrinth and we came through it safely."

"I think this will be much worse Ron," she said turning her tortured eyes towards him. "I get the feeling that this will be so much worse." She looked down at her hands feeling very miserable.

Her four friends looked at each other helplessly, not sure what to do to ease Margot's feelings of impending doom.

"We'll do some more reading about Abydos and the Osireion later," said Hermione, "but we'd better go up to see the Headmaster and the others first. We've got to tell them about this and that we want to go to Abydos as soon as possible. Where is Abydos anyway?"

Ginny flicked through her book to the place where she'd seen a map of ancient Egypt. She looked at it for a few moments. "Here it is. It's on the west bank of the Nile, between Hermopolis and Luxor."

"We'll get Bill to arrange a Portkey there," said Ron.

Draco Malfoy remained sitting at the table after the five friends had left. He smiled, elated that he'd found something out at last, and wrote a note to his father, still under the cover of his Invisibility Cloak. But Draco's smile was tinged with an odd sort of expression. While he sat listening to the five friends, something had started to creep, unbidden, into his mind and he started to feel an uncharacteristic jealousy at the way the five had interacted.

His mind strayed to his two friends, Crabbe and Goyle, and couldn't help thinking that he'd get a more sophisticated response from two lizards than he would from those two ignoramuses. He tried to put the thoughts out of his head - after all, he still hated goody-goody Potter, the self-styled saviour of the world, and the Granger girl was only a Mudblood. The pretty French girl was a stunner, but she couldn't really be up to much if she hung around with Potter and friends, and as for the Weasleys, well, they were from the lowest of the low, and would always remain so - always poor.

But still the feelings of jealousy persisted. But why should he be jealous? He had everything, and he knew he was destined for great things in the future. True, he was scared of Lord Voldemort, but wasn't everybody? He couldn't help feeling, however, that the Weasley girl seemed too spirited, too full of life to be a mere Weasley.

Draco headed slowly up to the owlery, his thoughts more confused than they'd ever been in the past.

"I'm glad the headmaster agreed to let us go to Abydos tomorrow," said Harry. "We haven't got any time to lose."

"Until then, we can spend the time reading up on the Osireion," said Hermione. "When do you think Bill will have the Portkey ready Ron?"

"He should be able to get it in place by tomorrow afternoon," he replied.

"As soon as we get his ok," said Ginny, "we can go."

"I'm going to miss one thing though," said Hermione. "Professor Dumbledore's going to cover Remus' DADA classes while he's away looking after us. I'd really like to see him in action."

"What are you going to do Margot?" asked Ron.

Ever since she'd voiced her earlier misgivings, Margot had become very quiet and deep in thought. She raised her head slowly and answered, "Grandfather and I'll be going back to France until you come back from Abydos."

Ron glanced at the other three before going over to sit beside Margot. He put his hand around her shoulder and squeezed gently. "What's bothering you Margot? You've been very quiet since lunch time."

A stricken look came into the girl's eyes, and she jerked away from Ron suddenly, leaving him staring in shock. "Nothing Ron."

Ginny and Hermione walked up to her, looking with concern into her eyes. "Margot?" whispered Hermione. "Tell us what's wrong... please."

"Nothing!" she shouted, getting to her feet. "Leave me alone! I'll be going home soon, and I don't know if I'll be back."

The four friends stared in shock as Margot raced up the spiral staircase and into Ginny's dormitory.

"What the hell was that all about?" asked an astonished Harry. "Did you do something to upset her Ron?"

"No Harry," said Ron, looking thoroughly miserable. "Nothing. I only tried to help her with whatever's on her mind. Did you hear what she said? She said she might not be coming back here."

"She's only been like this since she read that piece about the Underworld," said Hermione thoughtfully. "I wonder if it's anything to do with that?"

"What, because she's fearful of what might happen to us?" asked Ginny. "But that's an odd way to react if she's worried about us."

"I've got a funny feeling about this," said Ron. "I wonder if she's said anything to her grandfather about it?"

"Well there's only one way to find out," said Harry. "Let's try the headmaster's office, he's probably still there."

"So you see, Professor Denarnaud, we're worried about the way she reacted," said Ron as he finished explaining about Margot to Jules and Dumbledore.

"Has she said anything to you about it Professor?" asked Hermione.

Jules slumped into his seat, looking as if a great weight had suddenly fallen onto his body.

"Jules? Are you all right?" asked Dumbledore, getting up from his chair.

"Yes I'm all right Albus," he sighed. "I was afraid this might happen. I've hoped against hope that she'd be immune to it, but it seems I was wrong."

Professor Dumbledore nodded knowingly and he sat sadly back into his chair.

"What's the matter with her?" asked Ron a hint of panic in his voice.

"I'd better explain," said Jules with a sigh. "There was more than one reason for not sending Margot to Beauxbatons. Apart from the lack of good Divination teaching there, we wanted to shield her from forming any close relationships with students of her own age. We hoped that by waiting longer, any close friendships she'd make would be normal ones. But it seems the Seers' Curse has struck again."

Dumbledore nodded grimly as he listened to Jules' tortured explanation.

"The Seers' Curse?" whispered Ron fearfully. "What's that Professor?"

"I don't know how many seers you four know, but I suspect it's only your own Divination professor here at Hogwarts?"

The four nodded glumly, thinking about how odd Professor Trelawney was.

"Well I've met quite a few, as I'm sure that Professor Dumbledore has." Again Dumbledore nodded. "And there's not one that's been able to form a normal stable relationship with people of their own age. None of those I know are married. Normally, the curse strikes quite early in a seer's development, that's why we tried to shield Margot from it until she was much older, and, we hoped, better equipped to handle it. You see, if a seer starts to get very close to a group of people her own age, and especially to someone in particular," he nodded at Ron, "she will eventually be stricken with great feelings of foreboding. What Margot is feeling now, is a deep-rooted fear that she'll begin to have dreams and visions concerning the people she's grown to love - that's you. She's being torn apart that she'll eventually see something bad in your futures - even your deaths - and to someone as caring as Margot, that's a devastating thing to live with. So she's reacted in the only way she knows how - she thinks that by keeping her distance from you four, she won't start to see your futures, and in particular, anything bad that may lie ahead for you. In her confused state, she thinks that by not dreaming anything bad about you then nothing bad will come to you." He smiled. "Don't take this unkindly, but what you four are facing doesn't help with her condition. The only thing I can do now is to take her back to France and try a few things I've picked up during my researches into the Seers' Curse problem, the research I've been doing ever since I found out that Margot is a seer. I can only hope that they'll be able to help her through what will be a very difficult time for her."

He looked at the stricken expressions on the faces of the four friends. "So don't think for one minute that Margot has suddenly come to dislike you; on the contrary, it's because she loves you so much that has pushed her over the edge."

"Poor Margot," whispered Ginny, a tear running down her cheek as she saw the tortured look on her brother's face.

"Can we do anything to help Professor? Anything at all?" the panic in Ron's voice was now clear to see.

Jules smiled at Ron. "I'm afraid not Ron. I know it's difficult for you, but the best thing you can do now is to leave her well alone. I'll do what I can to help her, and we can only hope that she'll somehow get through it and come back to Hogwarts. And I can't promise that I'll be successful, but I'll try my damndest to get her over this. I don't want her to lose the close friendship she's built up with you four, and especially with you Ron."

He turned to the headmaster. "I'd better get her back to France as soon as I can Albus. Let me know when these four get back from Egypt, and I'll continue with their accelerated learning." He turned back to the four friends. "I think it will be best if she doesn't see you now. Perhaps you'd better wait here until we leave."

They watched as Jules Denarnaud walked slowly out of the headmaster's office, feeling quite devastated at what they'd heard. Hermione put her hand in Harry's and squeezed, sending her thoughts, and they glanced at Ron, seeing the look on his face and knowing that they'd have to give him all the support they could in the days and weeks ahead.

"What are the reports from around the country?" hissed Voldemort as he sat on his stone throne in his cave. Each of his inner circle gave their report, each bearing news of great fear and anxiety from the magical community.

Voldemort hissed with satisfaction. "And how are you progressing with the plan to retrieve the spells at Qumran?"

Lucius cleared his throat. "My Lord, we've sent several teams to the canyon and the surrounding area, each one given the task of mapping the defences and the positions of those security devices they use. I've told them not to return until they've properly surveyed and charted everything, but when they do we'll be able to formulate our plan."

"Hmm," grunted Voldemort. "Send them a message that I won't be kept waiting much longer. What of our spy at Hogwarts - we haven't heard from him lately."

"I received an owl from him only today my Lord, and I haven't had a chance to tell you his news yet. It seems that the Anima Summas are closing in on their second quest, and they'll soon be going to Egypt - to a place called Abydos."

Voldemort thought for a few moments. "I want you there, Lucius. Take Wormtail and Travis with you, together with fifty of our best men. I want you to try to capture them if possible but if you can't, make sure their bodies drift down the Nile for the fish to eat. But kill them only

as a last resort - I want to extract their powers for myself. Go immediately, and send me a message when you have them."

"Yes my Lord," replied Lucius as he nodded to Wormtail and Travis.

Sirius walked into the school library the following afternoon and motioned for Harry to come to him. "How's Ron taking it Harry?"

"He's in a terrible state Sirius," he replied worriedly. "The three of us are making sure he's not out of sight for an instant, and we're trying to talk to him, but I don't think we're helping very much."

"I'm sure you are helping Harry, it'll take time for him to come to grips with it. I spoke to Professor Dumbledore a little earlier, and suggested that it may be a good idea if he stays behind while we go to Abydos. I'm worried that if any Death Eaters turn up, and in his distracted state, he'll be too vulnerable."

"I've thought the same thing Sirius," Harry replied, "and I mentioned it to him this morning. I thought he was going to knock my head off; he said that he hopes that the Death Eaters turn up so that he can take his bang out on them!"

"Just like Ron," said Sirius grinning wryly. "Look, we've just had a message from Bill. The Portkey is set up and we're all ready to go. Meet us outside the main entrance in fifteen minutes."

Twenty minutes later, they materialised in the afternoon desert sunshine, just outside the temple of Seti the first at Abydos. Bill was waiting to greet them, dressed in his native garb and wearing a broad grin as he spotted Ceri. Sirius shook his hand and gruffly muttered a terse greeting, and then walked up to look at the impressive temple ruins.

Bill made a beeline for Ceri, and gallantly kissed the back of her hand. Ceri grinned and glanced over at Sirius, who made an obvious show of not looking in their direction. Charlie and Nadine both raised their eyes to the sky and hoped that they wouldn't have to take on the roles of referee this trip.

Bill led them up the long stone staircase and past a large number of huge stone blocks towards the entrance to the impressive-looking temple. As he led them into the gloom, he gave a running commentary on the history of the place, but although interested, Hermione had eyes only for one place.

"Uh Bill, where's the Osireion?" she asked, interrupting him in full flow.

"Just through the back of the temple Hermione. Follow me."

They walked through the various halls and chapels of the temple for about two hundred yards and finally came to the back section. "Here it is," said Bill pointing to a structure below the level of the temple floor.

They stood looking down at the impressive courtyard, open to the sky and flanked by huge stone blocks, not unlike the trilithons they'd seen at Stonehenge. They could see dark entranceways leading off under the ground to a number of mysterious places.

"How do we get down there?" asked Harry.

"The best entrance is to the north of the temple," replied Bill, looking at his tourist map of the complex. "We can go down a long corridor that slopes towards the Osireion. Come on."

They walked out of the corridor and stood looking up at the huge stones, marvelling at how the ancient Egyptians could have lifted them into place. "Where's the tomb of Osiris?" asked Ginny.

"There isn't one," Bill replied. "At least, no ones been able to find it yet. It's thought that it was built as a symbolic tomb so that the many worshipers of Osiris and Isis could come here to pay their respects. There're quite a few annexes leading off the central area though, if you want to explore further."

"Come on," said Hermione, feeling a bit downcast. "Let's check them out."

"We'd better stay here and keep watch," said Sirius. "Remus, would you, Ceri and Charlie go back up to the main temple and keep a look out from there?"

They nodded and walked back up the long corridor, leaving Sirius, Bill and Nadine to patrol the Osireion itself. No one saw Lucius Malfoy and his men, who watched from a sandy knoll about half a mile away.

The four friends raised their illuminated wands as they entered the first chamber and looked around the dark and empty space. "Nothing much here," said Ron.

They moved from room to room, but could find nothing of any significance to their search. The next room they entered was different. None of the four could quite put their finger on why it was any different from the other rooms, but there was definitely something different about the place.

"What the hell is it?" asked Ron, looking around the room.

"I don't know Ron," Hermione replied.

"There's something here," said Ginny from the far right corner of the room. She stood holding her wand up towards the ceiling, where there were a number of pieces of crumbly plaster still adhering to the wall. The others stood next to her and looked up at it, the wands now clearly showing the ancient plaster work.

"What do you think?" asked Harry.

"I think I'm going to do something very naughty," said Hermione. "Help lift me up to the ceiling you boys."

Harry and Ron bent down for Hermione to scramble onto their backs and then stood so that Hermione's face was right in front of the plaster. She examined it from all angles and then

whispered, "I think there's something underneath all this old plaster. Ginny, keep a look out in case anybody comes in."

Reaching out, Hermione caught hold of one edge of the plaster and pulled, closing her eyes and praying for forgiveness at what she was doing. "If the Egyptians see me doing this, I'll spend the rest of my life in a Cairo prison!" she thought.

Hermione shrieked as the bit of plaster fell, pulling the rest of the plaster along with it, showering Harry and Ron in a fine powder. "Sorry boys," she whispered.

She looked back at the exposed section of wall and gasped at what she saw. There, as vibrant and colourful as the day they were written, were a number of columns of hieroglyphic writing. She examined the writing closely, but the only things she recognised were a number of cartouches, writing surrounded by a sort of enclosure that normally represented the name of a Pharaoh or God.

"Ginny," she shouted to the redhead standing by the entrance. "You're good at drawing. Come and copy these hieroglyphics."

She jumped back down to the floor, and Ginny climbed up in her place, clutching parchment and quill. "Exactly as you see them please Ginny. I don't know if they're important, but something tells me they are and I want Professor Dumbledore to translate them."

After half an hour, Harry and Ron started to protest at the way Ginny kept shifting her position on their backs. "Well I can't help it," she shouted. "Some of these shapes are bloody awkward to draw from where I'm standing - keep still and keep quiet."

Harry and Ron groaned but resigned themselves to a little bit more suffering from Ginny as she moved from side to side to get the full perspective of the illustrations on the wall. They heaved a sigh of relief when Ginny finally jumped down, and smiled at Hermione. "Got it all Hermi," she said, "but I hope the colours aren't significant."

"I don't think so Ginny," she replied as she admired her friend's handiwork. "This'll do fine."

They walked back out into the central area of the Osireion and were astonished to find the place in pitch darkness.

Bill grinned at them. "The night falls very quickly in the desert. I think we'd better get back up to the main temple, it's too dangerous to go walking about down here at night."

"But I want to see if there's anything more here Bill," said Hermione.

"Well have to stay overnight up at the temple then," said Sirius. "You can resume your explorations in the morning."

A little later, they met back up with the three up at the main temple and started looking around for a good place to camp. "I think the best place is that large concourse just inside the main entrance," said Remus. "There's plenty of room to pitch some tents there and we can use the cracks in the stone blocks on the floor to anchor the tent pegs."

"It's a good job you come prepared for every eventuality," said Bill. "What about watching out for any lurking Death Eaters that may be around here?"

"We'll place a load of Whammos around the place," said Ceri. "Come on, we'd better do that first."

The adults walked out of the main entrance and down the long stone staircase, placing Whammos at thirty-yard intervals in a circle around the site, using their illuminated wands to guide them. Then they walked back into the temple and placed some inside towards the back.

"That should do it," said Ceri with a satisfied grin. But she wouldn't have grinned had she known that Lucius Malfoy was noting the positions of the Whammos as they were placed on the ground. Nor would she have grinned as he called his Death Eaters around him to formulate the plan to capture the Anima Summas.

"We'll destroy the ones at the far end of the temple," said Lucius, pointing to their positions on his parchment. "But we'll leave the ones on this side, in case we need to trigger a diversion."

"How are we going to get at Potter and Granger though?" asked Wormtail.

Lucius thought for a few moments. "We could get five of the men to trigger some of the Whammos, and when Black and the others come running out, we'll approach from the far side with the rest of the men. They won't stand a chance against us all in the dark. But don't forget, only stun Potter and Granger - I want them taken alive. I don't care what you do with the others, but just make sure about those two."

"When shall we attack?" asked Travis.

"We'll wait a few hours longer until we're sure they're asleep. Then we strike!"

Back in the temple, Nadine, Ceri, Hermione and Ginny prepared their usual fare of beans on toast over the campfire. Nadine leaned close to Hermione. "How's Ron doing?"

"He was fine this afternoon," she whispered, "when he had something to do, but look at him now - as soon as he gets time to think, he lapses back into that awful melancholy mood." They looked over to see Ron sitting between Charlie and Harry, and Charlie was speaking quietly to him, but Ron didn't seem to be answering.

"It must be terrible for him," whispered Ceri. "To be on the verge of love and then to have it snatched away like that..."

Ginny sighed. "I've never seen him like this before. I feel so sorry for both him and Margot. I *do* hope her grandfather can do something."

Ron only picked at his food that night, and everyone looked at each other grimly, knowing that Ron was suffering badly. He did, however, manage to fall into a deep sleep later on in the night, but Harry and Hermione couldn't get settled. They'd spoken silently together for most of the night about Ron, using their telepathic connection, and were just too worried about him to get to sleep.

Hermione sighed and sent her thoughts to Harry, 'I can't sleep Harry. I'm too worried about Ron.'

'I know Hermi; I can't sleep either. Come on, let's go out and get some fresh air, I could do with a cuddle.'

They silently crept past their sleeping friends and picked a spot at the back of one of the huge stones in front of the temple entrance. They sat on the ground and wrapped their arms around each other, looking up at the clear night sky, which clearly showed the constellation of Orion low down in the south.

"I wonder if Osiris and Isis are looking down on us," said Hermione grinning.

"I hope not," said Harry as he pulled Hermione close and kissed her tenderly on the lips. "I don't like an audience when I'm kissing my girlfriend."

Hermione smiled and put her hands around Harry's neck, pulling his face back down to hers. They didn't manage to complete the kiss, however. Over to their right, they heard a loud explosion, and looked up to see five glowing yellow figures in the distance.

"Death Ea..." Hermione started to shout, but her words were cut off when a calloused hand came from behind and clamped her mouth shut. Harry stared in horror, and started to rise, reaching into his robes for his wand. But that was the last thing he remembered that night. Travis, lurking behind the huge stone, brought his rock-filled hand down onto the back of Harry's head and knocked him senseless. Hermione squealed in horror through the hand that was over her mouth, but she could do nothing to help, three other pairs of arms held her immobile as they lifted her from the ground and carried her, struggling, out into the darkness.

Sirius was the first out of the temple, quickly followed by the others. They saw the glowing yellow figures over to their right and started to run in their direction. Sirius shouted back over his shoulder, "Ceri, you and Remus stay with Harry and the others, we'll see what's over there."

They stopped in their tracks when they heard Ginny shouting from the temple entrance, "Sirius, Harry and Hermione aren't here. Are they outside with you?"

Sirius and the others quickly looked around, their wand held high, but they could see no sign of the pair. "Bloody hell!" shouted Sirius. "Spread out quick, they've got to be here somewhere!"

"Sirius!" shouted Ron suddenly, looking down at the ground where Harry and Hermione had earlier sat. They all gathered round Ron and their worst fears were realised as he stooped and picked up two wands. "Their Harry's and Hermione's," he said quietly, looking out into the dark night. "The Death Eaters must have got them."

"Quick, spread out and look for any traces," shouted Sirius.

Ceri knew, of course, that it was too late. She knew that the Death Eaters would have Apparated the pair away as soon as they'd captured them, but she didn't say anything to Sirius. Deep down Sirius knew that too, but he couldn't bring himself to face the unpalatable truth of it.

After three hours of searching in the darkness, and scouring the ground for any signs of the Death Eaters' direction of flight, Sirius was finally forced to accept that the pair was gone, taken to some terrible place of torment by the Death Eaters. He sat on the stone steps leading up to the temple, slumped, holding his head in his hands.

The others looked on, full of despair, as Ceri sat down beside him and put her arm around his shoulders. "I've failed them Ceri," he said quietly. "They counted on me to keep them safe, but I've failed."

"It's not your fault alone Sirius," she said gently. "It's all our fault. We should all have been more aware of the threat. We've been lulled into a false sense of security because there hasn't been an attack on us for a long time, but now isn't the time for self-recrimination. We've got to work out what we can do, where we can look for them."

Sirius raised his head and smiled at Ceri. "You're right Ceri. We've got to do something. Let's get everybody together and talk it through."

They both got up and walked over to the others just as the first faint light of dawn filtered over the distant horizon. They hadn't even begun to formulate a plan of action when they turned at the sound of shouting from inside the temple. Ginny suddenly burst into view running towards them, her eyes wide with some hidden terror.

"He's not there!" she shouted. "I've looked everywhere inside the temple, but I can't find him!"

"Calm down Ginny," Nadine rushed over and put her hands on her shoulders. "Who's not there? Who can't you find?"

"Ron!" she said in an agonised voice. "He's gone!"

Harry regained consciousness only very slowly as he lay on the hard and dusty floor. He groaned and held his hand to the back of his head, feeling the large bump and the dull ache that seemed to fill his mind. He slowly opened his eyes, but could see only blackness. He lifted himself to a sitting position and reached for his wand, but he couldn't find it. Then a far worse pain filled his tortured head.

He cried out as his scar suddenly erupted into a blinding wall of pain. He doubled over in agony, all coherent thought driven from his mind, as he heard the low squeal of a rusty iron door being pushed open.

He opened his eyes once more and looked up. He could now see from the light of an illuminated wand at the open doorway. The figure holding it stepped quickly inside to allow someone else to enter - and the second figure filled him with dread. He looked up at Voldemort through squinting eyes as the pain from his scar started to get worse.

Voldemort lifted his head to the ceiling and laughed loudly. "At last Potter, we meet again. Pity I couldn't provide you with more comfortable surroundings, but they didn't go in for that sort of thing when the ancient Egyptians built these tombs, so I'm afraid you'll just have to put up with it. And in case you're wondering, we've got your girlfriend locked safely away down

the corridor, we know what you're capable of when you join together, so don't bank on seeing her any time soon."

Voldemort walked around to Harry's side and looked down at the boy with disdain. "I thought I'd pay you a little visit just to tell you what's going to happen here tonight -I'm sure that you'll be very interested"

. Right this minute, there's a ritual being prepared in your honour. But I don't for one minute think that you'll appreciate the archaic beauty of it. It will be similar to the one in the graveyard back two years ago, when you kindly provided some of your blood to make my new body. This time, you'll provide me with your mind! I want everything you took from me all those years ago, and I want the ancient knowledge you now have."

He once again moved his position, walking around to Harry's other side. "But before that, I've got a little entertainment laid on for you. You should find it quite interesting, since the star of the show will be your girlfriend! Yes Potter, I'm going to extract every last drop of knowledge from her - suck her mind dry while you watch her agony. Then you'll get the same treatment. I'm told it's very painful Potter, and when it's all over you'll just be an empty shell, just like your girlfriend. When we're long gone, you'll both be left to roam these ancient tombs until you die of thirst, but don't think you'll be found - no one has come down here for thousands of years. The muggles don't even know it exists. Your girlfriend doesn't know what lies ahead for her yet Potter; I wanted you to be the first to know. I want you to think long and hard about what's going to happen to you. I want you to suffer like you made me suffer for all those years."

Voldemort stormed out of the rocky cell, cackling quietly, quickly followed by the Death Eater, who shut the door with a loud clang and locked it, plunging Harry back into the pitch darkness. He sat up once again as the pain in his scar eased.

Further down the ancient corridor, Hermione was in an agony of doubt and fear, not knowing if Harry was still alive and not knowing that he was just up the corridor in another cell. All through the long and terrifying night, she'd called to him with her mind, but she'd had no response.

She wrung her hands in frustration as she again opened her mind and sent her desperate call to Harry. She stood still and a great sigh of relief escaped her lips as she heard him answer, 'Are you all right Hermi? Have they hurt you?'

'Oh Harry, I didn't know if you were still alive! You don't know how happy I am to hear your mind again.'

'Don't get too happy Hermi. I've just had a visit from Voldemort. He's preparing a ritual to extract all our knowledge from our brains. And they've taken my wand - I suppose yours is gone too?'

'Yes Harry; look, lets try to do wand-less magic. Try to unlock the door with Alohomora.'

After a few minutes, Harry gave up. 'It's no use. I can't do it without you.'

'Can you hear that Harry?' asked Hermione, unable to mask the deep fear she felt. In the distance, from somewhere deep within the rock tombs, they could both hear the deep ritual chanting echoing through the corridors.

'I don't think we've got much time,' Harry sent his thoughts. 'Can you see if there're any windows in your cell?'

'It's pitch dark in here, Harry, but I managed to take a quick look around when some people passed the cell with an illuminated wand a few minutes ago. There's an old rusty iron door, but no windows, the walls and ceiling are just bare rock.'

'Voldemort and a Death Eater came into my cell a few minutes ago; it must have been their light you saw.'

'But that means you're only about twenty yards further along the corridor to my left. I heard them stop and open a creaky door just after they passed me.'

'So near and yet so far,' Harry mused.

'Harry! Let's try something. Go to the back of the tomb and hold your right hand, the one with the ring, out in my direction and I'll do the same with my left hand. Concentrate hard on us joining together.'

Harry did as he was asked and stretched out his right arm, making sure that the ring pointed at the right-hand rock wall. He closed his eyes as he visualised Hermione, and put all his ample powers of concentration into the thought of joining with her. He felt the power surge through his arm, and felt a dragging sensation as a silvery blue beam of light hit the rock. He felt as if he was being pulled right into the rock, and he opened his eyes.

He could clearly see the tomb wall in the light of the beam coming from the ring. The rock wall seemed to shimmer, and then it started to crumble and disintegrate. He walked forward, dragged by the power of the ancient mind spell, into the rock wall, a roughly hewn corridor forming in front of him. After about ten minutes, and ten yards into the rock, he stood facing Hermione, who had walked through the corridor created by her own ring, to meet him half way.

They dropped their hands and the light faded, but they knew exactly where each other stood. They flung themselves forward and held each other tightly, again feeling the emotions of joy and love flow through their minds. They didn't have any time to savour the moment however, as they heard the screech of the rusty hinges on their tomb doors swing open.

They heard the startled voices of the Death Eaters at both ends of the newly constructed tunnel, and saw their shocked faces in the light from their wands. Hermione looked at Harry and nodded. They grasped their ring hands tightly and concentrated, feeling the urgent need to be outside the rocky tombs and away from the Death Eaters. They didn't have time to think that they'd only managed to Apparate if their target was a person, but they were both aware of the urgent need to be out of there.

The next instant, they stood in the corridor outside the row of rock tombs. They could hear the shouts of the Death Eaters inside as they searched along the newly formed corridor between their two cells.

"There's a light down the end of this tunnel," said Harry, pointing to a flaming torch about a hundred yards along the rocky corridor. They sprinted towards it and pulled to a stop when they saw a short, narrow tunnel leading into a large underground gallery, the walls awash with flickering torchlight.

They cautiously crept down the tunnel and looked out onto a terrifying scene. At the centre of the gallery was a large cauldron suspended over a large fire, with twelve black-cloaked figures standing around it, chanting a repetitive but unintelligible ritualised mantra. At the side of the cauldron stood Voldemort and a Death Eater who looked very like a larger version of Vincent Crabbe.

Harry pointed to an illuminated arched exit at the far side of the gallery. He could see stone steps leading upwards. "That must be the way out of this place," he whispered.

"But how are we going to get past all these Death Eaters?" asked Hermione.

Harry looked around the gallery, and pointed to the back of the cave about fifteen yards to their left. "Let's try to get over behind those rocks," he whispered. They stooped low to the ground as they slowly moved across the gallery and dropped to the floor behind the cover of the rocky outcrop.

Hermione looked at Harry with concern as he screwed up his eyes in pain. "It's my scar," he whispered. Hermione held his hand and tried to send soothing thoughts into his tortured mind, trying to ease his pain.

They moved further around behind the rocks at the sound of running feet. The Death Eaters they'd escaped earlier came running into the gallery, and one of them approached Voldemort. "My Lord, they've escaped. Potter and Granger have gone."

Voldemort roared in anguish, "No! That's not possible!" and motioned for his men to follow him towards the rock tombs, but telling six of them to keep guard in the gallery. The pain from Harry's scar immediately started to ease, and he sent his thoughts to Hermione. They joined hands and stood up, stepping around the outcrop of rock and looked towards the six guarding Death Eaters.

They raised their hands towards the astonished men and yelled, "*SPI SAEW*". The Death Eaters' astonishment turned to confusion and then to fear as an unseen force suddenly threw them together and held them immobile.

"Come on Hermi, quick - let's get up those stairs." Harry dragged Hermione to the opposite side of the gallery and they dashed up the steps for what seemed an age before they levelled off into a rocky tunnel leading to their left. They walked slowly, listening for any sounds that would reveal the presence of more Death Eaters ahead of them. They spotted daylight seeping through a fissure in the rock in a tall but narrow cave over to their right and they grinned at each other, realising that they'd come up to ground level, and walked further along the tunnel towards what they hoped would be the exit from the complex of underground tombs. Around the next bend in the tunnel, they saw it - a circle of light leading out into the desert beyond. But they also saw a large group of black-cloaked figures lounging both inside and outside the cave exit. They quickly backtracked towards the fissure in the rock they'd seen earlier, and eased their way into the narrow cave.

"We should be able to squeeze through if we can climb up to that fissure," said Hermione, looking at Harry hopefully.

"I'll lift you up first," he said, whipping his head around to look into the main tunnel, hearing the sounds of running feet coming up the stone steps from below. "Quick!" he whispered.

Hermione put her left foot onto a ledge about three feet above the ground and Harry heaved her up towards the fissure. She gripped the sides of the rock wall and quickly eased her body sideways into the fissure. "It's only about four feet to the outside," she whispered as she moved into the gap. "Hurry up!"

Harry scrambled up to the fissure and followed his girlfriend. They were relieved to see the desert floor just a few feet below them, but before jumping down, they looked into the distance to see a landscape of dunes and desolate rocky outcroppings, and about two miles to their left the fast-moving waters of the river Nile. They jumped down and ran, hand in hand, as fast as they could away from the entrance to the tombs.

"Phew!" gasped Hermione as they dropped to the sand behind a large and crumbling rock that protruded from the desert floor.

They panted heavily as they fought to regain their breath, and peeked around the rock to check for any signs of pursuit - it was not long in coming. They saw four groups of Death Eaters, each one heading in a different direction as they searched for the escaped teens. One group headed in their direction, about ten black-cloaked figures still about seventy yards away from where they lay, searching among the many hiding places that they passed. Harry looked around desperately, trying to find a better place to hide, and spotted a larger group of rocks directly behind, about thirty yards away.

"Over there," he said pointing. Harry pulled Hermione to her feet and they ran low to the ground, using their earlier hiding place as cover, towards the group of rocks. They sighed with relief as they flopped onto the floor behind their new cover and Harry pointed to a gap low to the ground that led to a dark space beneath one of the larger rocks.

"Let's try to get in there," he said. They crawled into the gap as far as they could, and were relieved that it branched to the left slightly, providing more cover from anyone who looked into the gap. Hermione squeaked and moved closer to Harry, clinging to his arm, when she saw three scorpions crawling close to her left side, but she breathed more easily when they scrambled away from her and into a small crack in the rock.

They waited for about ten minutes before they heard the sounds of the Death Eaters, calling out to each other as they searched through the rocks. They held their breath when they saw a dark shadow fall over the entrance to their hiding place, but it was soon replaced with daylight as the man moved away. They stayed in their rocky hideaway for another hour before they cautiously crept back out onto the desert floor. They looked around the barren wilderness but there were no Death Eaters in sight. They stood for a few moments, stretching their cramped muscles, before sitting back down on the sand to discuss their next move.

"Should we try to Apparate back to the others?" asked Harry.

Hermione shook her head. "It won't work Harry. There isn't any urgent need to get back to the others - I mean, no immediate danger that would make it work," she looked sheepishly at her

boyfriend. "We should have tried it when they were close on our heels, but it's too late now, we'll have to find another way."

"Any idea where we are? How far Abydos is from here?"

Again Hermione shook her head.

"Hermi, what if we fly out of here? I can change into my eagle form and fly high above the Nile. Maybe we'll be able to recognise this stretch of the Nile from way up above it."

Hermione pulled a face, "Do we have to?"

Harry grinned, "There's no other way, and don't worry, you hang on tight and I'll fly as smoothly as I can."

"Can't you fly up and then come back for me when you find which way to go?"

"No Hermione. You know what happened the last time we split up. We've got to stay together. And anyway, I wouldn't have a clue about the bends in the Nile, you're much better at geography than I am."

"All right Harry, but be careful!"

"I've been thinking - I want to try out our telepathy when I'm in my eagle form."

"But you can't speak to me when you're an eagle Harry, so what makes you think you can transfer your thoughts to me?"

"I can't speak to you because my eagle's vocal chords are so different, but I still think like me. So I can't see any reason why not."

Harry transformed and bent his legs for Hermione to climb onto his back. When she was settled, he lifted off from the ground and soared into the clear blue sky, circling to gain height. 'Are you ok?' he sent his thought to the girl on his back.

'It works Harry! I can hear you.'

'Great! Hang on tight, I'm going up as high as I can.' Harry rode the thermals as he soared higher and higher into the air, so high that the Nile appeared to be a narrow band of blue snaking across the barren land.

'That's high enough Harry,' Hermione's thoughts were as shaky as her voice would have been as she gripped tightly onto the feathers behind Harry's head. 'I think I recognise that long loop in the river to the north, and hang on a minute, I think I can see the ruins of Abydos way up there in the distance.'

'North it is then, fair maiden,' thought Harry, trying to reassure her as he banked into a shallow glide towards the north. He levelled off and flew about a thousand feet above the west bank of the river, heading towards the distant ruins that Hermione had spotted. They were still quite a way from the ruins when Harry's sharp eyesight spotted something in the desert below.

'Hermione, I just saw a flash of red down below. I'm going to go a bit lower and circle round. Keep your eyes skinned for anything unusual.'

"There," shouted Hermione, daring to lift her left hand from her tight grip and pointing to a cluster of sand dunes below. Harry looked in the direction she was pointing and his stomach lurched as it was caught in a grip of fear.

'That's Ron! And he's heading smack into the middle of a pile of trouble!'

Hermione gasped as she saw five black-cloaked figures crouching behind one of the dunes, and about fifty yards away, striding purposefully across the desert and straight into an ambush, was Ron.

They watched in horror as the five Death Eaters, left behind by Lucius to keep tabs on the group still at Abydos, jumped from behind the dunes and started to fling curses at Ron. Ron, however, had his wits about him and he dropped flat onto the ground as the deadly green beams sailed harmlessly above his head. He pulled his wand from his robes and sent a spell of his own at his attackers, sending one of them to the sandy ground, stunned. But it was only a matter of time before he'd be overcome.

'Hang on Hermi,' thought Harry as he pulled his wings tight against his body and went into a screaming dive towards the Death Eaters. He screeched loudly to attract their attention away from Ron, but not as loudly as Hermione as she saw the ground hurtling towards her at an ever-increasing rate.

The Death Eaters stopped and looked up in horror as they saw the huge eagle with a screaming banshee on its back heading straight for them. It was now their turn to tumble to the ground as Harry pulled out of the dive and crashed straight into them, sending them sprawling in every direction. He gained height and turned ready to attack once more, this time with his lethal talons extended, but his targets had disappeared, Apparated back in terror to the rock tombs and the safety of a calm blue sky, taking their stunned colleague with them.

Harry landed on the desert floor beside the grinning Ron, and waited for Hermione to dismount before transforming. Hermione didn't need any prompting to get off Harry's back; she flung herself onto the floor and staggered quickly behind the cover of the nearest dune. The two boys stared worriedly at the dune, hearing Hermione's terrible retching as she lost the contents of her stomach.

They continued to stare when Hermione stormed back into sight, her face red and tears streaming down her cheeks, striding with great purpose towards Harry. "You bloody idiot!" she raged as she poked him in the chest. "All you had to do was hover while I stunned them with my wand. You didn't have to do an impression of a bloody meteorite!"

"Sorry Hermi," said Harry, looking abashed. "When I saw Ron in so much danger, there was only one thing on my mind - getting to those plonkers as quickly as I could."

"Well stop and think next time it happens," she said angrily. Then her features softened as she looked at Ron. "What are you doing out here all on your own?"

"Looking for you two," he said. "I couldn't stand it just sitting around back at the temple - I had to do something. What the bloody hell happened to you anyway?"

"Later Ron. I suppose that Sirius and the others know where you are?" asked Harry.

Ron looked sheepishly at the pair. "I didn't think. They were busy looking all around the ruins, so I thought I'd look a bit further afield."

"Ron!" Hermione gasped. "They're going to be frantic back there. First they lose Harry and me, and then you."

"You're going to get one hell of a rollicking from Sirius, Ron," said Harry. "And I can't even imagine what Charlie and Bill are going to say to you."

"And don't forget Ginny," said Hermione. "She can be lethal when she's upset."

Ron looked horrified at his two friends. "They're going to murder me aren't they?"

"Quite possibly Ron," said Hermione, rubbing her friend's shoulder. "I know you've been distracted these last few days, and with good reason, but you really should have thought of the consequences before rushing off into the desert like that."

"I know Hermione. I've been a bit stupid haven't I? I know I can't do anything to help Margot, but it hasn't stopped me wracking my brains for a solution to the whole sorry mess."

"Come on," said Harry, "we'd better get back. I think I can carry the two of you on my back."

"Oh no Harry!" exclaimed Hermione with determination. "If you think you can get me back up in the air again you've got another think coming!"

"Come on Hermi," said Ron, grinning. "I'll ride behind you and make sure you don't fall."

It took all their powers of persuasion to get Hermione to agree to hitch a ride on the eagle, but persuade her they did. After all, the only alternative was a long trudge across the desert, and they didn't know how long it would be before Voldemort came calling!

Sirius and the others were in a desperate state back at the temple ruins. They'd searched frantically around the site but could find no trace of Ron. Sirius agitatedly brushed his hair out of his eyes as he stared into the desert. "I think we'd better split into two groups. One can go north and the other south - he can't have gone very far."

"Bill, Remus, Ginny - you come with me," said Ceri. "Charlie, and Nadine - you go with Sirius. I'll go north Sirius, you take your group and look to the south."

They walked down the stone steps and out of the temple complex into the desert, but they hadn't gone more than a hundred yards before Ginny shouted, pointing up into the air, "There they are! It's Harry's eagle, and he's got Hermione and Ron on his back!"

They waited until Harry circled around and landed lightly in front of them, and transformed after Ron and Hermione had stepped from his back.

Harry held up his hand to ward off the questions that were hurled at the three. "We'll tell you all about it later, but right now, we haven't got much time. I think Voldemort and his minions will be here before long."

The sound of the dreaded name effectively cut off any further questions, and Harry quickly explained what had happened to them, and how they'd found Ron wandering in the desert.

"Bloody idiot," Ginny muttered under her breath as she clung to her brother's arm.

"You wait until Mum and Dad hear about this Ron!" said Bill angrily, but Charlie said nothing, feeling too relieved to see his brother safe and well.

"We'd better get out of here fast," said Sirius. "I don't want 'You Know Who' to catch us out in the open like this."

Two hundred yards away, Voldemort stood on a tall sand dune looking down at the group below. Lucius, Wormtail, Travis and Crabbe stood just behind, with the remaining Death Eaters waiting hidden at the base of the dune. The anger that blazed in the Dark Lord's eyes was a fearsome sight, and Lucius asked tentatively, "Shall we attack, my Lord?"

"No Lucius! I've got something special up my sleeve for them." All thoughts of extracting the knowledge and power from the minds of Harry and Hermione were lost amid his terrible rage. "I'll finish them here once and for all!"

He pulled the black Necronomicon from under his robes and turned to a page that he'd earlier marked. He looked at the dreaded spell that had so piqued his interest and sense of evil during his studies of the book back in his cave.

"Make sure you all Apparate back to the rock tombs before I say this spell Lucius," he hissed. "I'll follow you shortly. We don't want to be anywhere near after I unleash it. And make sure you're all hidden safely away in the tombs."

Voldemort waited until all his men had disappeared, then looked back down at the Necronomicon. He breathed deeply as he summoned all his powers, waiting until he felt them peak before pointing his wand at the sky and loudly enunciating the dreaded words.

"GEN. GEN KU-KUGA DINGIR. GEN LAMMASHTA."

The air surrounding Voldemort heaved and crackled with the terrifying power of the spell. A black beam of light burst from the tip of his wand and shot into the sky where it seemed to disappear into an invisible place. He watched in fascination at the swirling darkness that opened high above his head and spread across the desert. Then he disappeared with a 'pop', not wanting to stay any longer in case he became caught up in the horror that would soon be unleashed on the land.

The group below looked up at the sound of thunder, and saw the swirling darkness and the flashes of lightning that permeated its inky depths.

"There's something very wrong here," said Bill fearfully, struggling to keep upright in the strong wind that suddenly ripped at their robes. "This sort of thing just doesn't happen in Egypt - they haven't had a storm in the desert region for thousands of years."

The blackness spread out above them, and dark swirling clouds began to form within it. The wind became stronger, tugging at them. Then they heard a loud but strangely soft and sibilant voice. It was not like any voice they'd heard before, and it said just one word that started loudly but then faded into the distance, a word that spread over the desert like a blanket, filling all that heard it with dread.

"LAMMASHTAAAaaaaaaa..."

Chapter 10 The Stealer of Souls

Remus Lupin was transfixed as he stood in the midst of the group in the desert, looking up at the tortured and heaving sky above their heads. The temple ruins behind them lost its burnished colour as the ever-present sunlight was suddenly cut off by the darkness that formed above. His brow creased as he delved into his memories to retrieve the word that still echoed around the desert.

"LAMMASHTAAaaaaa..."

And then he had it, and his eyes grew wide as he contemplated the horror of it all. He shouted above the sound of thunder issuing from the swirling vortex in the sky, and the gusting wind that swept across the desert, hurling sand at their bodies. "Quick. We've got to Apparate away from here right now!"

The teens were each held by one of the adults as they prepared to Apparate, but they all looked about in astonishment when they failed in their attempt.

"It's too late," shouted Remus. "She's here and she's blocking our escape."

"Who's here?" shouted Sirius.

"It's Lammashtha," he replied. "The she devil that was spoken about in the Necronomicon. I learned about her at University in my DADA studies, but we all thought it was just a myth."

"What can we do?" shouted Ceri.

"She's been summoned from the Dark Realm," he replied, "probably by 'You Know Who'. All we can do is stick close together. It's pointless trying to use magic on her, it just won't work!"

"Who is she?" shouted Sirius.

"She's the Stealer of Souls. She invades her victims' minds and tempts them with their deepest desires. It's absolutely imperative that you don't listen to her. Once you start to be tempted and look into her eyes, she's won. She'll get right into your head and steal your soul, and then she'll take it back to the Dark Realm where she, and the ones like her who live there, will torment it and feed off its agony for the rest of time. So whatever you do, don't listen to her or look at her!"

"How long will she try to get at us?" asked Nadine fearfully.

"Once summoned," he replied, "she won't be able to return to the Dark Realm until she's captured at least one soul. If she fails here, she'll just go elsewhere looking for victims."

They all looked fearfully up at the swirling vortex above them, trying to keep the horror of what Remus said out of their minds. Then, slowly, they saw something in the depths of the darkness above their heads. At first, it was just a small speck shimmering almost beyond their field of vision, but it rapidly grew in size until it filled the vortex. Lammashtha burst out of the Dark Realm, a monstrous, hideous creature, made all the worse by the beautiful face it wore. But the face, although beautiful, was filled with evil. She looked about the desert and laughed,

a terrible laugh, anticipating the glorious hunt for souls, a sport that she hadn't been able to indulge since the Nephilim were banished many thousands of years before.

"We can help," Harry shouted at the others, reaching out to grasp Hermione's hand. "Gather round and make sure every one of you touches either myself or Hermione. We'll make contact with our joint mind and help you resist the temptations."

"And don't look at her," shouted Remus. "Keep your eyes towards the middle of the group. Make sure you don't look into her eyes."

They all did as Harry asked and waited, a small and pathetic group of humanity huddled together in the desert in the presence of the unspeakable evil from the Dark Realm. Lammashtha spotted the ten souls below her and again filled the air with her insane laughter. She swooped down and circled the group, toying with them all, trying to attract a curious glance from one of them.

Harry and Hermione searched their memories for something that would help focus the minds of their friends - a mental image that would serve as a defence against the coming attack. And then they had it - they'd seen it in the carvings and paintings in the temple behind them - the ancient Egyptian symbol for life and truth - the ankh.

They sent a vision of a glowing white ankh into the minds of their friends. 'Concentrate on the ankh,' they sent their joint thought.

Lammashtha howled when her first ploy failed to attract even a single glance in her direction. She hovered directly above the group and started to send visions into their minds, visions that she knew couldn't fail to catch their attention.

Ron's eyes were screwed tightly shut as he concentrated on the glowing ankh in his mind, but just at the edge of his thoughts lurked an even more beautiful image. He saw the radiant beauty of Margot step from behind the ankh, smiling and beckoning to him, urging him to fall into her waiting arms, urging him to experience the love that she had for him.

'Ron!' Hermione shouted into his mind, pushing past the tempting vision. 'Don't listen to it. It's just a false vision put there by Lammashtha. Concentrate on the ankh!'

Ron's chin set in determined defiance of the she-devil and banished the vision from his mind, looking at the glowing ankh. Lammashtha again howled in frustration and moved her focus to Ginny, the youngest and most vulnerable in the group.

Ginny saw the beautiful young boy step from behind the ankh. He was naked, apart from a loose cloth around his hips, and his shining muscular body just screamed out for her to touch it, and in turn to be touched by the sensuous hands that beckoned to her. But far more tempting was the look of pure love in the boy's eyes. Love for her, Ginny, who had only had the most fleeting of contacts with the opposite sex. The boy's eyes seemed to bore into her very soul, stripping away her defences and exposing her desire for love. Ginny was on the verge of opening her eyes to look at the vision directly, wanting to reach out for his strong and adoring embrace.

'Ginny!' shouted Harry urgently through the vision. 'No don't look - it's just a trick. Concentrate on the love around you, the love and truth that's held within the glowing ankh.'

Ginny resisted. She delved into the depths of her being, reaching down into her reserves of concentration, forcing the vision of the boy from her mind.

Once more Lammashtha howled, and so it went on. She offered temptation after temptation to each one in the group, but each one resisted, helped by the marvellous powers of concentration of the Anima Summas and the active mental support of the others. For an hour she raged around and over them, doing everything she knew to find a chink in their armour. But she failed. With a final shriek of frustration, she rose into the air and drifted swiftly in the direction of the river Nile, where she knew there would be more and easier targets to tempt.

Harry and Hermione broke contact with the rest and slumped, exhausted, to the desert floor, their mental energies almost spent. Everyone looked towards the Nile, seeing the black vortex and the shimmering demon beneath moving towards it.

Nadine spoke shakily, "There's a small fishing village over the hill just a little further north along the Nile. It looks like she's heading in that direction."

"We've got to warn them, protect them somehow," gasped Hermione, getting groggily to her feet. "Come on."

They staggered over the barren desert towards the tiny village, and scrambled up the sandy hill that overlooked it. They got to the top, panting heavily, and looked down.

"Oh no!" The strangled words showed the deep despair that Ginny felt as she saw a cluster of villagers gathered around three pathetic bundles lying at the edge of the village.

"It's too late," said Remus sadly, looking up at the sky. "She's gone. She's returned to the Dark Realm, and that can only mean one thing - she's found her victims and stolen their souls."

They all ran down the hill towards the spot where the villagers were gathered and looked in dismay at the three young people lying on the ground, their friends and relatives wailing in despair above them. Bill eased his way through the ranks of the people and looked down into the faces of the unfortunate trio. What he saw would haunt him for the rest of his life. Two young girls, not much older than Ginny, and a slightly older boy stared unseeing at the sky. They still breathed, but they didn't move. The horrified and haunted look in their eyes reflected the mental torture they must have endured as Lammashtha sucked their souls from their beings.

Bill walked back to the group, his eyes wet. "It's horrible," he said. "They're only kids."

Ceri laid a sympathetic hand on his shoulder, and Nadine reached out to hold his hand.

"What will happen to them Remus?" asked Ginny quietly.

"I don't know, Ginny. It's too late for their souls I'm afraid. They've been taken back to the Dark Realm, but without their souls, their bodies are just empty shells, incapable of coherent thought and emotion. I just don't know."

"Come on," said Sirius, "we can't do anything to help these poor people now. We'd better get back to the Portkey site and back to Hogwarts. You'll need to get those hieroglyphics translated Hermione."

Sirius tried to lift their spirits as they walked slowly back towards the temple, but with his own spirits at such a low ebb, he just couldn't muster the enthusiasm to do the job properly. He eventually gave up and walked in silence like the rest of them.

The next day, Sirius, Remus and Charlie walked into Hogsmeade and up to the Shrieking Shack, the new headquarters of 'Weasleys Wizard Wheezes'. They went in through the side door and found the place buzzing with activity. They threaded their way through the piles of boxes packed with Whammos, stacked in a seemingly haphazard way throughout most of the downstairs rooms.

"Charlie! Mooney! Padfoot!" shouted George as they walked into the front room, the hub of their empire. "What brings you here?"

"Where's Fred, George?" asked Charlie.

"He's up with the others on the first floor. Hang on a minute - Fred, we've got company!" he shouted.

They heard the sound of feet thudding rapidly down the stairs, and Fred shot into the room. He grinned widely when he recognised the visitors and greeted them warmly.

"So," he said, "what's new?"

"We ran into a spot of bother yesterday," began Sirius.

"Come and sit down," said George, noting the concerned looks on their faces.

"We don't know how," said Sirius, "but the Death Eaters managed to disable a load of Whammos we had covering our camp site."

"Harry and Hermione were captured," said Charlie, and raised his hand quickly when he saw the look of panic on his brothers' faces. "But they managed to escape. They're all fine."

"When we looked around the site," continued Remus, "we found that some of the Whammos had been crushed, probably by fairly mild Flipendus curses. They didn't go off, probably because they were disabled from beyond their detection range."

"But what concerns us," said Sirius, "is how they were recognised in the first place."

"We'd better get Lee, Angelina and Alicia down here," said Fred, looking worried. "They should hear this."

A few minutes later, Fred and George's workforce joined them at the table and listened as Charlie filled them in on the events of the previous day.

"So what do you think?" asked Charlie. "Can you do anything to improve them?"

"You can be sure that the word will get out to the Death Eaters both here and in America," said Sirius, "and they'll be looking out for them now."

"We could disguise them a bit better," said Lee. "Different sizes and stone colours, and we could make them to look like fallen twigs from trees, leaves, anything. We could produce separate batches to camouflage them for just about every type of terrain in the world."

"We could toughen their casings as well," suggested Alicia. "So it won't be so easy to destroy them."

"There's probably a lot more improvements we can come up with," said George. "I'll get onto the ministry and arrange a meeting. It might be a good idea, Fred, if we went on a little trip to see them in action for ourselves. We could talk to the people who rely on them - the aurors."

"Sounds good to me George," replied Fred. "See what you can arrange. But there's something we've got to get to grips with - if we're going to start making a lot of different varieties, we just won't be able to keep up with demand with just us five and the weekend help from the students. We'd better ask the ministry if they can provide some help. We can ask them to recommend some of their most trustworthy people to help us here. I'm sure they'll agree, because it's important to the safety of their people."

"Well we'll leave it in your capable hands," said Sirius, getting up from his seat. "I know you're very busy, so we won't keep you any longer."

The four walked into the headmaster's office to see that Professor Denarnaud was there. Ron rushed up to him. "Professor! How's Margot?"

Jules looked sadly at Ron. "Still the same I'm afraid Ron. I've tried a few of the spells I found in my research; the ones I thought would be the most help, but they haven't made any difference at all. She's still very withdrawn and doesn't want to talk about her condition."

Hermione rubbed her hand on Ron's back, trying to comfort him, and he turned and smiled at her. "It's ok Hermione. I know Professor Denarnaud's doing everything he can and that's all I can ask for."

"How are you all?" asked Jules. "The headmaster told me you had quite a scare yesterday."

"We're fine Professor," Harry replied. "But we hope we won't be meeting Lammashtha again for a very long time."

"No I'm sure you won't. That must have been terrifying for you all. Well - are you ready for your next accelerated learning session this afternoon?" asked the grand master.

"Yes sir," Harry answered. "But first, we'd like to ask Professor Dumbledore if he'll translate some hieroglyphics Hermione found in the Osireion at Abydos."

"That sounds interesting," said Jules. "I studied ancient writing a long time ago just after I left University. Do you mind if I help?"

"Please do Jules," said Dumbledore. "Let's see what you've got Hermione."

"I found this writing under some ancient and crumbling plaster in an annex off the main part of the Osireion," said Hermione. She nodded at Ginny. "Ginny wrote it onto some parchment exactly as it is."

"I haven't heard of any new scripts found in Egypt for a long time Hermione," said Jules. "Funny I haven't heard about this."

Hermione flushed pink and whispered, "I'm afraid I was very naughty Professor. I had to pull the plaster off the wall to get to it. You won't tell anyone will you?"

"You didn't!" gasped Jules in mock indignation. Dumbledore chuckled as he slowly shook his head at the image that suddenly sprung into his mind of Hermione, in her insatiable quest for knowledge, pulling away the plasterwork that had, until then, been stuck to the wall for many thousands of years.

Ginny pulled the piece of parchment from her robe pocket and placed it in front of the two professors.

"Ah - now let's see," said Dumbledore slowly. "It's very ancient. Old Kingdom do you think Jules?"

"I agree Albus, perhaps even older," he replied. "Have you got any books on Old Kingdom hieroglyphs? I don't recognise some of these pictographs."

"Hmm, yes, I see what you mean," he replied, walking over to his bookcases and looking along the line of books. He pulled a very large tome from the shelf and placed it on the table.

"Right, let's get started shall we?"

An hour later, after much discussion between the two professors about the meaning of some of the symbols, Dumbledore declared that they had a working translation. "I'll read it out, shall I?"

'This message is for the eyes of the seekers of the Light. Your path lies beneath the site of the Ancient Neterw, upon which many of their monuments still stand. Follow the mystical journey of divine Osiris and be sure to arm yourselves with the spells and device to ward off the terrifying forces that lurk in its hidden depths.'

'The spells of protection can be found in the tomb known as the Pyramid of Unas, and also at the Temple of Horus at Edfu, where there is also a secret message hidden among the inscriptions on the inner enclosure wall of the temple. This will guide you to the Shemsu-hor and their sacred device and to the place where you can gain the ancient secret of the point of entry into the Duat.'

Professor Dumbledore looked up into the excited faces of the four youngsters. "That's it," exclaimed Hermione. "That's what we've been looking for - we can get the spells and then find the entrance into the Duat. We're nearly there! But who or what is the Shemsu-hor?"

"Not so fast young lady," said Jules, smiling at the infectious enthusiasm of the girl. "You won't be able to waltz into those places and just read the spells, you know. I know for a fact that the burial chamber in the Pyramid of Unas and its entrance chambers are covered from

ceiling to floor in hieroglyphic writing. The scripts, known as the Pyramid Texts, comprise hundreds upon hundreds of spells, and you'll have to find out which ones are relevant to your quest. It's a similar story at Edfu - loads of hieroglyphics cover the walls of the temple. Perhaps you'll find out there about the Shemsu-hor. But most important of all, you can't even read hieroglyphics. How are you going to find a secret message in all that script if you can't read the texts?"

Hermione's face had fallen further and further as Jules spoke, and now looked quite deflated. But then she brightened. "Well you can help there, Professor. You can teach us how to read hieroglyphics using your accelerated learning spell - can't you?"

"Us Hermi?" asked Ron looking quite ill. "Don't you mean 'you'? I don't fancy holding all that stuff in my head for ever more."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Well all right, me then!" She looked expectantly at Jules.

"I suppose it's possible, but I haven't got an established schedule for the subject so it might not work."

"What if Hermione and I link together mentally - would our heightened state of awareness help with the process?" asked Harry.

"Again it's possible," replied Jules, "but you must realise that we're sailing in uncharted waters here. I haven't had a pair of Anima Summas as subjects before."

"But you'll try?" asked Hermione.

"Of course," he replied. "Will you help me Albus?"

Dumbledore nodded. "Of course. The other two can have their normal session, but Hermione and Harry can catch up with their normal lessons on the next session. We'd better start preparing for the lesson Jules, we'll only have a few hours to get it all ready."

"Do you know where the Pyramid of Unas is Hermi?" asked Ron as they walked back up to the common room.

Hermione shrugged, but Ginny answered, "I remember seeing it on the map. It's about ten miles south-east of the Great Pyramid of Giza."

"What about the Temple of Edfu?" asked Harry.

"That's between Luxor and Aswan," she replied brightly.

"We'll have to study their lay-out," said Hermione. "There must be loads of photographs and commentary on those two places, and the better prepared we are, the easier it'll be to find what we're looking for. And we need to look for any references to the Shemsu-hor as well."

"Oh no! More reading!" groaned Ron. His friends smiled, pleased that he was acting more like the normal Ron at last.

That afternoon, the four walked into their accelerated learning classroom where they found Professors Denarnaud and Dumbledore waiting for them. They took their seats at the front of the room and looked expectantly at the piles of books and parchments on the table.

"Jules, if you start Ron and Ginny off with their session," said Dumbledore, "I'll quickly brief Harry and Hermione about Middle Kingdom hieroglyphics."

"Uh, Professor Dumbledore," said Hermione. "Shouldn't we learn about Old Kingdom writing as well?"

"I'm afraid it hasn't been possible to prepare a session for that Hermione," he replied. "There's very little material on Old Kingdom writing here at Hogwarts, and it would take weeks to gather everything together to teach it. Most of the texts in the Pyramid of Unas and at the Temple at Edfu are written in Middle Kingdom, so it's best if we cover that. If you come across anything you can't translate, you'll have to copy it and bring it back here for us to do it."

"Yes Professor," said Hermione.

"While Professor Denarnaud activates the spells on Ron and Ginny and gives them their material to read, I'll just give you a brief history of the translation of Egyptian hieroglyphics. It all started in 1799 when a French army officer uncovered a granite rock carved with three scripts - hieroglyphs, demotic or popular Egyptian, and ancient Greek. This proved to be the key to deciphering the writings of the ancient Egyptians. The stone slab came to be known as the Rosetta Stone, named after the town in which it was found. A French scholar named Champollion got hold of a copy of the writings in 1808, and managed to complete the first translation. The first things he noticed were a number of a series of glyphs contained within an oval enclosure, called a cartouche, and he equated them to the names of several Pharaohs in the Greek text. He soon identified the names Ptolemy and Cleopatra, and saw that each of the glyphs corresponded to a letter. From that, he was able to draw up a small alphabet, which grew over time. The odd thing about hieroglyphics is that they can be written both vertically and horizontally, and not only that, from right to left and from left to right. The only way of telling which way the glyphs go is by looking at some of the human or animal heads in the script - the line starts at the end in which the head is looking, so if they're looking to the right, then the script is read from right to left, and the opposite way if they look towards the left.

"And just when you think you've got that sorted out, you come up against two other oddities - there aren't any spaces between the words and there aren't any vowels! That's why no one is really sure how each word is pronounced."

"I'll have to have a word with Thoth and Seshat when I see them next," said Hermione with a grin. "I'll ask them why they couldn't have invented an easier written language to learn!"

"Ah, Professor Denarnaud is ready, I see," said the headmaster. "This session will be different from your earlier one because both myself and Professor Denarnaud will interact with you constantly. We'll have to explain a lot of the things you need to learn, such as the complex grammatical forms. Right, let's get started shall we?"

The learning session continued throughout the afternoon and into early evening, but by the time it came to a close, both Harry and Hermione were confident that they'd be able to

translate most of the hieroglyphics they'd come across. They were, however, very tired and didn't even bother to grab a quick sandwich before crawling into their beds.

Oliver and Katie sat on Oliver's bed in his tent, waiting for the time when the Portkey to Hogwarts would be activated. Katie'd had a message from Professor Dumbledore asking her to visit him on her next leave, because he had some news for her. She sat looking down at her hands, twiddling her thumbs nervously.

"Don't worry Katie," said Oliver, gently rubbing her shoulder. "I'll be with you."

"But what if my parents won't budge Oliver?" she asked. "They were so adamant they wouldn't tell me who my real father is the last time I spoke to them."

"If anyone can persuade them Katie, Dumbledore can," he replied, looking sadly at the beautiful girl next to him. He hated to see her so upset, and he drew her close and wrapped his arms around her, trying to comfort her. He kissed her on her forehead and then looked at his watch. "It's nearly time. We'd better get ready."

A few minutes later, they materialised outside the main entrance to the school. They both shivered in the late January air, so different from the heat of the Dead Sea area, and they quickly walked up the stairs towards the headmaster's office. As they approached, the gargoyle stepped to one side and allowed them entry to the spiral staircase leading up to headmaster's room.

"Ah, Katie, Oliver - come in and sit down," said Dumbledore, smiling at the pair. "How are things at Qumran? Any sign of Death Eaters lately?"

"No Professor," said Oliver. "It's been very quiet - too quiet I think."

Dumbledore nodded and looked at the girl sitting nervously before him. "Katie, I've been to see your parents, and I spent several hours talking to them about your real father. They explained why they don't want you to know who he is, and I've tried to get them to change their mind. But I'm afraid I failed. I'm so sorry."

A little tear ran down the side of Katie's cheek. "I was afraid of this. They were so adamant about it before. But I just can't understand why they won't tell me."

"Katie, they're afraid they'll lose you if they tell you who he is. I tried to explain that you still regard them as your parents and knowing your real father wouldn't change that, but I think they've lived with the fear that you'll find out for so long, that it's ingrained in them. They just won't risk losing you."

"What can I do Oliver?" she asked pleadingly.

Oliver frowned as he regarded the headmaster. "Did you see any glimmer of hope when you spoke to them Professor?"

"Well there was one stage in the conversation when I thought I'd managed to convince them, but they just seemed to recoil from the idea. They withdrew into their shells and from then on there was nothing I could do."

"Do you think it would help if I went with Katie to see them?" asked Oliver.

"Well you can try Oliver, but you'll have to put up a very convincing argument."

"Katie?" asked Oliver as he held her hand.

"But we haven't got long before we have to go back to headquarters to organise the provisions, and you wanted to call in to see Fred, George and the others," she replied.

"We can see them another time Katie. This is more important."

"All right. Thanks Oliver, and thank you for trying Professor Dumbledore."

Dumbledore smiled at the pair as they prepared to take the Floo network to Katie's parents house.

"Mum, Dad," Katie smiled as she greeted her parents, who caught around her lovingly.

"We haven't seen you for a long time," said her father. "I hate to think of you out there waiting for 'You Know Who' to attack."

Her mother, in the mean time, looked curiously over Katie's shoulder as Oliver stepped out of the fireplace. Katie turned and ran to him, clasping his hand in hers, and dragging him over to her parents. "This is Oliver," she said, smiling prettily.

"Mr and Mrs Bell - pleased to meet you," said Oliver nervously.

Mr Bell shook Oliver's hand while his wife eyed him appraisingly. "I take it that you and Katie are... together?" she asked.

"Yes Mum," said Katie. "Oliver was our Quidditch captain at Hogwarts, and now he's our team leader in Qumran."

"You're with Katie in Qumran?" said Mr Bell, looking with some respect at Oliver, and thinking that he was still very young to be in charge of a group of twenty aurors.

"Yes sir," he replied. "And don't worry, I won't let anything happen to Katie if it's within my power."

"I'm sure you won't," said Mrs Bell, smiling at the handsome young man.

"So is that why you're visiting?" asked Mr Bell. "To introduce us to your boyfriend?"

"Well yes and no Dad," said Katie slowly. "We've just come from Professor Dumbledore - he told us what you said in your meeting with him."

"Now look Katie," said her mother. "We've been over this time and time again, and we haven't changed our minds."

"But Mum, even if I find my real father, it won't change the way I feel about you both. You're still my mother and father."

"It's good to know that Katie, but we just can't," said her father.

"But why Dad?"

Her parents looked at each other sadly but didn't reply.

"Mr and Mrs Bell," said Oliver. "I think I know how you feel about this, but I've seen Katie agonising about finding her biological father for a while now. I ... I know I said I'd protect Katie, and I'll guard her with my life if I have to, but we're in a very difficult position at Qumran and 'You Know Who' could attack at any time. If anything should happen to us... well, I think Katie deserves to know who her father is before anything does happen. It might be too late for you to change your minds then."

"Please Mum, Dad," Katie implored her parents.

Mrs Bell had to wipe a tear from her eye as she contemplated what might happen to her daughter. She'd always known, of course, that Katie was in constant danger but when Oliver put it those terms, it seemed more real somehow. She looked at her husband and raised her eyebrows questioningly.

Mr Bell smiled wryly. "Your mother and I'll talk about it this evening Katie, and if we decide you should be told, I'll get in touch with Professor Dumbledore. I think we'd want him to tell you... I don't think *we* could."

Katie stretched up and kissed her father, and then her mother. "Thank you both, I know it's the right thing to do."

"Are you staying for tea?" asked Mrs Bell brightly.

"Yes - thank you Mrs Bell," said Oliver. "But we have to be back on Salisbury Plain in a few hours."

"Father! What are you doing here?" asked Draco at the unexpected appearance of Lucius Malfoy in the Slytherin common room.

"You're coming with me tonight Draco," he replied, quietly so the other students in the room couldn't hear. "The Dark Lord feels that you should get a little advance tuition in the noble art of Muggle and Mudblood baiting."

"What do you mean father? I can't leave the school!"

"I've spoken to Snape and he's given his permission. I told him that your mother's ill and wants to see you."

"Where are we going?" asked Draco, feeling the excitement starting to build.

"To a little place not far from here," replied his father. "I'll tell you more on the way to Hogsmeade. We'll Apparate from there to meet a team of our best Death Eaters just outside the place."

A little later, Draco stood overlooking a small village just off the lonely secondary road that skirted Loch Rannoch. Rannoch Moor was one of the more wild and desolate places in Scotland, even in summer, and the freezing winter wind that whipped around Draco's robes sent a shiver through his body, a shiver that was attributable not only to the cold. Lucius had warned his son to stay well away from the action, his task being to watch and learn, but Draco had eased closer to the village, not wanting to miss anything.

The attack started when one of the Death Eaters came too close to a Whammo, sending a loud explosion over the village, together with the attendant glowing yellow light that covered the Death Eater's robes.

Several of the villagers, obviously witches and wizards, burst out of their cottages looking for the tell-tale signs of the source of the explosion, and rushed from house to house warning their neighbours, both Muggle and Magical person alike, to run from the attack. Some of them managed to get away from the village and hid in the many nooks and crannies along the bank of the loch, but most didn't. Deadly green beams of light cut across the narrow space between the moorland and the village, and people started to die.

Draco looked on in horror - he hadn't really known what to expect. He'd had the idea that he'd see the victims being taunted and perhaps even mildly tortured, but he hadn't expected to see death. The thing that caused him the most horror was the vision of a hauntingly beautiful young girl with long auburn hair, not much younger than himself, and reminding him vaguely of Ginny Weasley, who cried out in pain and despair as a powerful Flipendus curse hit her in the middle of her chest. He'd never forget the look of terror in the girl's eyes as she collapsed to the floor, her life extinguished in the blink of an eye.

Draco was very quiet on the way back to Hogwarts. He'd been sickened just after the raid ended at the boasts and laughter of the Death Eaters, and kept seeing in his mind the face of the beautiful young girl as she dropped to the ground. His father didn't really notice his pensive mood, too elated with the success of the raid. Draco flopped onto his bed and thought long and hard about the events of the night. He didn't really understand that the influence exerted by Dumbledore and Snape had actually started to stamp some higher moral values onto his previously cold and heartless life, but he now slowly came to realise that he wanted no part of the terrible crusade of the Dark Side.

He thought back to the time when he'd spied on Potter and his friends in the library, and the confusing feelings of jealousy he'd had for their close friendship. And he thought of Ginny Weasley, the girl that so resembled the unfortunate soul that had been callously murdered that night. Draco then did something that he hadn't done before, not since he was a little baby. He cried, but most importantly he didn't cry for himself - he cried for the young girl whose life had been so mercilessly snuffed out.

The first day of February saw Hogwarts covered in a blanket of snow, deposited by the storm that raged around the school's venerable towers the previous night. Ron sat in the common room looking out of the window onto the bleak scene, wondering if it had snowed in Renne-le-Chateau last night. He jumped when Hermione asked him a question. "What?" he asked.

"Ron, I said is there a diagram of the Pyramid of Unas in the book you're supposed to be reading?"

"Uh, I don't know Hermi. Hang on a minute, I'll look." Ron thumbed through the book until he came to the list of photographs and diagrams. "Yes. Page 178." He turned to the page and spread the book out on the table.

"Let's see," said Harry. "We go in through an entrance chapel built just outside the northern slope of the pyramid, and then we walk down and along a tunnel to the middle of the pyramid into an antechamber, and the burial chamber's on the right of that."

"Can we narrow down what section of the texts we should look at?" asked Hermione. "See if there's anything about the Pyramid Texts in your book Ginny."

"I just read something about it," she replied, turning back a few pages and scanning the section she'd previously read. "Here we are. Well there's one place that we needn't bother looking. It says that on the northern wall of the burial chamber, the first two hundred and twelve utterances, that's what they call the verses written there, have been dismissed by established Egyptologists as meaningless and worthless, and they've put them down to fantasy and myth. Now let's see if they say anything about the other walls..."

"Hang on a minute Ginny," said Hermione looking thoughtfully at her friend. "That's precisely where we should start looking. If we're going to find anything, it'll be there."

"But if the Egyptologists say the text is useless, why should we bother?" asked Ron.

"Because," she said testily, "they most probably don't know what they're talking about!"

"You haven't got a very high opinion of Egyptologists have you Hermi?" said Harry, grinning at his girlfriend.

"No I haven't", she replied. "Do you know, they..."

Ron interrupted her as he looked pleadingly at the ceiling, "Oh no, I feel another rant coming on!"

"Yes Ron," she said, "and with good reason. They've got their heads so far up their arses they can't tell fact from fiction."

"Hermione!" they all looked aghast at the smouldering face of their friend, and settled down to listen to her views about Egyptologists, knowing that they wouldn't be able to stop her.

"For over a hundred years they've held back the flow of knowledge, they've repeatedly misread the finds that have been made, and stick to their illogical theories like flies round sh..."

"Hermione!" they all shouted again.

"Do you know that one discovery turned up a number of amazing diorite jars, dated to over 3000BC, in pre-dynastic times."

"What's diorite?" asked Ginny.

"It's a very hard dark coloured rock found in the Nubian Desert, south of Egypt. It's the hardest rock known to man, harder even than granite. Even today, tempered steel drills can only just scratch the surface, yet those jars had long narrow necks, ending in bulbous compartments. They'd been perfectly smoothly hollowed out, and engineers state that even using today's technology, we wouldn't be able to do that. Yet Egyptologists would have us believe that the strongest tools possessed by the Egyptians were made of copper - one of the softest metals."

"So how do the Egyptologists explain it?" asked Harry.

"That's just it Harry, they don't! Whenever they're faced with something that disturbs their precious preconceived ideas, they either put it down to coincidence or just ignore it like they did with the jars. They consign it to a dusty museum archive, and hope it goes away. And it's been the same all throughout history in other branches of learning, not only Egyptology - the establishment stick to their beliefs in the face of evidence to the contrary. It's just an entrenched protectionism of the status quo. The leading scientists of every generation dogmatically reject any new innovators because it often contradicts what they've been telling us for the last couple of decades. Take Galileo for instance - just because he agreed with Copernicus that the Earth wasn't the centre of the Universe, the church threatened him with torture under the Inquisition unless he recanted his views. No, the self-styled scholars stick to their beliefs, thinking they're the fount of all knowledge and teach it to the rest of us, but ultimately, they know very little and just perpetuate ignorance."

"Does that include Dumbledore?" asked Harry, grinning.

"No Harry, it doesn't! And you know what I mean."

"Have you finished now?" asked Ron.

"Yes!"

"Well the north wall of the pyramid of Unas it is then," said Harry referring to the diagram. "That's on the right as we go in through the antechamber."

"I've found something about the Shemsu-hor," said Ginny. "It says here that there's an old legend that the origins of the ancient city of Edfu are accredited to the mysterious Shemsu-hor - it means the Followers of Horus - who established their cult centre there in honour of their leader, the god Horus, long before the coming of the first Pharaohs. The author says that the Shemsu-hor are still thought to be active as a secret cult."

"Hey, I wonder if they're anything like the Priory of Sion," exclaimed Ron. "Perhaps they're the spiritual guardians of the secret chamber of Thoth!"

"It doesn't say anything more about them here," said Ginny, "except that they're referred to in the Building Texts at the Temple of Horus in Edfu."

"We'll have to look for that piece of text Harry," said Hermione, now fully calmed down.

The four friends wouldn't have noticed Draco Malfoy spying on them from beneath his invisibility cloak - even had he been there like he normally was. At that moment, Draco was lying in bed, wrestling with his thoughts, trying to find a way to get himself out of the clutches of the Dark Lord.

"Fred, George, come in... come in and sit down." Cornelius Fudge greeted the twins like they were long-lost sons. "I'm very impressed with your... uh... Whammos, they've played a big part in our security measures."

"Thank you minister," said George, "but Sirius Black came to see us the other day. It seems that the Death Eaters have somehow been able to recognise them and disable them from a distance. We've discussed various improvements, and we're currently putting them into production."

"I see," said Fudge slowly. "Is that why you've come to see me?"

"Yes and no," said Fred. "We'd like to visit some of your aurors out at the sharp end of things and get their views on any more improvements they'd like to see. Would it be possible for you to arrange it for us?"

"One moment," he said as he got up from his chair and spoke to his secretary in the next room.

"We've got another problem minister," said George when Fudge sat back down. "One of manpower. We desperately need more help in producing the Whammos. We wondered if you could recommend any trustworthy witches and wizards."

Fudge thought for a few moments. "I think I can help you there. Some of our departments have almost come to a full stop since the conflict started, so I'd be only too glad to second some people to your operation, just to keep them occupied. Ah, Marcus - sit down please. Fred, George this is Marcus Heatherington-Jones, the head of auror defences in the country. Marcus, the twins would like to visit some of our operations to get the views of our aurors on their detection devices. What would you suggest?"

Marcus shook hands with the twins and sat back in his chair. "I think it might be an idea to visit 'Mad Eye' Moody; he'll be only too pleased to give you his views, and he's right up to date with the current tactical situation. And after that, we could see Dave Henson at Qumran - you won't find any place closer to the action than he's in at the moment. When would you like to start?"

"As soon as we can Marcus," said Fred.

"Right, there's no time like the present. Let's drop in on 'Mad-Eye' first."

After shaking hands with Fudge, the twins followed Marcus into the outer room where they took the Floo network to Camp Merlin. Their meeting with 'Mad Eye' and his ex-aurors turned out to be a real eye-opener in more ways than one for Fred and George. They hastily scribbled onto their parchments as they noted the very valid comments of the experienced crew of the training camp.

Then Marcus took them back to the Salisbury Plain headquarters, again via the Floo network, to the place where a permanent Portkey to Qumran was set up. They materialised into the heat of the desert just inside the canyon entrance, and Marcus led them up to meet Dave Henson, who stood talking to a group of aurors in their defensive positions.

After the introductions, Dave walked with them into the canyon to his normal meeting place, inside a large rocky enclosure.

"The next watch change will be in half an hour," said Dave. "I'll be able to get all my team leaders together for a meeting then. Why don't you take a look around until then? I'll meet you back here in half an hour."

"Thanks Dave," said Fred. "Uh, can you tell me where I can find Oliver Wood?"

"You know Oliver? His tent is over there," he said pointing to one of the many tents at the base of the canyon wall. "But if I were you, I'd knock before you go in."

The twins looked puzzled, but thanked Dave and set off in the direction of Oliver's tent, leaving Marcus to discuss some business with the task force leader.

"I wonder what he meant by that?" asked George.

"Perhaps he's sleeping before going on duty and doesn't like being disturbed," answered Fred.

"Well he's going to get one rude awakening," said George grinning.

They stopped outside the tent and looked at each other when they heard some strange noises coming from inside.

"If I didn't know better," said George, "I'd say he's got a girl in there."

Fred grinned slyly. "Well the old dog's going to get a shock then, isn't he?"

They held up their hands and silently counted down on their fingers. 3-2-1-open.

"Surprise!" they both shouted. But they were the ones who got the surprise, their broad grins changing to looks of disbelief and then back to broad grins again when they saw Oliver and Katie in a clinch on the bed - both fully clothed they noted.

"Fred, George, what the hell are you doing here?" exclaimed Oliver, pulling his lips away from Katie's.

"I think we got here just in time," said Fred.

"How long have you two been an item?" asked George.

Oliver and Katie got up from the bed, hastily straightening their clothes, and welcomed the twins, Katie giving them both a big hug.

"I'm glad to see you took our advice Oliver," said George.

"Alicia, Angelina and Lee are going to be knocked out when we tell them," added Fred.

The twins insisted that Katie tell them exactly what happened to get them together, knowing that Alicia and Angelina would expect to hear nothing less than the full story in every detail. She spent the next twenty minutes doing exactly that, but leaving out the more intimate bits. She knew, of course, that her two female friends would drag those out of her when they next met.

Then it was time for the meeting and Oliver walked with them to see the other team leaders. It proved to be just as informative and worthwhile as their visit to 'Mad Eye', and the twins were happy that they'd gathered enough information to make even more improvements to their devices, as well as some ideas for an entirely new range of security enhancement devices. They couldn't wait to get back to Hogsmeade to put the ideas into practice and to build some new prototypes.

They waved goodbye to Oliver and Katie, who promised to visit them on their next leave, and walked back to the canyon entrance to take the Portkey back to the U.K. Eventually, they arrived back at their office in the Shrieking Shack and were pleased to see five ministry employees waiting for them. Fudge had lived up to his promise.

Bill Weasley shook Sirius' hand soon after the Hogwarts group materialised at the Portkey site just to the southern end of the Pyramid of Unas. He then walked quickly over to greet his brothers and sister and the rest of the group, paying special attention to Ceri. The American noted a slight change in Bill; his eyes didn't quite have the same devil-may-care twinkle in them, and she felt his sadness as he held her hand.

"You haven't got over the she-devil's attack yet Bill?" she said quietly.

Bill shook his head. "I've lived here a long time Ceri and I've come to love these people. Those three kids didn't deserve that fate - no one could deserve that. I don't know why, but I feel a bit responsible for it happening."

"That's just silly Bill. You can put that out of your head as soon as you like. 'You Know Who' caused that tragedy and no one else."

Bill smiled. "Thanks Ceri, I wish I could believe that, but if I hadn't brought you here he wouldn't have come, and neither would have Lammashtha."

Ceri looked closely at Bill, seeing a side to the man that she hadn't suspected existed. Bill sucked in a deep breath, pulled himself away from his gloomy thoughts and smiled. "Come on then you lot, we've got a pyramid to visit."

Bill led the group along the eastern side of the crumbling pyramid, through a jumble of fallen masonry blocks, and towards the entrance at the northern end. "It doesn't look much," he told the others, "and it hasn't stood the test of time very well, but the inside is far better preserved."

Bill and the protectors kept a wary eye out for Death Eaters as the four youngsters walked towards the entrance to the complex inside the pyramid. They settled down in a defensive semi-circle outside while Harry led his three friends into the tunnel.

They lit their wands as they walked down the steps into the gloomy corridor and then along the tunnel until they reached the antechamber. They all looked around, trying to comprehend the ancient skill of the scribes who'd covered the walls with the vibrant carvings and hieroglyphs more than four thousand years ago. Hermione gazed at the work with excitement as she felt herself immersed in the history of the place.

"The burial chamber is through here on the right," said Harry, visualising the diagram of the tomb. They walked through the antechamber into the burial chamber and raised their wands high in the air to get a good look at the place. They found themselves in an enclosed room about twenty-two feet long and ten feet wide and a two-sided sloping roof above them. At the far end of the chamber was a black basalt sarcophagus cased in alabaster, although the funerary coffin was no longer inside.

"The roof is covered with five-pointed stars," whispered Hermione reverently. "And look at the walls - they're absolutely covered with hieroglyphs. We're looking at the oldest sacred book ever discovered." She reached out her hand and lightly drew it down the wall to her left, her eyes wide and full of wonder.

"The north wall is on the right," said Ron. "That's where you want to look isn't it Hermi?"

Harry and Hermione stepped closer to the northern wall and looked at the writing, holding their wands close to it to get a better view. "There's masses of writing here," gasped Harry. "Where do we start? We'll be ages translating this lot!"

Hermione had a twinkle in her eye as she looked to the bottom left hand side of the wall. "I don't think so Harry," she breathed. "Look at that!"

The four looked down and gasped as they saw what Hermione was looking at. It seemed that about a dozen columns of text close to the floor and just visible behind the side of the sarcophagus, were glistening with a faint internal light.

"Switch your wands off," she breathed. They all said the spell that extinguished the lights and stood as the darkness enclosed them. Then, as their eyes became more accustomed to the darkness, they saw the slightly illuminated text. Hermione walked closer and the twelve columns of text grew brighter.

"These must be the spells we need," she said. "They seem to be attuned to react in the presence of witches and wizards."

"Or the presence of the Anima Summas," said Ginny.

"Ginny, Harry and I'll say these spells and you write them down exactly as you hear them. We won't translate them into English, because I've got a feeling that they have to be spoken in the language of the ancient Egyptians."

"But how do you know how the words sound?" asked Ginny. "Dumbledore said that the scholars can only guess how the language sounded."

Hermione looked at the first column and spoke words written in the hieroglyphics. Harry nodded. "That's how I'd say them as well."

"But how do you know it's right?" asked Ron.

"We just know Ron," Hermione answered, shaking her head slowly. "We just know."

Ginny pulled a parchment and quill from her robes and asked Ron to light his wand and hold it close so that she could see what she was writing. "I'm ready," she said.

"Harry," said Hermione. "I'll say each word and you spell it out for Ginny. Use the phonetic system that Professor Dumbledore taught us. Right, spell one."

'USIR UDJAT HOR UPI EN EK RE EK---BIA NETJER SHEMOU BIA NETJER MEHU'

"Got that Harry?"

Harry spelt out the words and Ginny dutifully wrote them onto the parchment. "Just as a matter of interest," said Ron. "What the hell does that mean?"

"Well," said Harry, wrinkling his brow in concentration, "the nearest I can translate them is - O Osiris activity of the Sacred Eye of Horus, there will open for you your Tunnel Opening --- god's Star lustre of the South and god's Star lustre of the North."

Ron exhaled a loud breath. "Bloody hell, I think I understood the Egyptian words better than the English ones!"

Harry and Hermione grinned and pressed on with the rest of the spells. Half an hour later, they'd finished and Ginny folded the parchment and put it inside her robes.

"That was weird," she said. "It's strange writing things down and not knowing what you're writing."

"This is all over my head," said Ron. "I think I'll just stick to Potions - it's easier."

"Did you spot it Harry?" asked Hermione. "All through those twelve spells, the Udjat Hor was mentioned."

"Yes, I think that must be very important to the journey through the Duat."

"What's the Udjat Hor?" asked Ron.

"It's the Sacred Eye of Horus," Harry answered. "It's mentioned in all twelve spells."

"Do you think that's the sacred device mentioned in that secret message that Dumbledore and Professor Denarnaud translated?" asked Ginny.

"I think it must be Ginny," Harry answered. "And I think we'll find out more about it in the Temple of Horus at Edfu."

They walked back through the antechamber, down the tunnel and up to the top of the steps, where they stopped and peered cautiously outside. The protectors were still in the same positions as before, still looking warily around the site, but there was no sign of any attack. Harry walked up to Sirius. "No sign of trouble then?"

"No Nothing," his godfather replied. "They can't have known we were coming. Did you find those spells?"

"Yes," said Hermione as the other three walked up, "and we need to get to Edfu now. Apart from finding how we get into the Duat, we think we've got to find the Sacred Eye of Horus."

Remus raised his eyebrows at the mention of the Eye. "Phew. Well I hope you find it - I've read a lot about that mythical relic."

"Mythical?" asked Ceri. "After the last few months I'm beginning to think that the myths of the ancient past are more factual than we ever thought possible."

Bill took them back to the Portkey that he'd set up on the other side of the pyramid. "Grab hold of this fallen pillar," he told them.

The next instant, they materialised in the desert, not far from the west bank of the Nile. The first thing they noticed was a marked raise in temperature. "We've come a fair way south." Bill smiled as they all started fanning themselves. He pointed behind them. "That's the Temple of Horus."

They turned and saw the stunningly well-preserved temple, and the massive pylons, standing over two hundred feet across and a hundred feet high, of the western enclosure wall rising majestically into the clear blue sky. As they walked towards the temple, Bill told them about the site. "It's the best preserved of all the temples in Egypt, thanks to the fact that it was buried in the desert sand for many centuries before it was excavated in the 1860's. Legend says that Edfu was the site of the mighty battle between the gods Horus and Seth..."

"When Seth lost his left..." started Ron, grinning.

"Ron!" shouted the other three, cutting him off in full flow.

"And Horus lost his eye," said Ginny quietly. "I wonder, we haven't got to find his... you know... his proper eye have we?"

The others looked at the redheaded girl but said nothing.

"It was built in the second century BC," Bill continued, "but again legend says that it was built over a much more ancient temple, although the Egyptologists are still arguing about that one."

"That figures!" said Hermione darkly.

They stopped when they reached the massive entranceway leading inside the temple enclosure and looked at the two large stone statues that stood on either side. "Two Falcons," said Bill. "Horus was always depicted with the head of a falcon."

They walked into the paved outer temple courtyard and looked around in awe at the colonnades on both sides and in front of them. They approached the main temple building, directly in front of them, and gazed up at the colossal black granite statue of Horus as a falcon, that guarded the entrance.

"All these walls, wherever you look," said Nadine, "they're all covered with carvings and hieroglyphics."

"This is huge," said Ron. "Where do we start looking?"

"At the centre," said Hermione with great assertion. "I think we'll find something in or around the inner sanctuary of the temple."

They stepped into the temple and found themselves in a massive hypostyle hall, the roof supported by twelve tall and massive stone columns. They walked across and entered another hall, similar to the first, and also supported by twelve huge columns. Beyond that they came to the inner sanctuary, the most sacred area of the temple, surrounding which were a number of other chambers.

"This is where we have to start looking," said Hermione. "Let's check out the inner sanctum first." The protectors stayed in the outer hall and the four youngsters entered the central chamber, holding their illuminated wands high to see the details of the carvings and writing on the walls. After a few minutes, Hermione shook her head. "These texts are all to do with the rituals of worship that the priests used. I can't see anything here that'll help us."

They walked back out and started to look in the chambers surrounding the inner sanctuary. The first one they entered had similar carvings and writings to the ones they'd seen earlier, and they quickly walked out and entered the second chamber. The hieroglyphics in this chamber were slightly different, but Harry and Hermione could see nothing of interest.

"Hey look at this," said Ron from the far side of the chamber. The other three looked across the room but couldn't see Ron.

"Ron?" said Ginny quietly. "Ron, where are you?"

"I'm right here Ginny," he said, laughing.

"Where!" she shouted.

Ron stepped out into the room, seemingly directly out of the solid rock wall. "This is clever," he said. "There's a hidden chamber here that can only be seen if you stand right in front of it. From where you three are standing it just looks like one straight wall."

"What's in there Ron?" asked Harry.

"Uh, I didn't look," he said.

All four walked into the hidden chamber and held up their wands. Every square inch of wall space was covered in carvings and hieroglyphic writing. Even the ceiling was covered in carvings depicting the gods, surrounded by the same five-pointed stars as in the burial chamber in the Pyramid of Unas.

"Look over there," said Ginny pointing her wand to the top-right corner of the chamber. "It's Horus isn't it? It's got the body of a man but the head of a falcon."

Below the carving of Horus were a number of columns of hieroglyphs, stretching from just below the carving all the way to the paved floor. Ginny walked towards the corner, her wand held high, and studied the carving more closely. "He's looking up at the stars on the ceiling and he's holding something that looks like a key in his left hand. His right hand is pointing down to the columns of writing below him."

Harry and Ron walked over to stand beside Ginny, but Hermione stopped in her tracks after she'd taken only two steps. "Do that again boys," she said quietly, looking intently at the columns of writing.

"Do what?" asked Harry. "We didn't do anything."

"No. Come back over here and then walk towards Ginny again."

Harry and Ron shrugged their shoulders but did as Hermione asked. They walked back over to her and then turned and walked back towards Ginny.

"No!" exclaimed Hermione. "Not like that, do exactly what you did earlier."

"Hermione! What the hell do you mean?" asked Ron.

"Come back here again, but when you walk back towards Ginny, hold your wands in the air exactly like you did the first time."

Again, Harry and Ron walked back to Hermione, turned, and holding their wands in the air started to walk towards Ginny in the corner of the room. They'd gone about halfway when Hermione shouted, "Stop! Stay exactly where you are."

They stopped and looked back at Hermione in confusion. "Is this some sort of silly game your playing Hermione?" asked Harry with a pained expression on his face.

"Of course not Harry," she replied. "Look at the columns of writing - can you see anything that looks odd to you?"

Harry looked at the columns of writing intently. "I can't see anything unusual!"

"Well from where I'm standing, some of the glyphs seem to be slightly out of alignment from the rest of them. You can only see it when the light's in a certain position. Ron, you stay there and Harry, you come and stand beside me."

Harry walked back to Hermione once more and looked at the columns of writing. He gasped, "You're right! I can see it now!"

"Do you think it's that secret code?" asked Ginny.

"I think so Ginny," Hermione answered. "You stay here Harry and I'll go over to Ginny. When I'm ready, direct my wand to each of the misaligned glyphs and I'll read what they say. Ginny, get your parchment and quill ready."

Hermione walked over to the corner of the chamber and held her wand above her head. "Right Harry," she said.

"Move your wand to the top of the left-hand column, third glyph down," said Harry.

Hermione studied the hieroglyph. "It says 'Go'. Next one?"

They continued the same procedure for the next fifteen minutes until all the misaligned writing had been translated.

"Can I move now?" whined Ron. "My bloody arm is nearly dropping off!"

"Yes, we're finished now Ron," said Hermione. Harry and Ron joined the two girls in the corner of the chamber. "What have we got Ginny?" asked Harry. "Read it out."

Ginny held her wand over the parchment and read, 'Go to the left pylon outside the enclosure wall. Go to the carving of holy Horus and look to his eye. He will direct you to the foundation stone of the first ancient temple built here. Enter the tomb.'

"Come on," shouted Hermione as she turned and ran out of the chamber. The others followed and rushed past the startled protectors standing in the hall outside the inner sanctuary.

"Where the hell are you lot going?" shouted Sirius.

"Come on, follow us," Harry shouted back.

They finally caught up with Hermione outside the enclosure walls. She walked along the massive left-hand pylon looking up at the huge thirty-foot carvings on the wall. She stopped when she stood below the second carving and looked at her friends as they approached. "This one is Horus," she said.

They all looked up at the head of the falcon. "I can't see anything odd about his eye," said Ron.

Hermione started to walk backwards, looking up at Horus' eye all the while. After about thirty yards she stopped. "That's it," she said. They walked over and looked up at the carving. They were astonished when they saw that Horus' eye was now quite large, and it was looking down towards the corner of the left-hand pylon.

"It's the way the carving was made," said Hermione. "From this angle, you can see more of the eye than you can when you stand directly below it."

"So the foundation stone must be just past the corner of the pylon," said Ron.

They walked over and looked around the sandy ground at the corner of the building. There were several large stones on the ground, but none of them seemed to fit the bill. They widened their search area, but couldn't find anything that looked like a foundation stone. The protectors formed a wide circle around the four, keeping watch on all sides for any sudden movements.

"Wait a minute," said Ron. "If it's a foundation stone, wouldn't it be buried in the ground? Or at least partially buried?"

"You may be right Ron," said Hermione. "Let's look back at the corner of the enclosure wall again."

They walked back and started looking closer at the ground. "Here's something," said Ginny pointing to the corner of a flat stone protruding from the sand.

They all knelt down and started sweeping the sand from the top of the stone to reveal its flat surface. "This could be it," said Harry, shovelling away the sand from around its sides. Soon they'd uncovered a large oblong block of dark granite, but they couldn't see any markings on its stark sides and surface.

Hermione plunged her hands below the sides, feeling around for any anomalies on the parts of the stone that were still below the sand. "I can feel something here," she said, shovelling away more of the sand. She bent lower and looked closely at the design that was carved into the very base of the stone.

"It's the eye!" she exclaimed. "It looks like the eye on that huge carving of Horus."

All four looked down at the carving. "What do you think we should do?" asked Ginny.

Hermione chewed her lip, deep in thought. "This is the foundation stone of the original temple, the source of everything that's been built here ever since."

"The source!" exclaimed Harry. "Perhaps we should use the spell we used in the labyrinth; the one we used to show the source of those seven rainbow lights."

"Let's try," said Hermione getting back to her feet. "Point your wands at the carving and say the spell together."

"Uh, remind me what the spell is Hermi," said Ron.

"It's 'Ostendo Origo' Ron. Three...Two...One..."

"OSTENDO ORIGO," they all said together.

Four silvery blue lights shot towards the carving, merging into a single, powerful beam of energy just before striking the carving in the centre of the eye. They watched the light slowly fade into the stone, and then heard a rumbling sound over to their left. They looked to see the sand churning about ten yards away from where they all stood, and then sliding down into the dark depths of the cavity that suddenly appeared.

Harry walked over and looked down. "There's steps going down," he said. "Come on."

Harry led the way down into the darkness, and they lit their wands to reveal rough blocks of granite on both sides, and the smooth stone steps leading further below the ground. Cautiously, they went down the steps until they stood in a small chamber, with an entranceway leading off to the right.

"The Eye of Horus," whispered Hermione as she looked up at the painted carving over the doorway. Harry walked through the entrance into a larger chamber, quickly followed by the other three. They held their wands high to see four bare walls, but the ceiling was covered in the same five-pointed stars as before.

Hermione gasped when she spotted the raised black granite altar in the centre of the room, but it wasn't the altar that made her gasp, it was the object that sat on its smooth polished surface. The four walked slowly over to it and stared in awe at the Sacred Eye of Horus. It was about twelve inches across and six inches high and looked like a stylised eye, made from different coloured stones and metals. At the centre of the iris was a small white iridescent crystal, shimmering in the light from their wands.

"It's beautiful," breathed Ginny. Harry reached out and tentatively touched the eye; then he picked it up and brought it closer.

Hermione shouted when she saw something move on the table. "There's something underneath it." She leaned over the altar and looked at the ancient and faded parchment that rested there, the corners curling up when the Eye was lifted from its surface.

She reached over and lifted the parchment, holding it delicately in both hands. "There's writing on it. But I don't recognise all these hieroglyphics."

Harry looked at the parchment and shook his head. "It must be Old Kingdom," he said. "But look at the glyphs at the top, I recognise those."

Hermione looked closely and nodded. "Shemsu-hor," she breathed. "The Followers of Horus. It must be a message of some sort from them."

"We've got to get back to Hogwarts," said Harry, carefully placing the Eye of Horus into the pocket of his robes. "Professors Dumbledore and Denarnaud should be able to translate it."

They turned and walked back out of the chamber and over to the bottom of the stone steps, turning back for a last look at the painted carving of the Eye of Horus above the entranceway. The cover stone lifted back into place as soon as the four walked back out onto the sandy ground, all traces that a secret chamber existed below their feet gone.

"The Eye of Horus," whispered Dumbledore reverently. "I never thought I'd see the day when this sacred artefact was uncovered."

"Mon Dieu," said Jules in equally hushed tones. Harry and the others grinned at the reaction of the two professors; they just knew they'd be as impressed as they'd been with the mystical Eye.

"And we found this," said Ginny, pulling the parchment from her robes and spreading it out on the headmaster's desk. The two dragged their eyes from the Eye and looked down.

"This is just as old as the writing Hermione found in the Osireion Albus," said Jules as he and the headmaster pored over the ancient parchment.

Dumbledore walked over to his bookcases and pulled down the same large tome as he'd done a few days ago. "It might even be older Jules. This might take us a while to translate."

The four youngsters sat impatiently around the headmaster's desk as the two professors worked to decipher the script on the ancient parchment. Everyone looked up when they heard a loud rumbling sound. Ron, slightly red-faced, sat rubbing his stomach. "Sorry. Hunger pangs. Do you think we can get some sandwiches while we're waiting?"

"You four go down to the kitchens," said the chuckling Dumbledore. "I'm sure Dobby can rustle up something for you."

An hour later, the four walked back up to the headmaster's office, now feeling pleasantly full. The two professors were still hunched over the papyrus, discussing the meaning of several strange glyphs that they'd been unable to translate. Dumbledore looked up as they entered. "Ah, here they are. Come and sit down. We've translated the message, for that's what it turned out to be, but there are a few phrases that we're having some trouble with."

Jules picked up his parchment, on which he'd written the translation, and sat on the edge of the headmaster's desk. "I'll read out what we've got so far. The heading on the old parchment is 'The Followers of Horus'; they are the ones who left the message. It says...

'These words are for the eyes of the Anima Summas, the Seekers of Light in a world grown dark with evil. In a far place, across the Sea of Reeds, lies an ancient mine where the precious 'What-Is-It' is fashioned. Follow the signs of Ma-na in the Temple of Hathor on Mount Horeb. Seek, ye seekers of Light, and ye shall find the earthly portal into the mystical realm of the Duat. But be warned that only the bearers of the Magical Eye will be able to gain entry.'

"There's one line at the bottom that we haven't been able to translate fully. We just haven't come across some of these glyphs before and there's nothing in the headmaster's Old Kingdom book. We've only managed to get...

'... mfkzt... and die... shades... beware... portals.'

"I'm sorry, but that's the best we can do."

"Thank you Professor Denarnaud and Professor Dumbledore," said Hermione.

"What is 'What-Is-It' and Ma-na?" asked Ginny, looking confused.

"We don't know," replied Dumbledore, "but where it was written on the parchment, it was followed by a curious symbol - a tall conical shape resting on a plate of some sort. The same symbol appeared after the strange word 'mfkzt' in the last line."

"So the three words could refer to the same thing," said Hermione. "And it was mined, or made, somewhere across the Sea of Reeds, wherever that is."

Harry stood up and looked at the translation. "It seems that it's on Mount Horeb in the temple of Hathor." He raised his eyebrows questioningly.

"Mount Horeb's mentioned in the bible quite a few times," said Hermione. "But I can't remember where it is."

"And who's Hathor?" asked Ron.

"She's an ancient Egyptian goddess Ron," Hermione replied, "but I don't know much about her. I just remember reading her name when we did our earlier research."

"Well you'll have a few days to do some more research," said Dumbledore. "Professor Denarnaud has to go back to France for a couple of days to spend some time with Margot, then he'll come back for your next learning session."

The four looked at each other sadly when Margot's name was mentioned. Ginny picked up both parchments before they went back to the common room.

Nadine sat in Ceri's room, fiddling idly with a quill as she glanced at the American. "You and Bill seemed very close in Edfu Ceri - I thought you weren't interested in him."

Ceri smiled. "There's more to Bill than meets the eye. When I met him first I thought he was a very shallow person, just out for a good time, but when I spoke to him yesterday a very different Bill emerged. He's suffering agonies about those three poor kids that were attacked by Lammashtha - he thinks he's partly to blame. He's really a very sensitive person."

"So did he ask you to go out with him again?"

"No Nadine, I think that romance was very far from his mind yesterday."

"But if he had asked you, would you have said yes?"

Ceri grinned wryly at the French girl. "I don't know Nadine; I really don't."

"So what about Sirius? I saw the way he was looking at you both yesterday, and he didn't look very comfortable."

"Sirius is a big boy Nadine; he's handled things far worse than that."

"I think he's in love with you Ceri - you do know that don't you?"

"I know no such thing Nadine. Oh I know he acts a bit jealous on times, but if that's how he feels he should come right out and say it, not mope around all the time."

"That's not fair Ceri. You haven't exactly encouraged him, and the way you've been flirting with Bill is bound to make him unhappy."

"Nadine! I am not flirting with Bill! But I have to admit to being just a tiny bit flattered by his attentions - any girl would be."

"And what about Sirius' reaction to it, are you flattered by that?"

Ceri chewed her lip as she looked long and hard at the French girl. "All right, I do feel something for him," she said quietly. "I never thought I'd have those feelings for any man again, but that doesn't mean I have to do anything about it."

"Oh Ceri, Ceri. Listen to yourself - you just admitted that you're in love with Sirius and you don't think you'll do anything about it?"

"I didn't say I'm in love with him Nadine - I just said I had... feelings for him."

"Is there a difference?"

"Oh I don't know Nadine!" Ceri exclaimed. "I'm just so confused by it all. I need time to think things through properly."

"Well don't leave it too long Ceri," said Nadine smiling. "Sirius is smouldering so much these days he might just burst into flames right in front of your eyes."

The four sat at the corner table over by the window in the common room surrounded by mounds of books, both Hermione's and the ones they'd borrowed from Dumbledore's library. They were trying to find where their next stop would be on the road to the Duat.

"I've found something about Hathor that makes her involvement in all this pretty clear," said Harry. "She was the wife of Horus."

"Osiris and Isis's daughter-in-law," said Ron. "Well at least we know the connection now."

"Where's the Sea of Reeds?" asked Ginny. "I can't find anything about it in my book."

Ron looked up at his sister. "It says here that the Sea of Reeds is the Red Sea - you know, the one that Moses and the Israelites crossed during the Exodus out of Egypt."

"Of course!" exclaimed Hermione. "That's it! I remember now. Mount Horeb is the mountain that Moses went up when he saw God in the burning bush, and the one he later went up to get the Ten Commandments."

"But that's Mount Sinai isn't it?" asked Harry.

"Well yes, but it's first referred to in the bible as Mount Horeb. It's only later that it's called Mount Sinai."

"So do you know if there's a mine and a temple of Hathor up there?" asked Ron.

"Let's look up everything we can find on the two mountains," said Hermione. "It's bound to say somewhere."

An hour later, they still hadn't found anything about a mine and a temple on Mount Sinai. "This is stupid!" exclaimed Ron. "There's loads of stuff on it here, and plenty of references to Egyptian mines in the Sinai Desert, but not on Mount Sinai!"

"This is interesting," said Ginny suddenly. "Listen to this. *'When Queen Helena, mother of Constantine the Great, chose Jebel Musa in the Sinai Peninsula as the site of the biblical Mt. Sinai, the Christian world blindly assumed this to be true. But in actual fact, she only proclaimed it to be the Mountain of God because she had a dream when she was camped at the foot of that mountain.'* So how did she know? That was seventeen hundred years after the Exodus happened!"

"Sounds like the biblical scholars are a bit like the Egyptologists, wouldn't you say Hermione?" asked Ron, grinning. Hermione pulled a jib in Ron's direction.

"Now this is very interesting," said Harry. "It says here that there's a Temple of Hathor in the Sinai Peninsular on a mountain - but it's not Mount Horeb or Mount Sinai. It's on a mountain called Serabit el-Khadim. It's a lot further north on the western side of the Sinai Desert. What do you think?"

The three others looked quickly in the alphabetical indices of their books and soon found references to the temple. They turned to the relevant pages and began to read. Soon, Hermione let out a gasp.

"The bloody Egyptologists again! There's an account here about an excavation on Serabit el-Khadim. Flinders Petrie - he was a famous archaeologist - excavated the Temple of Hathor in 1904. His expedition was funded by an organisation called 'The Egypt Exploration Fund' and their brief was to find relics that supported the biblical account - that means that if something was found that didn't support those beliefs they were simply not published - bloody typical! Anyway, it says here that Petrie made some astounding discoveries and although he reported them to the fund, they were never published. Close to the summit of the mountain, he found extensive ruins, which proved to be the temple complex of the goddess Hathor. But what made this find significant was the location of mines around the temple area. At first, it was supposed that they were turquoise mines, Hathor being the goddess of turquoise, but there were no traces of turquoise found on the high plateau where the temple stands. There were plenty of deposits further down the mountain, but it seems stupid to think they'd carry it all up to the top to be processed. Then they thought they were copper mines, but there were no deposits of copper in that particular area. What Petrie found was an alchemical workshop! He talks about alchemist's crucibles and such, but listen to this. *'In several of the chambers, we found the floors covered in a fine white powder, the like of which I've not seen before.'* Ever since, Egyptologists have passed it off as the product of copper smelting or incense burning, but that just doesn't hold water. Petrie took a large sample back to the British Museum for analysis, but nothing was ever heard of it again."

Hermione looked up at the others, excitement in her face.

"That sounds like the stuff we found on Mount Olympus," said Ron. "The Ambrosia of the Gods - the Philosopher's stone."

"That's right Ron," she replied. "And it's probably rotting away in some cold and gloomy vault underneath the museum, forgotten by everybody. The scholars walking right on top of it don't even know they're walking on the find of the century - the Elixir of Life!"

"But there should be plenty of it left up on the mountain shouldn't there?" asked Harry.

"It says here," said Hermione, "that a later expedition found nothing - it seems the chambers exposed by the expedition lost its astounding secret, blown to all four corners of the desert by the wind."

"Hey!" exclaimed Harry. "It suddenly just struck me. Ma-na referred to in the papyrus - could that be the 'manna bread' that the Israelites collected to feed themselves in the desert?"

"Hang on Harry, there's an old Hebrew dictionary in the library. I'll go and get it." Hermione jumped up from her chair and raced out of the common room. Only ten minutes later she was back, slightly out of breath, holding a dark-covered book.

"I've found it," she said, excitement in her voice. "And do you know what Manna means? It's ancient Hebrew for 'What-Is-It!'"

"So it looks like Moses had something to do with the mines then," whispered Ron.

"I'll wager it's more than that Ron," said Hermione. "The bible says that Moses went up into the Mountain of God, where the summit breathed fire and smoke. I think that was from the alchemical process for producing the white powder. I think that Serabit el-Khadim is the Mount Horeb and Mount Sinai of the Bible. And that's where we've got to go next!"

Chapter 11 Written in the Stars

Jules Denarnaud walked into the headmaster's office the next morning and greeted everyone in the room. Harry and the other three had just finished telling Professor Dumbledore about their discoveries, and that they urgently needed to go to the Sinai Desert - to the Temple of Hathor on the mountain of Serabit el-Khadim.

Ron looked behind the grand master, but sadly looked away when he saw that Margot wasn't there. He'd hoped that her grandfather would have been able to persuade her to come back to Hogwarts.

"How's Margot, Professor Denarnaud?" asked Ginny.

He looked sadly at the four friends. "I've spent every waking hour with her that I could and I've tried everything I know to help her shake off the effects of the Seers' Curse." He shook his head slowly. "But I'm afraid my efforts have all been in vain. She's still in the depths of despair, and she refuses to speak about any of you. She's still trying desperately to blot out all memories of having met you - I've seen that reaction before in other seers. I'm beginning to think that my worst fears will be realised now, and I can't see any future for Margot other than one of loneliness since she won't be able to form any close attachments with other people of her own age. Oh, she'll get all the support that her parents and I can give her - it's strange that seers don't feel the same sort of dread towards their close families, probably because we're so familiar to them from a very early stage in their development. But we won't be around all the time. That's when Margot will feel the full weight of the Seers' Curse on her shoulders, and I just hope she'll be able to cope with it."

"I know she doesn't want to think about us Professor Denarnaud," said Hermione, looking sadly between Harry and her two friends. "But when you see her next, tell her that we're thinking about her."

"Thank you Hermione, I will."

Ron's eyes were veiled, his face without expression, as he desperately tried to keep his emotions in check. He'd hoped against hope that the grand master would be able to help Margot. He just couldn't envisage the beautiful young girl going through life and ending up like Professor Trelawney. He breathed deeply, knowing that he'd have to keep his feelings hidden from his friends, knowing that he'd have to make an enormous effort to appear as normal as he could - make an effort to *be* as normal as he could. He didn't want to put more pressure on them - he didn't want to add to their worries by suddenly starting to come unhinged at the seams.

"Jules," said Dumbledore. "They've just been telling me about what they've found out during their research, and they need to go to the Sinai Desert tomorrow. Do you think you could start their next learning session straight away? That should give them plenty of time to recover."

"Of course Albus, are you all ready then?"

The four friends woke next morning to the chill of an early February cold snap. Harry shivered as he looked out of the dormitory window at the frozen lake, and jogged over to Ron's bed to wake up his snoring friend.

"Come on Ron, wake up!" he said as he cruelly threw back Ron's bedclothes.

"Ahhhgggg," shouted Ron as he hastily pulled the clothes back up around his throat, drawing sleepy protests from Neville and Seamus across the room. "It's bloody cold! And what time is it anyway!"

"It's eight o'clock, and you know that Sirius wants to make an early start," said Harry.

Ron jumped out of bed and hurriedly dressed. "I'm bloody starving! Do you know we missed lunch and dinner yesterday? I'm not doing one of those learning sessions so early any more."

Harry grinned as he waited for Ron to get ready, and they both walked down to the common room to sit in front of the blazing fire while they waited for the girls to make an appearance.

"Oh, this is so cruel," said Ginny as she and Hermione ran up to the fireplace and tried to warm themselves.

"Come on you lot," said Ron. "Let's get down to breakfast. I can't wait much longer - my stomach feels like my throat's been cut!"

Sirius and the others grinned as the four rushed over to the Gryffindor table in the Great Hall and started to tuck into liberal helpings of bacon and eggs. "Cold enough for you this morning?" shouted Harry to the adults sitting at the top table.

"Well in about another half hour you'll have all the heat you can stand," said Nadine. "Bill sent an owl to Ceri this morning telling her that it's absolutely steaming in the Sinai Desert. He wants us all to take plenty of water - he says we're going to need it if we're going to climb up the mountain in all that heat."

"Oh no!" exclaimed Ron. "I had enough of climbing mountains in Greece and Wales."

"This one's not very high Ron," laughed Charlie. "Bill says it's only about 2600 feet above a rocky plateau in the desert - although he *did* say that the guide book says the going's pretty rough."

"Thanks Charlie," groaned Ron through a mouthful of toast.

"When's Bill expecting us?" asked Hermione.

"He's timed the Portkey for nine o'clock," said Ceri looking at her watch. "That gives you another twenty minutes to get ready."

Twenty minutes later, they left the freezing cold of Hogwarts and materialised into the blazing heat of the Sinai Desert, standing in a deserted Muggle car park.

"We seem to be making a habit of this," said Bill, grinning as he walked towards the Hogwarts group. "Are you sure you all wouldn't like to come to Egypt to live?"

"It's too bloody hot here Bill," said Ron fanning himself. "And to think I was just moaning about the cold back in Scotland - I wouldn't mind a few blocks of ice right now!"

"It's early yet Ron," laughed Bill. "Wait until about midday when the sun's at it's peak and you've just scrambled up that mountain!"

They all looked up at the rugged cliffs of Serabit el-Khadim, and the rough track that wound its way from the car park and up towards the mountain summit. "This track will take us to the Temple of Hathor," said Bill. "It's about a five mile walk, taking into account all the twists and turns, and it gets quite hairy towards the top, at least that's what it says in the guidebook. I've never been to the Sinai before, so I don't know a lot about it, except that it gets very hot. Ready?"

Their progress was slow climbing in the desert heat, and they made frequent stops to rest and take on more water. The scenery was magnificent, typical of the wild ruggedness of the Sinai, and Hermione had to be dragged away from the many signs of ancient habitation. They passed plenty of old mine workings and rock huts, used by the long-forgotten miners over the many thousands of years that the area was worked. They also passed quite a few inscriptions, written by the miners in the proto-Canaanite script that was later to evolve into the ancient Hebrew language. And there were also many references to Hathor, her image of a slim Egyptian goddess with two horns sprouting from her head and the sun disk resting between them, carved into the rock.

One carving in particular fascinated the four youngsters. It showed Hathor offering a Pharaoh the conical-shaped object they'd seen in the ancient parchment from Edfu - she was offering him 'What-Is-It' on a plate, as if she was giving him a loaf of bread or a large cake.

"Interesting," breathed Hermione, who had a sort of glazed look in her eyes as she walked on, thinking that in all probability she was following in the very footsteps of Moses, who walked this way almost 3500 years before her.

After four gruelling hours, they finally walked onto a small plateau just below the summit of the mountain, and they stood, panting and very sweaty, and looked at the ruins of what had been the Temple of Hathor. Among the many blocks of stone scattered around the red-coloured sandy ground were quite a number of tall blocks still standing, covered with hieroglyphic writing. They looked across the site to a low cliff, about eighty yards away, and the avenue of tall stones that led towards it.

"We're standing in the New Kingdom section of the temple," said Bill, looking at a map of the site in his guidebook. "That avenue of stones leads to the oldest part of the temple, believed to be built during the Old Kingdom. Or even earlier."

Harry led the way across the ruins towards the cliff and soon stood in front of some stone buildings that were still intact. "These chambers are the oldest of the structures," continued Bill, "and they lead down into what is called 'The Cave of Hathor'."

Hermione quickly walked into the first room and looked around at the stone benches that flanked the walls. "This must have been one of the alchemical rooms," she said, although all traces of the implements mentioned by Flinders Petrie when he first excavated the ruins were now long gone. There were still the stone furnaces in evidence though, the ones used in the manufacturing process of 'What-Is-It'. Hermione nodded, wondering whether it was the glow

and smoke from these furnaces that Moses had spoken about when he was in the presence of God.

The other three followed as she walked further into the ruins. They soon came to a wall that marked the end of the stone structures, butting up against the low cliff. At the corner of the room were steps leading down into the mountain.

Harry and Ron walked down the stone steps, followed by the girls, and emerged into a dark cavernous area, where they had to light their wands to see anything.

"The Cave of Hathor," whispered Hermione. She walked to the far end of the cave and looked up at a large carving in the rock. "It's Hathor," she said, looking at the horned head of the goddess, the sun disk resting between the horns.

"And look what she's doing," breathed Ginny quietly. Hermione took a step back from the wall to get a better view. Hathor stood looking ahead, one hand raised to the sky and the other pointing to the ground. In the hand that was raised to the sky rested the conical shape - the 'What-Is-It'.

"As above, so below," whispered Hermione reverently. "There's got to be something here - she's pointing the way for us."

She bent down and looked at the rocky ground underneath the carving - at the spot where Hathor seemed to be pointing. She brought her wand close to the ground and looked about for anything unusual, but all she saw was the bare rocky floor. Ron, meanwhile, looked up at the cave ceiling, above the spot where the conical shape in Hathor's other hand was pointing.

"There's something there!" he exclaimed. All four gathered round and looked up at the ceiling, where they could just make out the faint traces of some hieroglyphics.

"Come on, same as we did in the Osireion," said Hermione assertively. "You two boys bend down for Ginny to climb on your backs. Ginny - will you copy the writing please?"

Fifteen minutes later, Ginny jumped down from the platform formed by the backs of Harry and Ron, parchment in hand and a smile on her pretty face. Hermione eagerly took the parchment from her and held her wand close. The two boys, holding their backs as they stretched to relieve their aches, staggered over to her and gazed at the writing.

"Can you read it?" asked Ginny.

"I think so, Ginny. What do you think Harry?"

Harry looked closely at the glyphs. "I recognise most of the writing," he said, "but I can't make out what that part says." He pointed to a cartouche, inside which were a number of unfamiliar glyphs.

"I think that must be the name of a god or Pharaoh," said Hermione. "It must be in Old Kingdom writing - we'll have to ask Dumbledore and the grand master to translate those."

"But what about the rest of it?" asked Ron, impatient to know what it said.

"Right," said Hermione. "It says... *'Seekers of the Light; Look to the Amduat for the way.'* Then there's that cartouche."

"And it finishes with *'The Horizon of Khufu will be your guide. As above, so below'*," said Harry.

"Is that all!" exclaimed Ron incredulously. "That doesn't mean a thing!"

"Who, what or where is the Amduat?" asked Ginny. Hermione and Harry shook their heads and shrugged.

"And what about The Horizon of Khufu?" asked Ron.

"Khufu was the Pharaoh who supposedly built the Great Pyramid of course," answered Hermione, "but I don't know what his horizon is."

"Come on," said Harry, "let's get back to the others. We'd better get that cartouche translated, it might tell us something more."

"I'm not walking back down that bloody mountain on an empty stomach," said Ron emphatically. "Who's got the food?"

"Nadine and Ceri," said Ginny, grinning at her brother.

"Right!" Ron led the way back up to the temple ruins and walked towards the two women in a very determined manner.

Back at Hogwarts, Sirius and Ceri patrolled the edge of the Forbidden Forest before the fifth and sixth year Slytherins took their turn at sampling the crisp air after afternoon classes. They walked side-by-side, not saying very much, and each sneaking sidelong glances at the other every now and again.

Sirius cleared his throat and tried to put a casual tone into his voice. "Uh, you were very pally with Bill this morning?"

Ceri suppressed a grin. "Was I? I didn't really notice."

Sirius frowned. "Well I did! You'll get hurt if you're not careful Ceri."

"Hurt? Why would Bill want to hurt me Sirius?"

"You know what I mean."

Ceri stopped walking and turned to face the smouldering Sirius. "Do I? No, I don't think I do. Bill's a very nice guy and there's a side to him you haven't seen yet. I don't think he'll hurt me."

Sirius frowned and continued walking again. "Just be careful, Ceri, that's all I'm saying."

This time, Ceri didn't bother to suppress her grin as she watched Sirius striding out in front of her. She couldn't help but visualise the fire and steam shooting out of his ears.

Up in the headmaster's office, Dumbledore and Jules once more examined the parchment that Ginny laid before them and looked closely at the cartouche surrounding the strange glyphs. "Old Kingdom again Jules," said Dumbledore.

"You'd better get your book again Albus," Jules replied. "But if we get much more practice at this we'll soon become fluent."

"Now let's see," said Dumbledore, turning the pages of his Old Kingdom Egypt book. "It says - Djedi mrwty Khufu. The first few hieroglyphics relate to a name - Djedi. And the following is a qualification - it says, beloved... of... Khufu."

"The builder of the Great Pyramid!" exclaimed Ron.

"No he's not Ron, remember?" said Hermione testily.

"Well there you have it," said Jules. "Djedi, beloved of Khufu."

"Now where have I heard the name Djedi before?" muttered Harry. "It sounds familiar Hermione."

"Yes, I think you're right Harry," said Hermione. "We've definitely heard it before. But where?"

"It'll come to us eventually, and there must be a link with the Horizon of Khufu," said Hermione. "Professors, have you heard of the Amduat?"

"The Amduat is one of the oldest religious texts of ancient Egypt," said Jules. "It's also known as the book of 'What is in the Duat', but to the scribes of the Old Kingdom it was known as 'The book of the Hidden Chamber'."

"The hidden chamber!" exclaimed Ginny. "That's what we're looking for isn't it? The secret chamber of Thoth, the Sanctuary of Thoth, the Hidden Hall of Records! A rose by any other name!"

"Do you have a copy of this book, Professor Dumbledore?" asked Hermione, crossing her fingers.

Dumbledore smiled. "I do believe so, Hermione. One moment, I'll check." He walked over to his bookcases and drew his finger along the row of books on the top shelf. "Ah, here we are. 'The Book of What is in the Duat'."

He reached down a thin-looking folder and handed it to Hermione. "This is an English translation, but I should also have the original text somewhere - but it's in Old Kingdom hieroglyphics I'm afraid."

"Thank you Professor," said a relieved and excited Hermione. "Well come on you lot, what are you waiting for?"

She rushed out of the office, her three companions close on her heels, hearing the laughter of the two professors fade into the distance.

She walked along a dark corridor, turning to left and right as she probed the shadows for hidden disasters. All the while, she felt the terrible dread of certainty that she would suddenly come across the scene of her worst fears. Up ahead she could hear the anguished cries of souls in torment, but still she walked forward, unable to alter the course set for her at the moment of her birth. She looked back down the corridor, wishing to return to the comfort of the womb, to start afresh, but she knew she could not return there.

'Margo...Margot,' came the plaintive call from the shadowy darkness ahead. She hurried forward, wanting, but at the same time dreading, to see what lay ahead of her. She cried out in despair as she entered the place where her nightmare lay in wait.

'Margot...where have you been? Why have you taken so long to get here?'

She tried to clear her mind, squinting into the gloom to make out the face of the one calling to her. She saw a large white horse weighed down with protective armour, ready for battle, and atop the charger was a tall form, also dressed in battle armour, waiting for her to give him her blessing, waiting for her to send him charging into the darkness and into even darker oblivion.

'No,' she cried, striving to reach the knight. 'Please stay with me. Don't go!'

'But I must, my love,' he replied sadly. 'It is my destiny. I have to go.'

'NOOoooooo...' she cried at the top of her voice, willing him not to turn and charge into the darkness, trying to project her love, hoping that it would save him. But she knew it was a futile gesture. She knew that nothing could prevent the cruel and relentless march of destiny as it moved towards its horrible and inevitable conclusion.

"NOOoooooo..." cried Margot, her head thrashing about on her pillow.

"Margot! Margot!" She opened her eyes to see the worried expression on the face of her grandfather as he held her shoulders gently. "Shhh, Margot. It's all right. You're safe."

The tears fell freely as she clung desperately to her grandfather, sobbing uncontrollably as he rocked her gently. Jules Denarnaud silently sighed as a tear of his own fell onto Margot's shiny white hair. He closed his eyes, his mind in an agony of despair at his lack of power to rescue his granddaughter from the terrible torment of the Seers' Curse.

The four friends sat close together as they huddled at the table by the fire in Gryffindor common room. Before them, laid flat on the table, was the parchment that Ginny had written at Serabit el-Khadim, and next to it was the thin folder that contained the Amduat.

"There's not a lot to go on," said Ginny, looking once more at Hermione's translation on the parchment. "And there's that 'As above, so below' message again. It seems to crop up everywhere."

"That must be a reference to Rostau and the Duat," said Hermione. "The re-creation of heaven on Earth."

"I've been wracking my brains," said Harry, "but I just can't think where I've seen that name before - Djedi. And what does it mean - the Horizon of Khufu will be our guide? Is that referring to when we actually get inside the Duat?"

"Who knows, Harry? Shouldn't we read the Amduat?" asked Ron. "The message says that the way is in that book - I suppose that means that it'll tell us where the entrance to the Duat is?"

"That's what I hope Ron," answered Harry, sitting back in his chair and putting his hands behind his head. "Read it out to us Hermi."

"You can read as well as I can Harry!" she exclaimed.

Harry grinned. "But you have such a nice way of putting things. And I like to watch the intensity in your lovely eyes when you get carried away with a good story."

Ginny and Ron laughed and also sat back comfortably in their chairs. "Come on then Hermione," said Ron. "Let's see those eyes flash."

Hermione groaned resignedly, but not without hint of pleasure in her face as she picked up the folder and turned to the first page. She scanned it for a few moments. "There's a lot of repetitive stuff, but I think the introduction proper starts here..."

'The writings of the Hidden Chamber. The places where the souls, the gods, the shadows and the spirits stand. What they do. The beginning of the Horn of the West, the Gate of the Western Horizon, the end of utter darkness. The Gate of the Western Horizon.

'This is the knowledge of the power of those in the Netherworld. This is the knowledge of what they do; knowledge of their sacred rituals to Ra; knowledge of the mysterious powers; knowledge of what is in the hours as well as of their gods; knowledge of what he says to them; knowledge of the gates and ways on which the Great God passes; knowledge of the movement of the hours and their gods; knowledge of the powerful ones and the annihilated.

'This god enters into the Western Gate of the Horizon while Seth stands on the bank of the river which is 120 schoeni long. The barge reaches those of the Netherworld and passes afterwards into Urnes.'

"Stop Hermi, stop!" groaned Ron. "What the hell is it on about? I can't make head nor tail of all that."

"Ron, honestly!" gasped Hermione. "Use a bit of imagination. It's just an introduction, telling us what we're likely to find in the Duat." She quickly scanned the following pages. "And it then goes on to talk in a lot more detail about what is in each hour of the Duat."

"Well I hope it gets more interesting than the first part," he said sullenly. "What do you mean 'each hour of the Duat' anyway?"

"Well according to ancient Egyptian Religion," said Hermione brightly, "the Duat traces the journey of the sun god Ra from the time the sun sets, or dies, to the time he rises again, or is reborn. So they split the Duat into the twelve hours of the night."

"But shouldn't we be looking at those books we've got about the Secret Chamber?" asked Ginny. "Most of them say it's somewhere below the Sphinx, like Edgar Cayce says in his predictions."

"But they haven't found anything have they!" exclaimed Hermione.

"Perhaps there's more about it in the Westcar Papyrus your parents sent you Hermione," said Harry.

"The West... Of course! That's where I've seen it!" Hermione suddenly exclaimed. She delved among the books strewn around the table, and after a few moments found the copy of the Westcar Papyrus. She quickly turned to the page and gasped. "Yes! The name in the cartouche - Djedi beloved of Khufu - Djedi was the old wizard that told the Pharaoh about the Sanctuary of Thoth!"

"Well at least we know who it is now, but does it help?" asked Harry.

"It has to Harry," said Hermione, "but I can't think how for the moment."

"Well I still think the Sphinx is our best bet," said Ron, leafing through one of the books and holding up an image of the Sphinx for the rest to look at. "There's a nice photo here of the Sphinx looking towards the sunrise."

Hermione's eyes went wide as she gazed at the photograph, and then she brought her hand down hard onto the table, making the rest jump. "No wonder they haven't found the Secret Chamber! They've been looking in the wrong place!"

Harry, Ron and Ginny glanced at each other, wondering what Hermione had spotted in the photo. "What makes you say that Hermione?" asked Ron. "All those researchers can't be wrong can they? They all seem convinced that it's somewhere underneath the Sphinx."

"I'm not saying they're wrong Ron," said Hermione, now looking excitedly back at the Amduat. "I'm just saying that if they want to find it, they should be looking somewhere else. And it's right here - in the introductory paragraph of the Amduat!"

The others looked even more confused. "Hermione!" exclaimed Harry, looking exasperated. "You say the researchers may not be wrong, but you say they're not right! That doesn't make sense."

"What I mean Harry," said Hermione, now bubbling, "is that the Secret Chamber may well be underneath the Sphinx, but the researchers are looking in the wrong place to find the entrance to it. Remember what I said about the sun god Ra's journey through the Duat? He's reborn when the sun rises - that's in the East, and the Sphinx is on the eastern side of the Giza Plateau - Rostau. But he dies when the sun sets - in the west. See?"

"No!" all three said together.

Hermione looked up at the ceiling in frustration. "Look, we have to follow the Hunter's path through the Duat to get to Thoth's Sanctuary - we know that. And the Hunter must have retraced the path of Ra, the sun god - right?"

They all nodded.

"So - that's what we have to do too. We have to enter the Duat, the start of our journey to Thoth's Secret Chamber, where the sun dies - in the west! The entrance must be somewhere on the western side of Rostau, opposite the Sphinx, where all those researchers have been looking."

Harry grinned and shook his head slowly. "How many times have I told you that you're absolutely amazing Hermi?"

"Not enough Harry," she said, feigning a pout.

"I follow your reasoning," said Ron. "And I think you're right. But where on the western side of Rostau is the entrance? It's a big place!"

"The Amduat gives us a bit more information," said Hermione. "In the opening few paragraphs it mentions the Gate of the Western Horizon - that's the gate we have to find."

"I hate to put a damper on things," said Ron knowingly, "but if you face North and look to your left, you see the Western Horizon - and that holds true wherever you stand on the whole planet! Even if it's talking about Rostau, the Western Horizon is still a bloody big place!"

"You're right Ron," said Harry. "But it tells us a bit more - look at the first few lines; it says 'The beginning of the Horn of the West, the Gate of the Western Horizon'."

"But what's the Horn of the West?" asked Ginny, looking confused.

All four looked blankly at each other.

"There's a big diagram of the Giza Plateau at the back of one of the books I was reading not so long ago," said Ron, rummaging among the books on the floor. "Let's look at it and see if we can see anything that looks like a horn."

Ron laid the book on the table and opened out the large, scale plan of the plateau. They all crowded around and looked closely at the diagram, which showed the three large pyramids, the Great Pyramid to the north at the top of the diagram, and the sphinx to right, as well as loads of other smaller structures.

Harry looked at the scale marking at the bottom. "It's about fifteen hundred yards from north to south, and about twelve hundred yards from west to east."

"What about the track marked at the top?" asked Ginny. "See where it branches? If you turn the map upside down, the two legs of the track look a bit like the horns of a bull."

"Hmmm," said Harry. "I think you're clutching at straws there, Ginny. And in any case, those tracks are much more recent than the pyramids; they were probably built for the tourists."

"Well I can't see anything that looks like a horn!" exclaimed Ron.

"What are all those small oblong shapes?" said Ron as he pointed to several places on the map.

Harry squinted closely. "There's some small writing here, let's see... this one says 'Central field of Mastabas' and the one over to the right says 'Eastern Mastaba field'."

"What the hell is a mastaba?" Ron asked.

"It's an ancient tomb Ron," said Hermione. "The Giza Plateau is full of them. But they're not just any old tombs; they were reserved for the close family of the reigning Pharaoh and high-ranking officials."

"The biggest cluster of them is over to the left of the Great Pyramid," said Harry. "It says 'Western Mastaba field of the Old Kingdom'. They must be the oldest tombs on the plateau."

"That's it!" shouted Hermione. "Djedi beloved of Khufu. I'll bet that his tomb is there somewhere! Khufu was an Old Kingdom Pharaoh, and Djedi must have been a favourite of his to have a title like that, so it follows that the Pharaoh would have given his permission for him to be buried in a favoured place - the Old Kingdom mastaba field! That's why the cartouche was in the message - I think we've got to find his tomb, and that mastaba field *is* over on the western side of Rostau!"

"Brilliant Hermione," said Harry, smiling. "But which one of those tombs is Djedi's? There're thousands of them there."

"There's writing on the back of this map," said Ginny. "Perhaps it gives the names of the tombs there." She turned the map over, but her face fell when she read the notes. "Oh. Only a few of the tombs have been identified, and they're listed here, but Djedi's isn't one of them."

"Well we're starting to narrow it down," said Harry brightly.

"That's curious," muttered Hermione as she reached down and picked up her ruler and placed it on the map. "Look at this. The two largest pyramids line up exactly in a north-east to south-west direction, but the third one is slightly offset to the east - it doesn't quite line up with the others. I know that the ancient pyramid builders were very precise in their alignments, so I wonder why they did that? I can't believe it was a mistake."

"I know the reason for that," said Ron, grinning, feeling pleased that he knew something that Hermione didn't know. "I read about it in one of those books written by a New-Age Egyptologist. He says that the builders did it deliberately to mimic the three stars in Orion's belt in the constellation of Orion, because the ancient Egyptians associated Orion the Hunter with their god Osiris."

Hermione looked shocked for a moment, then she squealed excitedly as she stretched over and planted a big kiss on Ron's forehead. "You're brilliant Ron!"

"I am?" asked the startled Ron.

"That's the last part of the message in Hathor's temple," she said. "As above, so below. But the message doesn't mention Orion or Osiris - it mentions the Amduat, and that talks about the Horn of the West! Come on - let's get down to the library, I want to look at some astronomy books. Bring the plan of the Giza Plateau Ginny."

Hermione led the other three down to the library and they all rushed inside, drawing stern looks from Madam Pince. Hermione went over to the Astronomy section and picked out a large book, which she placed on one of the tables.

"What are you looking for Hermione?" asked Harry.

"I want to look through the mythology of the constellations," she replied. "I want to see what it says about the constellation of Taurus the Bull."

She looked in the index at the back of the book and turned to the pages on the Taurus constellation. "Let's see what it says... Taurus, often associated with the Egyptian goddess Hathor! I thought so. When Ron said about the Pyramids being built in the shape of Orion's belt, I started thinking - the message was in the Temple of Hathor, and she's depicted with two large horns with the disk of the sun in between them. The only constellation I know about that has horns is Taurus the Bull. And this confirms it - Taurus is associated with Hathor the same as Orion is associated with Osiris, her father-in-law. Now the last part of the message says 'As above so below', so I started wondering if the correlation between Osiris and the Pyramids applied to Hathor and Taurus!"

"So you think that there're structures on the Giza Plateau that are built in the shape of the Taurus constellation?" asked Ginny.

"That's what I'm hoping Ginny, but we need to see a star chart and see where Taurus lies in relation to Orion."

"Hang on," said Harry as he got up from his seat and walked over to the Astronomy section. "We should find it in here." He heaved a very large book onto the table.

"Turn to the star charts for the night sky in the south," said Hermione. "I know that Orion lies just above the celestial equator."

Harry turned over the pages until he came to the constellations in the southern sky. "Here's Orion," he said pointing to the distinctive pattern of stars on the chart.

"And there's Taurus," said Ginny pointing to the star pattern just above and to the right of Orion.

"But it's to the East!" exclaimed Ron.

"No it's not Ron," said Hermione. "Remember, we're looking to the south, so the right-hand side of the chart is the west - Taurus is slightly to the west of Orion."

"Let's put the star chart over the map of the Giza Plateau," said Ginny. "We should be able to see if Taurus relates to any structures there."

"Uh, hang about Ginny," said Hermione, deep in thought. "We've got two problems - we need one of these to be transparent, or we won't be able to spot anything. But that's the least of our problems. When the Egyptians built the structures at Rostau, they would have looked at the star constellations as they appeared at that time. So we need to know exactly when the Pyramids were built."

"But why?" asked Ginny. "I thought the stars were unchanging - won't they be in the same positions?"

"Relative to themselves, yes they will. But we have to take into account Precession of the Equinoxes."

"Huh?" all three asked together.

"Precession," said Hermione. "We won't cover that subject in Astronomy class until year 7, but I've done bit of advance reading."

"Typical!" exclaimed Ron, grinning at his friend. "Are you going to baffle us with this Hermione - like you did with the Golden Section last year?"

"Oh, it's a far simpler concept to grasp Ron," said Hermione. "Imagine a child's toy - a spinning top. Although the top revolves very fast, you'll always see a slight wobble on the handle at the top of it. The handle always revolves, but at a much slower rate than the top itself. The Earth's exactly the same - it's got a wobble. But this wobble is very, very slow. The Earth revolves on its axis in one day, of course, but the wobble revolves through a complete 360-degree cycle in just under 26,000 years!"

"So what's that got to do with it?" asked Ron.

Hermione frowned at Ron, thinking how best to explain the phenomenon. "Well imagine that we're standing on the Giza Plateau looking up at the stars in the sky just as the belt of Orion rises above the southern horizon. We see their positions as they are now, of course, but because of the wobble, if you were on the Giza Plateau, say 5000 years ago around the time when the pyramids were built, and watched the belt as it rose above the southern horizon, the three stars would rise at a slightly different angle compared to today. The constellation shapes would be the same, but their orientation as they come above the horizon would be different."

"But that new-age Egyptologist said in the book I read that the three pyramids matched the position of the stars in Orion's belt in 10,500 BC!" exclaimed Ron.

"What! But that means they were built 12,500 years ago!" gasped Hermione.

"Well he didn't think so," said Ron. "He said the pyramids may have been built at about 2,600 BC, but the builders were following an ancient plan laid down in 10,500 BC."

"Whatever," said Hermione, deep in thought. "But it still means that we have to find a star map of the southern sky as it appeared on the Giza Plateau in 10,500 BC - We need to find the positions of the stars in Orion and Taurus back at that time."

"Uh Hermione," whispered Harry. "I doubt if there're any star maps still around from 10,500 BC."

"Of course there aren't Harry," she replied. "But that new-age Egyptologist managed to work out their positions, so there must be a way of doing it."

"How are we going to find that out?" asked Ginny.

"Well I wouldn't call her new-age exactly," said Hermione, "but I'll bet that Professor Sinistra knows how to do it. Come on, afternoon classes are just about to finish so we'll catch her up in the Astronomy Tower."

She walked along the same dark corridor, still glancing from right to left, still fearful of what she may see in the misty recesses of her mind. She heard it once more, the plaintive voice coming from up ahead in the dark and shadowy tunnel of the future ...

'Margo...Margot.'

She reached out with her hand, her eyes wide and her lips trembling, as she walked towards the place where the voice was coming from. Then once more she entered the place of her nightmare, but this time it was different.

She shielded her eyes against the bright silvery glow, striving to see the source of the light, but all she could see was the hazy outline of the spirit beckoning to her, calling her to stand in the place before him at some point in their future. She approached slowly, still having to shield her eyes from the glare.

'Wh... Who are you?' she asked.

'I am the spirit of the Light,' replied the spirit with a soft and gentle voice, looking into the agony of her mind with compassion and understanding. 'I am your future. I have called you here for my council - hear me. Your task is not yet done; you must yet give aid to the children of the Light in their dreadful task. Do not forsake them, for their need is great. They have the weight of sorrow in their hearts, for you are of their kind. They feel your pain, your doubts, your fears, and that will hinder them in the quests they have yet to complete.'

The spirit raised his arm, pointing his upward-facing palm towards her. 'I will help with the curse you bear. I will give you hope and clear thought so that you may find your way past the worst ravages of the affliction that faces all those who are privileged to see into the times ahead.'

A silvery blue light moved from the spirit's palm and surrounded her mind in its gentle warmth. She gasped as she felt her mind respond to the manipulations of the ancient magic, easing her fears and opening her inner eye to the joyous things she'd been denying herself. And then she knew. She knew who stood before her, and a tear of wondrous knowledge and love trickled through the dark caverns of her innermost being.

'You now know me, daughter of the Light, and you know the truth and wisdom of my council. Your gift has not been affected and the curse you bear is still with you, but you may now apply your powers of reason to deflect its worst depredations.'

'You must go to the children of the Light, you must show them that you are still by their side. For they are about to face their most difficult quest, one that will task their ability to fully comprehend and survive what they will experience. They need to know you are with them, for that will be their anchor when they come face to face with the mysteries of life and death. Tell them what you have witnessed, for they also know me. I must leave you now, but when you return to your conscious mind remember that I will be with you always...'

The light grew dim and was soon gone, leaving her to sleep without the agonies of the future, leaving her to enjoy the restful slumber that she'd thought was forever lost to her...

When she woke, Margot's face was wet with tears, but she didn't cry out in mental torment. She lay still for several minutes, watching the late afternoon light as it filtered through the drawn curtains of her bedroom in the Villa Bethania. For the first time in many days she smiled. Then she jumped out of bed, dressed quickly, and rushed from the bedroom down to her classroom.

"Margot," said the sad-faced Jules as he saw his granddaughter slowly close the door behind her. "How was your nap this afternoon? Was it any easier?"

"Oh yes grandfather," she replied. "I... I've got something to tell you..."

"Professor Sinistra, I wonder if you can help us with something?"

The professor looked at Hermione and the other three as they stood in front of her desk in the Astronomy tower, watching her expectantly. "Of course, what's the problem?"

"Well it's a problem we have with Precession of the Equinoxes," replied Hermione.

"Precession? You won't cover that topic until seventh year!"

"I know Professor," she said. "But we need to get hold of a star chart of the southern sky at the latitude of the Giza Plateau in Egypt. But it has to be as it was in 10,500 BC. Do you know of any way it can be done?"

"Ah... your quest. I see now," said the professor smiling. "Well had you been in seventh year, you would have seen precession in action. I have a spell that can regress the constellations back to any point in time in the past, or forward into any point in the future. Sit down I'll show you."

The four looked at each other with excitement as they took the front seats in the classroom.

"Now which constellations do you want to see?"

"Orion and Taurus," Hermione replied. The professor waved her wand and muttered a spell, and the two constellations appeared in the air right in front of the astonished friends. Beneath the stars was a silvery box, in which was displayed the current date.

Sinistra pulled a book from the bookcase at the side of the classroom and wrote down some figures. "Right, I've got the latitude of the Giza Plateau. Now what time of the night do you want?"

"Uh, I don't know Professor," answered Hermione. "But we want it to appear just as the belt of Orion rises above the southern horizon."

"Hmmm," said Sinistra as she once more consulted the book. She again waved her wand and the stars dropped further down in the air, and the belt of Orion sat just above a magical line that represented the horizon.

"10,500 BC you say?" asked Sinistra.

"Yes Professor," said Hermione, eager to see what would happen.

The professor again waved her wand at the stars and muttered a few words. At first, nothing seemed to happen, then the numbers in the date box started to change, picking up speed until the years fairly tumbled down towards zero. As the pace of change quickened, the four saw the stars start to move, the belt of Orion angling slightly downwards and the start of Taurus moving very slowly towards the left.

Harry watched, fascinated, as the date entered the BC period, and saw them tumbling down towards the target date. Then the images stopped, and the date box showed 10,500 BC. Hermione looked at the two star patterns and saw that Orion had drifted over to the left, with the belt stars showing a greater angle of elevation to the horizon. Taurus had also drifted to the left, with the two stars that represented the end of the horns only just to the right of the stars in Orion's belt.

"That was amazing Professor," she breathed.

Sinistra looked quite pleased with herself. "Do you want to see anything else?"

"Uh, I don't know if it's possible," said Harry, "but could you transfer those patterns to a piece of parchment?"

"And could you make the parchment transparent?" added Ginny.

"And to the same scale as this diagram?" asked Hermione, handing the professor the map of the Giza Plateau.

Sinistra smiled. "That's standard practice during 7th year studies. But if I use the same scale as this map, I'm going to need to use a very big piece of parchment!" She opened her desk drawer and rummaged around for a few moments, eventually pulling out a very large piece of parchment, about four times as big as the map. She placed it onto the floor directly beneath the stars hanging in the air and looked at the scale shown on the Giza map. Then she waved her wand and muttered a few words.

"Bloody hell!" gasped Ron as the stars hanging in the air before him dropped down, one by one, until they were all transferred onto the parchment. Sinistra finally pointed her wand at the parchment, which shimmered and became transparent.

"Incredible!" gasped Ginny.

"We can't thank you enough Professor," said the beaming Hermione as she picked up the map and carefully folded the star parchment.

"Any time dear girl," she replied, looking pleased.

Ten minutes later, the four friends were back in the library, the transparent star chart lying beside the map of Giza.

"Now we'll find if 'As above, so below' in the message works," said Hermione.

"How are we going to do this?" asked Ginny. "How do we line it up properly?"

"Hermione," said Harry. "Put the transparency on the Giza map, so that the three stars in Orion's belt line up exactly over the three pyramids."

Hermione turned the map around so that she looked at it with the south towards the bottom, then placed the star chart on the map so that the three belt stars covered the pyramids. "They line up exactly!" she exclaimed.

After a few moments of scrutiny, Ron exclaimed, "But the stars of Taurus don't line up with anything on the map! Look, they're off the map all together!"

"Wait a minute," said Hermione quietly. "The Amduat said 'The beginning of the Horn of the West'. The furthest west of the two horn stars is this one." She pointed to one of the stars. "I think that we have to see what structure that one's covering."

"But it's off the map Hermione!" Ron exclaimed. "It doesn't cover anything!"

Hermione frowned, muttering, "There must be another way to do this..."

They looked closely at the map and the position of the western-most star of Taurus, which was about twelve inches beyond the edge of the map. Then Hermione brightened. "I know! The star doesn't have to cover a structure on the map - think about it. The three stars of Orion don't really cover the pyramids on the map, they're up in the sky - they just point to them! I think we have to do the same with the horn star in Taurus and see where it points to."

"What - draw a line from the star down onto the map?" asked Harry.

"Yes," said Hermione. "Do it Ginny, and see where it points to. Make sure you draw the line vertically."

Ginny leaned over the table and placed a large ruler over the star parchment and the map. "This has to be done accurately," she said frowning, placing one end of the ruler on the star and making fine adjustments so that the ruler was exactly parallel with the edges of the parchment and the map. Then she drew a line onto the transparent parchment, right to the bottom where it overlapped the bottom of the Giza map.

The four stared glumly at the result. "That's bloody great!" exclaimed Ron, drawing a stern look from Madam Pince. "The line's beyond the western edge of the Old Kingdom mastaba

field, and anyway, even if it went right through the tombs how would we know which was the right one? It could have been anywhere along that line!"

Harry frowned. "Hermione's reasoning is right. I'm sure of it! There's got to be something on the map or the star chart that we're missing, something else that'll guide us to the right spot."

"Aaaaaahhh," shouted Hermione.

"Miss Granger!" said Madam Pince sternly. "If you and your friends aren't able to conduct yourselves properly in the library, then I'll have no option but to send you out. Now please!"

"Sorry Madam Pince," said Hermione, looking shame-faced at the librarian. Then she turned back to the others, whispering excitedly. "You've hit the nail right on the head Harry. That's what the message meant - we've looked in the Amduat and found the Horn of the West, and we've found out that we've got to look for Djedi's tomb. The only thing we haven't followed is the other part of the message - The Horizon of Khufu will be our guide - we've got to use that to find the right spot!"

"But what's the Horizon of Khufu?" asked Ron.

"Let's see if we can find a reference to it," said Hermione, jumping quickly, but quietly, out of her chair and running to the library door. "You stay here, I'll check the Egypt books up in the common room."

Fifteen minutes later, Hermione came back into the library, smiling broadly. "I've found it. The ancient Egyptians called the Great Pyramid the Horizon of Khufu. We've got to use the Great Pyramid to find the right place."

"How do we do that Hermione?" asked Harry.

"Ginny," said Hermione. "Draw another line, this time from the exact centre of the Great Pyramid across to the first line you drew. Make sure it cuts the line at right-angles."

Ginny again leaned over the table and drew the second line, then leaned back and looked at the spot where the line intersected the first one. "There's nothing there," she said sadly.

"We must be doing this wrong," said Ron.

"I don't think so Ron," said Hermione. "The intersection is on the section of the map that we expected, but it's just a bit further west than the western-most tomb shown in the Old Kingdom mastaba field - about a hundred yards further to the west."

"Perhaps Sinistra's spell is not very accurate then," said Ginny.

"Or maybe the Egyptologists made a mistake when they drew this diagram," added Ron.

Hermione shook her head. "No, I don't think there's anything wrong. Whatever I may think about the Egyptologists, their archaeological expertise and accuracy is beyond doubt. The only thing that this tells me is that the Egyptologists haven't found all the Old Kingdom tombs yet. I think that there's a tomb right where those two lines intersect - and I bet it'll be Djedi's tomb! As above, so below."

"Let's mark the position on the map," said Harry, "and we can use it to look for the tomb when we go there."

"We'd better take our buckets and spades then," said Ron grinning. "We'll have a bloody great load of sand to shift if we're going to find the tomb."

They all laughed, but Hermione's expression turned grim after a few moments. "We might have found where the entry to the Duat is, but we've still got a lot of work to do before we go there."

"Why?" asked Harry. "We now know all we want to know don't we?"

"No Harry, we don't," said Hermione shaking her head. "We'll need to read the rest of the Amduat so that we can see what to expect when we get there. And from what little I saw in those pages, I don't think we'll be going on any picnic! And not only that, we need to look at those spells that Ginny wrote down from the Pyramid of Unas. We have to try to work out how and when they have to be used."

"You're right as usual," said Harry gloomily. "And we also need to try to work out how we're going to use this." He pulled the Eye of Horus from beneath his cloak and showed it to the others. They sat silently looking at the beautiful and enigmatic Eye, wondering what they'd be facing in the not too distant future.

"I wonder what Professor Dumbledore wants?" asked Ginny as she and the others turned into the corridor leading to his office the following day.

"I don't know Ginny," said Harry as they went up the spiral staircase to his office.

They walked into the office and suddenly stopped, gazing at the smiling faces of Professor Dumbledore, the grand master and Margot.

"Margot!" they all shouted, running over to the beautiful girl, stopping just in front of her, smiling but unsure how to proceed.

"Margot's feeling a lot better now," said Jules. "She'll tell you all about it, no doubt, but she seems to have made a miraculous recovery!"

Hermione was the first to reach out and hug Margot tightly, followed by Ginny and then Harry. The French girl had tears in her eyes as Ron approached her, gazing at the look of wonder and happiness on the redheaded boy's face. He wasn't as demonstrative as his other three friends, he never had been when it came to such matters, but he reached out and held Margot's hand in his, squeezing gently, which was his way of showing his feelings towards the girl.

Margot looked down shyly, and then back up into Ron's sparkling eyes. "I have to tell you something. I have to speak to you all."

"You four go back up to the common room," said Dumbledore, smiling happily, "and don't be late for your next learning session this afternoon."

"What happened?" asked Ginny as the five sat in the corner of Gryffindor common room beneath the window in the corner.

"I'm so sorry at the way I reacted towards you all," said Margot. "I just couldn't help myself."

"We know Margot," said Hermione. "Your grandfather told us all about the Seers' Curse. But how did you manage to get over it? Your grandfather said that he hadn't been able to help you."

"Well, first of all, I haven't got over it - at least not completely. He just told me how to cope with it and face up to things. He made me realise that I'd be the poorer if I lost your friendship. I now know that I was being very silly when I tried to shut you all out. And he told me that I've still got to help you with your quests."

"He?" asked Harry.

Margot grinned. "Jesus. He came to me in a dream yesterday. He spoke to me and did something to my mind, something that's helped me enormously with the curse."

Ron reached out and held her hand once more and whispered, "He spoke to us last year."

"Yes Ron," said Margot. "He told me that you all knew him. But he also told me something about the quest you're about to go on. He said that I'd be your anchor - somehow I'm needed to help you understand things and survive the journey. But I don't know what he meant by that. Do you know where you have to go yet?"

"We've found the way into the Duat Margot," said Ginny. "But we need to get things together in our heads before we go there."

Margot nodded, looking sadly at them all. "Yes - he said that it will be your most difficult quest up to now."

"Well it's great to get you back," said Harry. "You can help us with the things we need to understand about the Duat - perhaps that's what Jesus meant."

"Perhaps Harry," she replied. "But he spoke about matters of life and death."

The four glanced at each other, feeling uncomfortable. "Are you still able to see into the future?" asked Hermione.

"He told me that my gift wasn't affected by his spell, and I'd still have dreams about your quests."

Ron lifted the sombre mood. "Well there's only one dream I've got at the moment - it's about all that food down in the Great Hall. Come on, it's time for lunch."

Two days later, Harry, Ron and Hermione sat sullenly in the Potions classroom, feeling unhappy that Dumbledore had insisted that they attend to keep up with the more practical aspects of the subject. Snape was his usual condescending self as he prepared to start the

lesson, relishing the prospect of finding out just how much the three erstwhile absentees didn't know.

He looked up as Professor Dumbledore came into the room with a smiling Margot at his side. The rest of the students gazed at her with a mixture of desire, envy, antagonism, admiration and recognition, depending on which side of the room they sat. Needless to say, the first three emotions came from the Slytherin end of the room.

"Professor Snape," said the headmaster. "Would you mind if Margot sat in on this lesson? She's keen to see how a proper Potions lesson is conducted at the school."

"Of course not Headmaster," he replied, looking pleased for once. "She can sit next to Weasley; it seems that Longbottom has suddenly come down with a very mysterious ailment and he's up at the hospital."

Ron grinned as Margot took the seat beside him. He leaned over and whispered in her ear, "Don't be too upset when Snape has a go at us - it's nothing personal." He thought for a few moments and then whispered, "Well - it is personal, actually, but don't you worry about it."

After the headmaster left the room, Snape grinned at the students. "Today, we're going to prepare one of the more difficult potions, so we'll see how much you've learned." He grinned wickedly at the four friends. "If everything goes according to plan, and it should since Longbottom hasn't graced us with his presence, you should leave the room after two hours all in one piece."

Harry glanced at Hermione and raised his eyes to the ceiling. "I saw that Potter," said Snape, still grinning. "You'll be the one to test the new girl's potion when it's ready."

Ron cast angry glances at the Slytherins, scowling at their laughter and rude gestures.

"Today," Snape continued, "we'll be brewing the Fading Potion. If brewed correctly, it will cause a part of your body to fade and vanish for about an hour. I want you to brew the potion so that it makes your left hand fade and vanish." He grinned evilly at Harry. "And you needn't worry - your hand will still be there, you just won't be able to see it. Unless, of course, you do something wrong - then, any part of you may vanish, and there have been instances of the invisible appendage not making a reappearance - ever! So be warned - the ingredients are up on the board, and you'll find the correct brewing sequences and times in your textbooks. You may now start, and no conferring!"

"Will you be ok with this Margot?" whispered Ron.

"Five points from Gryffindor," shouted Snape. "I said no conferring Weasley!"

"But Professor..." started Ron.

"Another five points from Gryffindor! Get on with it Weasley."

Ron scowled at Snape, knowing it was futile to argue, and set his cauldron up on the table. Hermione kept glancing at Margot, hoping that she'd be able to cope since she'd had little practical experience at Potions brewing - her grandfather had been the first to admit that Potions wasn't his best subject. However, she was pleasantly surprised at the way Margot

started her potion. Obviously, she'd retained the essential information in her memory and was confidently cutting up the lionfish scales on her chopping board. She grinned as Margot added the ingredients to her cauldron, and poured the correct amount of spiders' bladder into the pot. Finally, she took a cutting from the nail of her left hand and added it to the bubbling mixture, before sitting back in her seat to wait.

An hour later, Snape took his usual stroll between the students' desks, looking at the colour and consistency of each of the brews. "Right!" he shouted. "They should all be ready now. Potter, come to the front of the class."

Harry walked slowly up to Snape's desk, glancing down at the mixture now cooling in Margot's cauldron.

"Miss Denarnaud, pour a measure of your potion into a small beaker if you please, and hand it to Potter."

Margot did as she was asked, and walked to the front of the class, winking at Harry as she handed him the beaker. Harry looked at the green-coloured brew and closed his eyes as he drank it all down in one go. "Ugghhh," he gasped, pulling a face.

"Another five points from Gryffindor," said Snape. "I've told you about the histrionics before Potter." He looked at his watch, smirking. "One more minute and we'll see how good you are Miss Denarnaud."

Everyone in the room looked expectantly at Harry's left hand, waiting for something to happen. Then, slowly, his left hand began to fade and soon vanished completely.

"Humph," said Snape. "You should be sitting on the Slytherin side of the room Miss Denarnaud, you're far too good to be with the Gryffindors. Sit back down Potter. Crabbe, give a measure of your potion to Goyle. Let's see how well you've done."

Goyle drank the potion, looking nervously at Crabbe. After a few minutes, it was the Gryffindors' turn to laugh as Goyle's head slowly faded and disappeared.

"You really should do something about your dandruff Crabbe," said Snape, shaking his head in disdain. "Don't worry Goyle, your head will return to your shoulders in an hour's time."

"That's a pity!" shouted Ron, unable to prevent himself getting in a dig. "Goyle looks a lot prettier without his head!"

"That will do!" shouted Snape, trying to quell the hilarity of the Gryffindors. "Another five points from Gryffindor."

"Don't worry about the five points Ron, it was worth it," grinned Harry.

"All right everyone," Snape shouted above the laughter. "The rest of you give a beaker of your potion to the person sitting next to you. Oh and you'd better wait for a few minutes for me to check that nothing really nasty happens to you."

Five minutes later, the students filed out of the room, almost all with missing left hands, but there were a few missing heads and various other appendages. "What do you think of that Margot?" asked Hermione.

"Very interesting Hermione, very interesting indeed. I think I've missed out on a lot over the last few years. Oh, grandfather's wonderful, and he's a very good teacher, but I really wish I could have been part of a class like that, seeing how everybody reacts to various happenings. Do you and the Slytherins always act like that towards each other?"

"No Margot," said Ron grinning. "Only when we have to be together in the same place at the same time."

The following day, Draco Malfoy eased his way into the library under his invisibility cloak and glanced around. He was disappointed that the five friends weren't there, but sat quietly at the end of the table they usually sat at, hoping that they'd soon make an appearance.

A few minutes later, his disappointment vanished as they walked in and sat at the furthest end of the table. Hermione placed a thin folder on the table and Ginny placed a piece of parchment beside it. Draco stretched over the table, being careful to keep himself completely covered by the cloak, and read the title on the folder, 'The Amduat,' he thought. 'What the hell's that? And what's the strange writing on that piece of parchment?' He settled back down to listen and learn.

"Well we've read everything," said Harry, "and we've done everything we can to be prepared for this."

"When is your Portkey timed for tomorrow?" asked Margot.

"Bill said it was timed for tomorrow afternoon," replied Ron. "He's placed it to the west of the Great Pyramid, behind one of the large mastabas in the Old Kingdom necropolis."

"Have you got your bucket and spade ready Ron?" asked Harry, grinning at his friend.

"Ha, ha Harry. I think I'll just sit back and let you do all the work."

Hermione shook her head sadly. "We've worked out when to use the first eleven of those spells from the Pyramid of Unas, but I wish we could find out when to use the last one. Read it out again, Ginny - my English translation, I mean."

Ginny picked up her parchment and read the twelfth spell. "*Guard your Star self, O lion, for which the command levitates, that the Child of Light will appear in glory in the morning.*"

Hermione thought deeply for a few minutes, but then let out a loud breath, again shaking her head. "I just can't see where it fits in! The first eleven are obviously to do with opening each gate to the Hours of the Duat, but this spell is different."

"But it must be for opening a gate Hermione," said Harry. "There are twelve hours of the Duat, and so twelve gates, so it must be something to do with it."

"We can only hope we find out as we go through the Duat Harry," she replied.

"I don't relish that," Ginny suppressed a shiver. "If what the Amduat talks about is true, the labyrinth under Rennes-le-Chateau was a dawdle compared to this place!"

"I can't see that it's true Ginny," said Hermione. "Most of the Amduat is plainly religious metaphor for the passage of the soul from the dead body to heaven. It can't possible be literally what we'll find there."

"I hope you're right," she replied.

"What about the Eye Harry?" asked Ron. "Have you worked out how and when you have to use it yet?"

Harry shook his head. "No Ron, there's nothing that I could find in the Amduat. Oh, it talks a lot about it, but it doesn't say anything about its specific use."

Margot, who had remained very quiet while the four made their final plans, cleared her throat to get their attention, and then spoke very quietly. "You must be very careful tomorrow. I know Hermione doesn't think the Amduat tells what you'll actually find there, and I hope she's right, but I can't help feeling that it's going to be a very dangerous place. Please take good care of yourselves, I've just found you all again and I don't want to lose you once more."

A tear escaped and ran down her cheek as she finished speaking. Ron gave her a rueful smile and squeezed her hand. "Don't worry Margot, we'll be careful. We're always careful, aren't we?" he said looking up at the other three.

"Ron's right Margot," said Ginny. "We'll be back, don't you worry about that!"

Ron once more turned the conversation away from the gloom. "Are we going to look for Djedi's tomb as soon as we get there?"

"Yes Ron," Harry replied. "And once we find it we need to see how we can get inside."

"But don't forget," said Hermione, "we can't enter until sunset."

"You said that before," said Ron. "Why've we got to wait until it gets dark? I'd rather go into a tomb during the daylight if it's all the same to you!"

Hermione smiled. "I just get the feeling, and Professor Dumbledore agrees with me, that we have to follow the path of the Hunter exactly. We've got to enter the Duat at the beginning of the first hour of darkness and work our way through to emerge from the underworld with the first light of dawn."

"Well I suppose it's going to be dark down there anyway," said Ron, "whether we go in during the day or night."

"Are you sure you're all ready for this?" asked Harry, placing his hand, palm down, in the middle of the table.

"I'm ready," said Hermione with conviction, laying her hand on top of Harry's.

"And so am I," said Ron and Ginny together, placing their hands on top of the others'.

"Me too," said Margot quietly, putting her hand on top of the pile.

"As above, so below," said Hermione. They grinned at each other and then stood and walked out of the library.

Draco let out a quiet breath when he was alone. He grimaced ruefully, thinking to himself, 'Alone. That's all I'll ever be! I'll never experience the sort of close friendship that those five experience. Potter! He gets all the luck.'

He pondered long and hard; then once more, an unsolicited thought entered his head. 'I hope that Ginny'll be safe. She seemed nervous about that Duat place where they're going. And anyway, how can a girl as lovely as her be a Weasley!'

Draco got up from his chair, careful not to make a noise, and crept back out into the corridor behind a third year student, who'd considerately but inadvertently, opened the door for him. But Draco didn't follow his well-worn path to the owlery to send a message to his father. Instead, he walked slowly back to the Slytherin common room where he didn't bother to stop to talk to Crabbe and Goyle, who'd been wearing a permanent grin on his face since getting his head back. He went straight up to his dormitory and flopped down on his bed, trying to sort out the confusion in his head, the sort of confusion to which he was wholly unaccustomed.

Voldemort sat on his throne in his cave, looking at his inner circle as they discussed the planned assault on the canyon at Qumran the following night. He signalled to Wormtail, who scurried up to him with his head bent low. "Yes master?"

"Have you tested all the signalling devices Wormtail? I don't want any mistakes tomorrow night. I'll need to keep in touch with my squad leaders."

"Yes, my Lord," he replied. "Travis and I tested them all this morning."

"Good. But if any of them lets me down, I'll know who to blame!"

"They won't fail you master."

Voldemort looked back up at the group at the centre of the cave. "Have you nearly finished your briefing Lucius?"

"Yes my Lord, I've just given everyone their positions for the start of the attack."

"Lucius, come here for a moment will you."

Lucius walked over to the throne, wondering what the Dark Lord wanted, and feeling a little nervous when he saw the scowl on his face.

"Why haven't you heard from our friend at the school Lucius? Before we go to Qumran tomorrow, I want you to pay him a little visit and find out what he's been doing. I know that Potter's up to something so why haven't I heard anything about it? I'm not pleased Lucius!"

"I'll see him straight after our meeting my Lord," Lucius replied, bowing to his master.

That night, Margot dreamed, and she reached the place of her worst nightmare...

'She watched as her four friends walked cautiously through a dark and frightening place, looking around them fearfully, trying to detect the direction from which the next attack would come. She watched, rooted to the spot, as they walked on and disappeared into the darkness.

After a while she was able to move and she hurried after her friends. When she saw them, a cry of despair escaped from her taut throat. She lifted her hands over her mouth and gasped as the tears streamed down her anguished face, looking at the four prone figures as they lay, unmoving and lifeless, on the cold, hard floor.'

She woke with a start, crying out in her agony of remorse, her face wet with the tears that still escaped from her lovely eyes.

"Margot," said Ginny gently as she leaned over her friend. "Whatever's the matter?"

"Ginny, I have to speak to you and the others. I have to tell you something and I have to tell you now, before it's too late. You mustn't go through the Duat this afternoon. You have to stay here!"

That afternoon, the four friends waited with their protectors outside the main entrance to the school, waiting for the time when the Portkey would be activated. Margot looked at the worried faces of her friends, and wondered whether she should have told them about her dream. She had somehow known that her warning wouldn't prevent them going on their quest through the Duat. She tried to suppress a sob as she waited beside her grandfather and the headmaster, but failed. She ran over to her friends and caught around them. "You'll be all right. What I saw might not be what it appeared to be. Please look after yourselves - promise me?"

"We promise Margot," they replied, trying to think positively about the quest.

Margot stepped back towards her grandfather, but turned once more and looked at Ron. Ron looked into Margot's eyes, seeing the love, feeling his own love for the beautiful girl. A sob escaped from her lips once more as she flung herself at Ron, closing her arms around his neck and clinging to him tightly, not wanting to let go, fearful that she'd lose him. "Be careful and come back safely, mon petit chevalier rouge," she whispered into his ear.

Ron eased Margot away from him slightly and looked deep into her lovely eyes, savouring the moment as though it would be his last. Then he kissed her gently on the lips, thrilling to the wonderful feelings it gave him, excitement running through his veins as she responded.

They broke apart when Harry touched them both on their shoulders. "It's nearly time," he said gently.

Ron took one last look at Margot before he disappeared with the others. "I'll be back Margot. After what just happened, all hell won't be able to keep me from you." His voice faded into the distance.

Margot turned and buried her head in her grandfather's chest, sobbing uncontrollably. Jules looked worriedly at Dumbledore and shook his head sadly. "I hope they'll come back safely," he whispered low enough so that Margot couldn't hear.

Katie and Oliver sat close together in the Cave of Spells, talking quietly together. It was their way of relieving the boredom of their watch. Nothing had happened for a long time, and the tension of several weeks ago had turned to a false sense of security among most of the Aurors.

"Dave's worried about the apparent apathy running rampant through the teams," said Oliver, looking worriedly at Katie. "He's asked all the team leaders to try to keep up morale, but it's difficult when we're all stuck here in this awful heat with nothing to do."

"I'd rather have nothing to do than face 'You Know Who'," replied Katie.

"I know Katie, but you try telling that to the others. I can't blame them really, even though they get a break every few weeks, and it's hard for them to keep up their full concentration and alertness all the time."

Katie smiled and squeezed Oliver's hand, leaning close to whisper into his ear, "It's a good job we've got something to distract us though, isn't it?"

Oliver coloured up, but smiled at his girlfriend, looking deeply into her lovely blue eyes. "I wish..." he began, but looked up in alarm as he heard a fluttering from outside the cave.

They both looked in surprise as an owl flew in through the cave entrance, a rolled-up parchment tied to its leg. The owl landed beside Katie and hooted. Katie tickled the feathers behind its ears and untied the message, then poured some water into the palm of her hand for the owl to drink before it flew back out.

Katie unrolled the parchment and read the message, gasping as she absorbed its content. "It's from Professor Dumbledore, and he says he's got some good news for me!" She looked up into Oliver's smiling eyes. "My parents must have been in touch with him - he's going to tell me who my father is Oliver, I just know it."

She hugged Oliver excitedly, but then pulled back, a look of horror on her face. "But we won't have our next break for another two weeks! I don't know if I can wait that long Oliver!"

"I'll speak to Dave," he said quietly. "I'm sure he'll let us go to Hogwarts, even if it's only for a few hours."

"Oh will you Oliver?"

"You stay here Katie, I'll see if I can find him." Oliver got up and scrambled down the ladder, which had been placed from the top of the pile of rubble up to the mouth of the cave, and set off down towards the canyon entrance where he knew Dave would be at this time of day.

Katie waited anxiously for Oliver to return, looking out of the cave opening down towards the bend in the canyon. Her heart jumped when he came running into view, smiling and waving to her, gesturing for her to climb down to the canyon bottom.

"He's given us permission to go?" she asked excitedly as she ran up to Oliver.

"Well not exactly," he said, his smile fading slightly. "But he said that you can go, as long as you're back for our second watch this evening. I'll have to stay here to look after the team."

Katie's face dropped initially as she thought of going somewhere without Oliver. They hadn't been apart at all since they'd got together, and she didn't want to leave him, even for a few hours, but then she brightened. "I'll be back by tonight Oliver, I promise." She smiled slyly and lowered her voice. "I know how cold you get at night when I'm not there to warm you up."

Oliver laughed and hugged her. "Come on, I'll walk you down to the Portkey site. Now don't hang around - go straight to Hogwarts via the Floo network, speak to Dumbledore, say hello to your father, and then come back to me. Do you hear?"

"I hear you Oliver," she said gently, catching his hand as they walked down the canyon. A little later, Oliver waved as his girlfriend disappeared at the Portkey site. He turned and walked back to his team, feeling suddenly alone and not really caring for the sensation.

Dumbledore sat in his office facing the remnants of his close advisors - McGonagall, and Flitwick. Sirius and the others had gone to Rostau and Snape was out on a spying mission.

"I hope that Margot's dream wasn't accurate headmaster," said McGonagall worriedly.

"She's not often wrong Minerva," he replied sadly. "I just hope she's misinterpreted what she saw." He looked at Flitwick and shook his head, knowing that what he'd just said wasn't very likely.

At that moment, Katie walked out of the fireplace in a rush of blue flame. "Oh I'm sorry Professor, I've come at a bad time."

"No, no Katie, come in and sit down. We've just finished our meeting."

McGonagall and Flitwick walked out of the room, and Dumbledore waved Katie to a seat in front of his desk.

"I had your owl Professor. You said you had some good news for me?"

"Yes Katie. Your parents have been in touch with me, and they want me to tell you about your real father. They've asked me to tell you that they're sorry that they haven't been able to tell you before now. It seems that your visit did the trick."

"I've got Oliver to thank for that," she said, looking at Dumbledore expectantly. "Who is he Professor?"

"Before I tell you Katie, I'd like to say something to you. You know, of course, that your father doesn't know that you exist, and it's going to come as a big shock to him when he finds out."

Katie nodded.

"Would you like me to tell him before you see him? Prepare the way, so to speak?"

"No, I think I'd like to tell him myself Professor Dumbledore. I want to see the expression on his face when he finds out."

"You realise, of course, that he may not react to finding out about you the way you hope he'll react? You may get hurt if he seems... well, shocked and confused by your revelation."

Katie lost her smile momentarily. "I... I suppose so Professor. But I'm willing to take that risk."

"Very well Katie. As long as you're prepared for that possibility."

"Professor," said Katie quietly. "Before you tell me who he is. I can only stay for a few minutes and then I have to get back to Qumran - I was only allowed to come here on those terms. Will... will I be able to meet him before I have to leave?"

Dumbledore smiled as he shook his head. "I'm afraid not Katie. You see, he's away from the school on a mission, and I'm not sure when he'll be back."

Katie nodded, her expression sad. "Very well Professor, will you tell me who he is now?"

Katie held her breath as Dumbledore nodded and smiled. "This may come as a shock to you Katie. Are you ready for this?"

"Yes Professor Dumbledore," she replied tensely, closing her eyes. "I've been ready for a long time now."

Chapter 12 The Duat

The sun beat down on ancient Rostau, causing Bill to screw up his eyes against the glare reflected from the Old Kingdom mastabas that dotted the desert to the west of the Great Pyramid on the Giza Plateau. He was sitting on the sandy ground, waiting patiently for the group to materialise, squinting in the direction of the pyramid, wary in case any tourists came his way, or worse - any Death Eaters.

He stood as he saw the familiar group materialise in front of him, and smiled as he walked over to them, but his smile faded when he saw the serious look on all their faces. He raised an eyebrow questioningly at Charlie, who frowned and shook his head.

The four youngsters looked up at the Great Pyramid towering above them. "That is so amazing!" exclaimed Hermione, her eyes full of wonder. "How on earth did they build that?"

"Well I don't think they used buckets and spades Hermione," said Ron grinning. "Come on - let's see if we can find Djedi's tomb."

"Just hang on a minute Ron," said Hermione. "I want to take a look around first - we're standing right in the middle of history you know!" She looked into the middle distance towards the other two pyramids, shaking her head in wonder.

Her three friends grinned, never ceasing to be amazed at the rapt gaze she reserved for anything that fascinated her keen sense of the enigmatic. She looked up once more at the unfathomable mystery that grew out of the desert, rising like a beacon, a testimony to the skill and hidden knowledge of the ancient Egyptians.

She dragged her gaze back down to the ground and walked towards a very large mastaba, looking at the inscription painted on one of the pillars that supported the iron grille that protected the internal beauty of the tomb. She looked at the map of the Giza Plateau and breathed, "Hesayuru - grand vizier of the Pharaoh Khufu. It's nearly five thousand years old!"

"Come on Hermione," shouted Sirius. "We'd better get started; the sooner we find the tomb the better."

Hermione reluctantly walked back to the others and again consulted the map, pointing into the desert beyond the edge of the plateau. "It's about three hundred yards in that direction."

Sirius directed the adults to walk on both sides of the four teens as they started out across the sandy ground. After about two hundred yards, Hermione called a halt. "This is the edge of the mastaba field, or at least as far as they've excavated. Djedi's tomb should be about a hundred yards further on, and directly in line with the centre of the Great Pyramid."

They all looked back at the Great Pyramid, checking that they stood at the exact centre of the western slope. "I'll stay here," said Ceri, "while you pace out a hundred yards. You can line me up with the centre of the pyramid to make sure you're on the right line."

Ron strode out into the desert, counting the yards as he walked. The others walked along with him, turning back every now and again to make sure that Ron stayed on track.

"One hundred!" said Ron as he stood looking down at the ground beneath his feet. "Nothing here!"

"I didn't expect there would be Ron," said Hermione. "I didn't think you'd land on the exact place where the tomb is, but the spot we've marked on the map should be fairly close to where we're standing. Come on, let's spread out and see if we can spot anything. You stay there as a marker Ron."

The three walked slowly around Ron, looking down at the ground. Ron, meanwhile, put his hands in his robe pockets and started to whistle the Dione Warwick classic, 'Walk On By', drawing giggles from his friends.

Harry leaned close to Hermione, whispering in her ear, "It's great to see him in this mood. I think Margot's lifted his ego almost as high as the Great Pyramid."

Hermione laughed. "That's the power of love, Harry."

"Here's something," said Ginny, looking down at the ground. "There's nothing to see, but it felt like I walked into a slight dip in the ground."

The others gathered around. "There's definitely a slight depression in the sand here," said Harry. "Come on Ron, bucket and spade time!"

The protectors moved into a protective circle around the four as they started to shovel the sand away from the slight dip in the ground with their hands. Before long, Ron stopped shovelling. "I just felt a rock or something. Come on, start digging here."

Soon, they'd unearthed the corner of a large granite capstone, and they moved along the sides, heaving away the sand until they'd uncovered it all. It was about four feet wide and eight feet long, but there weren't any markings or writing visible on its stark surface.

"This must be it, I'm sure of it," said Hermione. "You can see it isn't a natural rock, the sides are much too square. Come on, let's dig a bit deeper."

Fifteen minutes later, they'd exposed the whole of the capstone, which was about a foot thick and seemed to be resting on the bare natural rock of the plateau.

"We need to shift this, I think," said Hermione. "We'll have to take a look inside. There's nothing on the outside that tells us whose tomb it is. What do you think?"

"I think it's going to be too heavy for us to shift," said Harry, turning towards his godfather about fifteen yards away. "Sirius, do you think some of you can help us to move this capstone?"

Sirius signalled to Bill, Charlie and Remus and the four walked over to the youngsters. Sirius looked at the slab of granite from all angles. "I think if we concentrate our effort at the far corner, we might just be able to slide it to one side slightly. It might be enough for you to see what's inside."

The four adults, aided by Harry and Ron, heaved with all their strength at the corner of the slab, pushing mightily to try to slide it over. Inch by inch they started to make progress, the

low sound of grating of the granite capstone on bare limestone giving them the encouragement to push even harder. Slowly, the dark interior began to appear below the granite slab until a triangular opening of about two feet across was exposed.

"That should be enough," said Ginny, kneeling on the ground beside the opening and shining her wand into the darkness. The men and boys slumped onto the sand, sweating and breathing heavily.

Hermione knelt down beside Ginny and peered inside. "Move your wand a little to the left Ginny."

"There's some writing here I think," she said, straining to look underneath the slab, "but I can't quite see it. Can you move it over a bit more?"

The male members of the party all groaned, but stood up and took their former positions at the corner of the capstone. Ten minutes later, they'd managed to move the slab another foot or so and then flopped back down to the ground to rest.

"It's a cartouche," said Hermione excitedly as she again looked inside the opening. "Let's see that parchment you wrote at the Temple of Hathor, Ginny."

Ginny handed her the parchment, and Hermione placed it inside the opening, alongside the cartouche. She compared the two and shouted, "They're the same! This is Djedi's tomb!"

The two girls sat down beside the boys. "What else did you see in there Hermione?" asked Harry.

"The cartouche is on a white limestone block of stone," she replied. "We're going to have to get this capstone off and try to move that block as well."

Loud groans were heard, making all the girls grin, although they were careful not to show their amusement in the face of some very odd and hostile stares coming from the male members of the group. "Much more of this," groaned Ron, "and I'll be too knackered to go anywhere, let alone into the Duat!"

"Come on," Harry forced a grin. "Let's get to it."

Half an hour later, the granite capstone lay to the side, and the limestone slab was fully exposed, as was the lack of fitness of the males, except for Harry, who walked around the limestone block examining the sides. He saw that the slab was surrounded by a sort of narrow enclosure, cut from the bare rock of the plateau, on which the granite slab had rested. The enclosure was about four feet deep around the sides of the slab, and he looked closely at the far corner. "There's a sort of portcullis thing on the side of the slab. It looks as if it has to be raised up, somehow."

Hermione walked over and looked down at the odd structure, noting the grooves cut into the rock. "I think you're right Harry, we definitely have to lift it - you can see the grooves in the limestone."

Ginny lay on the sand and stretched her arms down to cup her hands beneath the portcullis. She took a deep breath and heaved upwards with all her might. The portcullis rose above the

limestone slab, moving easily in the ancient grooves cut millennia ago by what must have been a master builder. Ginny sat back up grinning, wiping her hands. "That's how it's done boys - easy!" She got some very black looks as she stood up, gazing at the boys with disdain.

Harry moved to look into the darkness exposed by the removal of the portcullis, stretching his wand into the opening. "There're stone steps leading down. There's just enough room for us to squeeze inside, I think."

He went to step into the enclosure, but Hermione put her hand on his arm. "Not yet Harry. We have to wait until sunset, remember?"

Harry stepped back out and nodded. The adults stood back up and moved away, working out where they'd best be positioned in case any Death Eaters turned up. The four youngsters, meanwhile, sat at the side of Djedi's tomb looking up at the sky and settled down to wait while the sun crawled slowly, but inexorably, down towards the western horizon

Oliver waited impatiently at the Portkey site at the entrance to the canyon at Qumran. His team's night duty was due to start in about fifteen minutes, and he looked up at the darkening sky, knowing that the sun would be fully set within a few minutes. He heaved a sigh of relief when Katie appeared with a 'pop' and ran towards him, smiling.

They hugged tightly, both grinning with the pleasure of being together once more. "Did he tell you?" Oliver whispered into her ear.

"Yes, he did Oliver, and you'll never believe who it is," Katie whispered back.

Oliver eased her away, looking at her grinning face in the fading light, knowing that she was deliberately delaying telling him her father's name.

"Well?" he asked loudly.

Katie opened her mouth to tell him, but was interrupted by a loud explosion from outside the canyon. They both jumped and looked to see the sky streaked with the unmistakable bright yellow glow of a Whammo.

"Quick," shouted Dave Henson running up to them, the sounds of more explosions following him. "Get back up to the cave and get your team to take up a position right opposite. There's about two hundred Death Eaters outside the canyon and it won't be long before they get here. Tell two of the teams at the campsite to come down and help the two already here. That'll leave the team in the cave, you, and four others to guard the Spell Cave. I'll stay here."

Oliver grabbed Katie's hand as they sprinted into the canyon. They turned the final bend before coming to the cave area, and Oliver quickly spoke to two of the team leaders who were running in their direction. They ran up towards the campsite and forty Aurors quickly disappeared around the bend heading to help the two teams at the canyon entrance. Oliver quickly briefed the other five team leaders, including the one in the cave, and they all took up defensive positions in, around and opposite the entrance to the Cave of Spells, determined that the Death Eaters wouldn't get past them.

More loud explosions could be heard from the direction of the canyon entrance, and the sound of spells and curses soon filled the air. Oliver moved around his team standing among the rocks opposite the cave, speaking to them quietly, making sure that they were prepared for the coming fight. Then he moved back to his position alongside Katie, squeezing her hand and grinning at her, trying to calm her nerves.

For half an hour the battle raged at the canyon entrance, and Oliver tensed when he spotted someone come round the bend, running towards the cave area. He relaxed when he recognised Dave Henson, and walked out into the canyon to meet him, as did the other five team-leaders.

Dave was breathing heavily, and his forehead was streaked with sweat. "There's at least a couple of hundred of them," he gasped. "I want two more teams down at the canyon entrance to help us hold them off. The team in the cave can stay there, and you keep your team opposite Oliver. You other two deploy your Aurors around the bend in the canyon and pick off any Death Eaters who manage to break through our defences. Come on - move!"

Oliver watched Dave and the two teams disappear around the canyon bend as he walked back to his team, stopping to tell each of his Aurors what was going on. Then he went back to Katie, now crouching behind a tall rock, with John Ballot just to her left.

They looked grimly at each other as they heard the sounds of more explosions, spells and curses filtering up from the point of the Death Eater attack. They knew that it wouldn't be too long before they themselves were flung into the midst of the fighting, but they kept hoping that the others would be able to hold them off before that happened.

Harry and the other three felt tense and nervous as the sun's bottom edge touched the western horizon at ancient Rostau. They looked towards the inky blackness outlined by the raised portcullis and felt a ripple of fear run through them as their thoughts turned inevitably to the dream that Margot had told them about that morning.

They looked towards the protectors, who had now gathered in one spot and were talking animatedly among themselves. They looked in surprise as Bill started to become agitated, waving his arms in the air and looking angrily at the others. Charlie and Nadine stood with their heads bowed, looking gloomily down at the ground, holding hands. They saw Sirius nod, and then lead them all over to the four waiting at the side of Djedi's tomb.

Bill continued to appear angry, but also looked worried, as Sirius spoke also looking worried. "Harry, you don't need to do this. You four have done more than could have been expected of you, so it might be time to call it a day."

"Sirius is right," said Charlie. "It's too dangerous down there."

Bill weighed in, speaking passionately. "I've just heard about the dream. There's no way I'm letting you go down there. I know something about Egyptian myths and legends, and if you're going to face anything like that then it's best that you don't - believe me, it can get nasty! And what would mum and dad say if they knew you were taking Ginny down there Ron? Look, no one's going to blame you for giving up, especially when they hear that you've been told you're all going to die."

Ginny spoke quietly, "We have to do this Bill. I know you're worried, we all are, but it's our destiny. We have to do it."

"Harry!" Bill looked pleadingly towards him.

Harry glanced at his friends, and they nodded quietly. "If we don't complete the quests there'll only be one outcome. Voldemort will get stronger, and there's no doubt that he'll get hold of those spells eventually, and then we'll all die. No one will be able to stop him, not even Dumbledore. All of us will die, and not only us - there'll be countless numbers of people sacrificed to his mad ambitions." He shook his head sadly. "We know what Margot said, but we still have to go. We still have to try to get through the Duat somehow. There's just no alternative. We can't even think of giving up."

Bill's shoulders sagged in defeat as the last of the sun's rays disappeared. He walked over and held Ginny tightly to him, closing his eyes to prevent the tears running down his cheeks. Then he hugged Ron, Hermione and Harry. He slowly walked back, looking down at the ground dejectedly as first Sirius, and then Ceri, Nadine, Remus and finally Charlie hugged all four youngsters.

"You be very careful down there," said Sirius, his voice taut and sounding strange.

"We'll see you at dawn," said Harry, forcing a grin.

"Wait," said Ceri, walking back towards them. "Don't forget this." She handed Ron a large rucksack. "You might get a bit hungry and thirsty down there."

"Thanks Ceri," he replied.

"If all goes as we expect," said Hermione quietly, "we'll meet you somewhere over by the Sphinx as the first rays of the morning sun strike it."

Darkness quickly fell over ancient Rostau, and first Harry, followed by Ron, Hermione and finally Ginny squeezed through the narrow opening in the side of the limestone slab and disappeared below the ground.

Harry lit his wand as he cautiously walked down a long flight of stone steps, finally emerging into a low oblong tomb. The four stood at the side of a stone sarcophagus, bearing the hieroglyphic name, inside a cartouche, of Djedi. On the wall opposite, dancing eerily in the light of the four raised wands was a carving of the ibis-headed god, Thoth.

"Look," breathed Hermione quietly. "He's in the same pose as Jesus in the church, one arm raised and the other pointing down at the ground - as above, so below."

"But look at his raised hand, Hermione," said Ginny. "He's pointing over to the far side of the tomb."

They looked at the direction in which Thoth pointed and saw a low archway, covered in hieroglyphics, leading darkly into what appeared to be a passageway.

"The Duat must be that way," said Hermione, glancing at the others.

"Come on," said Ron, walking towards the archway. "Let's get started with this."

Ron led the way into the tunnel, followed by Harry and then the two girls. Harry quickly stepped up alongside Ron and they grinned at each other as they continued, wands raised, down the tunnel.

After walking for five minutes, they stepped into a small antechamber. They all looked around in amazement at the walls and ceiling, which were covered in hieroglyphic writing. In front of them, guarding the only place where there wasn't any writing, were two statues, both in the same pose as Thoth in Djedi's tomb with one arm raised and the other lowered. Between the two statues was a large bronze door, completely unadorned and without any visible means of opening it. At the centre of the door was a depression in the shape of an eye. Harry walked over to the door and took out the Eye of Horus from his robes. He held it to the side of the depression and looked at his friends when he saw that the two shapes matched exactly.

"That must be the first gate," breathed Hermione. "The entry into the Duat."

"The eye must fit in that depression," said Ron. "Maybe that's how we open it."

Hermione pulled out the parchment containing the twelve spells from her robe and looked at the first one. "We probably have to say this spell as well," she said. "Place the Eye in the door Harry - let's try it."

"What does that spell say again Hermione?" asked Ron.

"Well I translate it as ... O Osiris activity of the Sacred Eye of Horus, there will open for you your Tunnel Opening - god's Star lustre of the South and god's Star lustre of the North."

Harry pushed the Eye of Horus into the depression and heard it click when he pushed it fully in. Hermione stepped up alongside Harry and held his hand, then she held up the parchment in front of them. "Point your hand at the Eye and say this spell Harry."

Hermione also pointed her hand at the Eye and they both said the first spell...

'USIR UDJAT HOR UPI EN EK RE EK---BIA NETJER SHEMOU BIA NETJER MEHU'

They stood back as they heard several faint clicks. Then the Eye of Horus raised itself out of the depression and floated slowly back to the astonished Harry. He reached out and caught hold of it and then put it back into his robe pocket.

They waited for a few moments, and then held their breath as the bronze gate silently swung open. They looked at each other uncertainly as they stared into the darkness beyond the gate.

"This is it," said Hermione. "The first hour of the Duat. Come on, let's go in and see what's there."

Harry and Ron were the first through the gate, stepping into the silent darkness. Then dim light filtered down from the ceiling of a large empty chamber, but it was not sufficient for them to see to the furthest end of the room. They stood just beyond the gate, trying to make

out what lay ahead in the shadowy reaches of the room. They all jumped at the sound of the gate closing behind them, and they knew that there was no turning back.

"There's something moving over there," Ginny whispered, the quiver in her voice betraying the fear she felt. In the gloom they could all just detect movement, no more than a slight shifting in the shadows, but they all heard the shuffling sound that accompanied the movement. Then the shadow became clearer. The girls gasped when they were able to see the shape more clearly.

Moving in and out of the shadows, shuffling along in an odd sort of way, was a very large man, or at least that's what they thought it was at first, before they saw the head. It seemed that the man hadn't seen the four youngsters standing by the closed gate; he just kept shuffling along the back wall of the room.

"What sort of a head is that?" whispered Hermione. "I've never seen a head like that before."

"I think it's some sort of animal," Harry whispered back. "But he's got the body of a man."

Ron leaned over and whispered, "He's walking as if he's got a poker stuck up his ar..."

"Ron!" exclaimed Hermione and Ginny quietly. Harry laughed nervously.

"What!" whispered Ron. "I think it must be Seth - he's probably walking like that because Horus cut off his left... whatsit."

All three grinned at Ron's attempt to ease the tension they all felt. "I think he's going," said Harry quietly. The man, or whatever it was, shuffled into the far corner of the chamber and disappeared into the shadows. The four breathed a bit easier when the shuffling sound faded and finally stopped.

"Maybe there's another door or something over in the corner," said Ginny.

Harry opened his mouth to answer but stopped as the chamber was suddenly filled with light, but it was no ordinary light. The quality of the glow was amazing, enabling the four to see the tiniest details in the chamber. Then, at the far end, a much brighter glow appeared, so bright that it was difficult to look at it directly. Then, out of the brightness walked two glowing figures, a man and a woman, dressed in the apparel of the ancient Egyptians, just like the paintings and carvings they'd seen on the walls of the tombs and temples they'd visited.

The two figures stopped at the centre of the room and looked directly at the nervous teens, who looked back in amazement at the sight of their regal faces. Their features were almost identical, but at the same time very different. The man's gaze was strong and commanding, yet his eyes held a gentle quality. His pose was that of an athlete, broad shoulders tapering down to a slim waist around which rested an ornate belt.

The woman was beautiful, her full lips turned slightly upwards at the corners as she smiled. Her large dark brown eyes were as gentle as the man's, but were full of compassion and love as she looked towards the four.

Harry glanced at his friends and then walked slowly towards the centre of the chamber, followed by the others. When they were no more than five yards away, the man held up his

hand, gesturing them to stop. Then he spoke, his resonant voice echoing throughout the chamber.

"Who seeks entry into the Duat?"

Harry answered nervously, "The Anima Summas and their helpers."

The man smiled. "There is much for you to learn before you enter the Duat, and you need to prepare yourselves, and be prepared, for a hazardous journey." He glanced at the woman and smiled. "We once stood where you now stand, many thousands of years ago. We were the Anima Summas of that time, and followed a similar path to the one that you now follow."

"You were the Anima Summas?" asked Hermione, her voice full of the awe she felt. "Who are you?"

"I am the spirit of Osiris," said the man.

"And I am the spirit of Isis," said the woman, her melodious tones washing over the four with the gentleness of a soft breeze.

"We once fought a deadly battle with the Dark Forces of that time," said Osiris. "Our brother Seth became jealous and dissatisfied with the spiritual wealth and stability we brought to the two kingdoms of Egypt. He roamed the world in search of his own source of power, and found it in a dark and evil realm. He summoned the ones who once walked the Earth long before our time, feeding on the souls of the innocent. We prevailed in that contest and banished the Nephilim back to realm of the Dark."

"But it was not without a heavy cost," continued Isis. "We were mortally wounded in that conflict, and our last physical action on this Earth was to bury the dreaded Disc of Gates and its attendant magical spells in such a way that they would not see the light of day again. But we were wrong. That ancient and terrible instrument has now been exposed, and soon so will the spells. Your task is to prevent the Disc of Gates being used to return the Nephilim to our realm."

"It is a terrible thing that lies before you," said Osiris. "And you are nearing the end of the second part of your quest - the council and knowledge of our beloved friend Thoth. We have appeared before you to prepare you for your journey through the Duat to his hidden chamber."

"Be warned," said Isis. "The Duat is not of this Earth, and neither is it of heaven or hell. It is an in-between place, a portal of reckoning to both the Light and the Dark, where the souls of the departed are weighed and judged. Your hearts and minds must be as light as a feather to gain entry to the Light."

"And it is now time for your first trial," said Osiris. "The weighing of your souls. We must be assured that you are all worthy to enter the Duat. Then it will be upon your actions alone, within its strange and terrible confines, that you will be judged."

The four looked on as three forms walked out of the bright glow at the far end of the chamber and stood beside Osiris and Isis, waiting. One of them, a man dressed in ancient Egyptian robes, held a large weighing scale, which he placed on the floor beside him. He then pulled a small white feather from his robes and placed it on one side of the scales, which caused it to

dip very slightly in that direction. The other similarly dressed man stood beside the scales holding a ledger and a quill. The third figure was different - it walked on all fours, like a dog, but its head was more like a crocodile. It padded over and flopped onto the floor beside the man holding the ledger.

"Let the Anima Summas approach so that the ceremony may begin," said the one holding the ledger.

"Wh... what's happening?" asked a very nervous Ginny.

Isis smiled. "There is nothing to fear child. I can see into your heart and mind, and I see only pure and good thoughts. We have to enact the 'Weighing of the Heart' ceremony so that you may proceed into the Duat."

"But... but what's that, eh... dog thing?" asked Ron, eyeing the strange-looking animal suspiciously.

"He is the devourer of hearts," said Osiris. "If the Ab causes the scales to tip out of balance, it means that the heart and mind is not pure, and is unworthy to proceed. The devourer will then consume the Ab."

Ron gulped loudly. "And what's the Ab?"

"It is part of you," replied Osiris. "The source of good and bad thoughts. It holds your moral awareness of right and wrong."

Harry and Hermione stepped forward towards Osiris and Isis. Osiris held out his hand and placed it in the centre of Harry's chest, and Isis did likewise with Hermione. They both gasped in astonishment at what happened next.

Harry stared disbelieving as a dim, silvery shape moved out of his body and stood beside him. It was the most startling and amazing experience - the dim shape was himself and yet it was apart from him. He was in two places at the same time, and his consciousness was also in two places at the same time.

"Let the Ab approach the scales," said the one holding the scales.

Harry's dim, silvery shape walked over and then floated up onto one end of the scales. The man with the ledger looked closely, his quill hovering over the ledger, and waited for a few moments. The dog-like thing sat up expectantly.

Harry's physical self held his breath, watching the scales just as closely as the ledger man. The scales started to tip slowly in the direction of Harry's Ab, but he sighed with relief when he saw that the scales stopped when they were exactly level. His Ab stepped down and walked back over to Harry, where it stepped into his body and disappeared. The man wrote some hieroglyphics into the ledger and the dog-like thing flopped back onto the floor.

Hermione's Ab then stepped forward to be weighed, with the same result as Harry. Osiris and Isis then called Ron and Ginny forward and placed their hands on the centre of their chests.

"Bloody hell!" breathed Ron as his Ab walked over to be weighed. He, too, saw that the scales remained level after slowly tipping towards his Ab. He smirked at the dog-thing when his Ab reunited with him. Ginny's Ab followed and produced the same evenly balanced result as the other three.

"Is my... Ab still inside me?" asked Ginny, voicing the thoughts of all four teens. "I wasn't aware that I had it floating around inside somewhere. Where does it live anyway - in my heart or in my head?"

Isis looked amused as she smiled at Ginny. "The Ab *is* you Ginny - it isn't a separate entity. You have to understand that there are many aspects to your existence on Earth, and the Ab is just one of them - but all these aspects form the complete whole which is Ginny. I know it must seem very strange to you, but such matters were known to us during our physical existence in ancient Egypt, and were very familiar concepts."

"Uh, what would have happened to me if doggy over there had eaten my Ab?" asked Ron.

Osiris laughed, a powerful and full-blooded laugh. "You would not have been allowed into the Duat. You would have returned to your friends above ground, somewhat diminished but still the Ron that everyone knows and loves. But if your Ab had been in such a state to cause... uh, doggy here to devour it, you would not have been here in the first place. You would not be a helper to the Anima Summas." He nodded to the two men and they walked back into the glowing light, taking the scales and doggy with them.

Hermione frowned, deep in thought. "But what if we were dead, and our souls came here seeking entry into the Duat and then into heaven? What would have happened to our souls if our Abs had failed the test?"

Osiris and Isis frowned as they glanced at each other. Then Isis turned to face Hermione. "I see that you are delving into the ways of the dead. You should not dwell too closely on such matters at the present time; you'll have much on which to reflect later. But I will tell you that if a soul loses its Ab at the weighing ceremony, it still enters the Duat, but is destined to remain there, wandering the hours as shades, until one of two things happen. Either it will succumb to despair and be dragged into the fiery furnace, or it will rise above despair and seek entry back into the Earthly realm, there to strive to do one good deed that will affect the well being of a fellow soul, at which time its Ab will be renewed. Until that time, it will roam in solitude, seeking out wizard-kind who are the ones able to converse with it - you see them as ghosts in the Earthly realm."

Hermione nodded. "Why do we need to be specially prepared to enter the Duat?"

Osiris again smiled. "You must understand, inquisitive one, that the place you are about to enter is not of the physical Earth; as we have told you before, the Duat is the heavenly portal created on Earth to guide dead souls to their spiritual home. But you are not dead, you are still attached to the Earthly Realm, so if you were to enter the Duat unprepared, you would not see the reality of it. You would wander endlessly through a dark and terrifying place and would not see and would have no protection against the things that reside there."

"You must partake of the Shewbread," said Isis, holding before her a cone-shaped loaf on a silver platter. "This will enhance your Light bodies and will enable you to see the substance of what is in the Duat."

"Is that 'What-Is-It', mfkzt, Ma-na?" asked Harry.

Isis nodded. "You have researched well. It is also known as the Elixir of Life, and the Philosopher's Stone. It was used in our time to extend life and to enhance our Light spirits. But now, its process of manufacture has been lost to the world and that is why the Dark Side has so many followers. Come, take a small piece and eat it slowly."

Harry was the first to approach Isis and reached out to take a small slice of the Shewbread from the plate. He stood looking down at it while the other three each took a slice. Then he broke off a small piece and placed it in his mouth, tentatively chewing the strange bread. His eyes opened wide as the bread seemed to dissolve in his mouth, leaving it strangely dry as it was absorbed directly into the tender tissues inside his mouth.

When they'd finished eating, although eating was perhaps the wrong word since nothing was swallowed, they all stood quietly together, wondering what would happen next.

"You should experience a change in your perception of reality within a few minutes," said Isis. "But do not be alarmed. You have not been changed in any way other than your ability to perceive what is around you in the portals of heaven."

Soon, their surroundings seemed to change. Instead of the bare chamber, they saw blue sky and clouds above them and on all sides, stretching into the distance, were green meadows filled with startlingly bright flowers. They felt a warm, gentle breeze, which carried the wonderful aroma of the grass and flowers.

"Something's glowing inside your robes Harry," said Ron, staring at Harry's side.

Harry looked down, then reached inside his robes and pulled out the Eye of Horus. The small white iridescent crystal at its centre was now glowing with a silvery light.

"The Udjat Hor has always been thus," said Osiris. "Only now you are able to properly see it. Guard it well, for without it you will not be able to complete the quest."

"You're eyes, Ginny - they're glowing slightly," said Ron staring at his sister, looking into her eyes. "And so are yours Hermi ... and yours Harry," he said turning to look at each of his friends.

"So are yours Ron," said Harry, smiling.

"You now see part of your inner light," said Isis.

"Uh, how long will this last?" asked Ron.

"Until you complete your journey through the Duat," answered Osiris. "But now you are ready to proceed into the second hour. Follow us."

They walked behind the two spirits until they came to a grassy bank, in which was set another large bronze door.

"The second gate," said Osiris. "We will open it for you, but before you go we must tell you one final thing."

Isis looked sadly at the four youngsters. "To reach your goal you will see and experience many strange and frightening things. That is the nature of the Duat. But be brave, never doubt that you will prevail, and always hold true to yourself and to each other."

Osiris and Isis then raised their hands in a gesture of farewell, and they slowly faded from sight.

"It's open," said Hermione looking towards the second gate. "After this one there're ten more, and we have ten unused spells."

"But what about the last one Hermione?" asked Harry.

Hermione shook her head. "I really don't know Harry." The four shrugged their shoulders and walked towards the gate.

Oliver and Katie glanced worriedly at each other as the sounds of heavy fighting drifted up the canyon to their defensive positions opposite the Cave of Spells. Then they looked up towards the top of the cliffs at the far side of the bend in the canyon as they heard several more loud explosions, now much nearer, and bright yellow glows flashing up into the night sky.

They looked on with horror when they saw about one hundred Death Eaters, some of them stained with the yellow light, standing at the top of the cliff and flinging down about a dozen thick ropes to the bottom of the canyon. Then they began to descend, moving quickly to the base of the cliff. Some of them were hit by spells thrown by the Aurors guarding the canyon bend and fell crashing to the rocky ground, but most of them reached the bottom safely and started to run towards the canyon entrance, obviously intent on trapping the main defensive force between two fronts.

"Stay here," Oliver shouted to his team. "I'll see what's happening."

He ran quickly down the canyon towards the bend and stopped to speak quickly with the two team-leaders stationed there. "Dave and the others won't stand a chance. We should try to relieve the pressure on them and move down the canyon. We can attack those latest Death Eaters from behind."

They both nodded and gestured for their Aurors to move forward. But they hadn't gone more than a few yards when Dave and about forty Aurors ran around the bend, flinging spells at the unseen Death Eaters behind them. Dave ran up to Oliver and the other two team-leaders, gasping for breath, a worried frown on his face.

"There were too many of them," he gasped despairingly. "We managed to break through but the others are trapped." He shook his head, a haunted look in his eyes. "There's nothing that we can do for them now. There're nearly three hundred of them down there and it won't be long before they'll be here. We've got to dig in and defend the ground around the cave area. We can't let them break through. Come on."

Dave directed the two teams that made it to the safety of the cave area up beyond the other side of the cave, telling them to take up position in the rocks in case any more Death Eaters

dropped into the far side of the canyon. He told Oliver to keep his position opposite the cave, and the other two teams to move back from the bend and dig in among the rocks close by.

Dave ran back with Oliver and settled down beside him, Katie and John Ballot. The sounds of spells and curses could still be heard at the canyon entrance, but they soon became more sporadic and finally stopped. Dave hung his head, looking at the ground, his mind in torment knowing that all four teams trapped down at that end were either dead or badly injured.

"We managed to get one Auror to the Portkey site," he told Oliver, "but he was hit by a curse just as he disappeared. I don't know if he'll arrive back at base safely - I hope to god he does, but even if he can get to the headquarters buildings it's going to take some time before they can get enough Aurors to reinforce our position. I think we're on our own for a while yet Oliver."

He stood up from behind the rock and shouted to the rest of his men, "Get ready - they'll be around that bend any time now. Good luck to you all."

Harry led the other three slowly through the gate, looking into the gloom that lay before them.

"What's that noise?" asked Ginny.

"I think it's water Ginny," Harry answered. "It sounds like waves breaking on the shore."

The gate closed behind them with a loud clang, and the four found themselves standing on a wooden jetty that stretched out over the choppy waters of a very large lake. On both sides, as far as the eye could see in the gloom, stretched a narrow, rocky shoreline. Dark clouds scurried beneath an overcast sky and they could hear the sounds of thunder rolling in from the distant shore. The gentle breeze of the last hour had been replaced by a stiff and gusty wind that tugged intermittently at their robes, causing them to shiver involuntarily, both from the cold and their thoughts of what lay ahead.

"How the devil are we going to get across that!" said Ron.

"Lets walk out onto the jetty," said Harry. "Perhaps there's a boat moored at the end."

They walked slowly towards the end of the little wooden pier and looked down into the dark, choppy waters of the lake, but there wasn't a boat there.

"Great!" exclaimed Ron disdainfully, pointing into the dark water. "Well I'm not bloody well swimming through that! Goodness knows what's lurking in there!"

"You won't have to Ron," said Ginny, clutching his arm and pointing with her other hand to the left side of the jetty. "Here comes our transport unless I'm very much mistaken."

They all looked in the direction Ginny was pointing and saw a low wooden boat slowly coming towards the end of the jetty. The prow and stern were raised at both ends, with a small square wooden cabin in the centre, much in the style depicted on the walls of the Egyptian temples they'd visited. Rising from the wooden cabin was a thin mast, atop which was a light. But the most unnatural thing about the craft was the way in which it was being propelled.

Standing in the stern, pushing on a pole that stretched into the water was a tall, dark-cloaked figure, his head covered by a long pointed hood. As the boat came closer, the four peered at the figure trying to see the face, but it was completely hidden by the large hood. They all felt a bit jumpy, wondering whom it could be. The boat pulled alongside the end of the jetty and stopped.

The figure stood up straight and looked at the four youngsters, his face still cloaked by the hood, and raised his arm, pointing a bony finger towards the centre of the boat.

"I think he wants us to get in," said Hermione nervously.

"Well it's better than swimming," said Ron stepping into the boat, which rocked dangerously in the choppy waves. He stood and held out his arms to help the two girls get in, and then steadied Harry as he jumped in beside him.

As soon as Harry landed, the figure again bent down and pushed the pole into the water, sending the boat into the lake. The craft soon turned and headed out towards the distant shore at the far end of the strange place.

"I don't think this lake can be very deep," whispered Ron. "Watch him - he's not pushing the pole very far into the water."

"I wouldn't be too sure about that Ron," said Hermione looking up at the top of the mast. "That's no ordinary light - it's a sun disc. I think this must be the Barque of Ra!"

"The what of Ra?" asked Ron.

"The Barque of Ra," she replied. "It was in the Amduat - it's the barge that the sun god, Ra, used to traverse the second hour of the Duat, and it looks like we're going to do the same. It must be a magical craft of some sort - that water looks pretty deep to me - the Amduat says it's a bottomless watery abyss."

They all shivered as they looked back at the enigmatic ferryman, but then jumped as they heard a frightening sound. At first, it started as a low moaning, but quickly became louder, the moans and plaintive cries tugging at their minds. They put their hands over their ears to keep out the dreadful sounds, but they could still hear them. They clung together nervously, not because the noise was particularly loud, but it was the desperate emotion it conveyed - minds in torment.

"What the hell is it?" asked Ginny, her eyes wide.

"It must be the cries of the souls lost in the Duat," said Hermione. "The ones that Osiris and Isis told us about."

They looked across the water, trying to see what was causing the agonised cries, but there was nothing there.

Then Ginny shouted, pointing to the left, "Over there - look."

Just at the edge of their vision, they saw movement in the gloom - dark shapes drifting over the surface of the water. Some of them must have seen the boat because they drifted closer,

their cries becoming louder. Then three of them came closer still, almost to the side of the boat.

"Shades!" exclaimed Hermione, her face screwed up in horror.

The three shades reached towards the four youngsters, their shadowy arms held forward in a pleading pose, begging for help. The ferryman suddenly stood up and pointed at the shades, who pulled back from the boat as if they'd been burned. Then they drifted back to join the others. The boat continued on towards the far shore.

"I don't think I like this place very much," wailed Ginny, unable to pull her eyes away from the gyrating forms floating over the water, keeping pace, but also their distance, from the boat.

Harry and Hermione reached out and held her hands, sending soothing thoughts into their friend's mind.

The three looked up when Ron suddenly shouted, "Look up ahead - there's something happening."

The dark water was being whipped up into a frenzy not more than fifty yards in front of them. Ron climbed up onto the cabin to get a better view and shouted down in horror, "It's a whirlpool, and a big one. If we keep on this course we'll be dragged into it!"

They all looked back at the ferryman, who seemed to be putting more effort into poling the boat. Slowly, too slowly for the watching teens, the boat started to veer to one side of the maelstrom. They were now only about twenty yards away.

"There's no way we're going to miss it!" yelled Ron. He jumped back down onto the deck and stood close to the other three. They looked over to the following shades when they detected a change in their pleading cries. Now, the pleading changed to an excited anticipation of what was about to happen.

"They want us to get dragged into it," shouted Harry. "They want us to become lost in this place - like they are!"

"That's why they failed to make it through the Duat," Hermione shouted back, shaking her head. "They don't want to see anyone do what they couldn't. They'd rather we became part of their agony than get to the other side of the lake. If only they could feel compassion for others, they'd have a chance of escaping this hell-hole."

"We're going in!" yelled Ginny.

The ferryman suddenly doubled his efforts, really putting his back into poling the boat through the water and at the last moment he steered it away from the black hole at the centre of the whirlpool and over to the right side, into the madly circulating flow around the edge of it. The barge tipped precariously over to the left and the four held onto each other, leaning to the right to prevent falling into the cabin. The boat put on a burst of speed and then steadied.

They looked back at the deadly vortex and breathed a sigh of relief as the boat was catapulted forward and out of its clutches. The emotive cries coming from the shades again changed, this

time to cries of disappointment, and they turned and moved away from the boat, back to join their fellow drifters on the far reaches of the lake. Soon, the shore grew larger in their vision as the barge approached the far side of the lake. The ferryman steered towards a wooden jetty, identical to the one at the other end of the lake, and slowed the boat as he pulled alongside.

He pulled the pole out of the water and stood up straight. He said nothing; he just stood waiting for the four friends to climb up onto the jetty. Ginny was the last one out of the boat, pulled up by Ron and Harry, and stood by their side as the boat pulled away, turned around, and moved back in the direction they'd come.

"We'd better find the third gate," said Harry as he looked over to the end of the jetty. He led the way to the shore and looked along the base of the cliff.

"There it is," he said, pointing to a spot about ten yards to the left.

They walked over and saw that the gate was identical to the other two. Harry pulled the Eye from his robes and placed it into the depression at the centre of the gate and stepped back, gesturing for Hermione to join him.

Hermione pulled the parchment of spells from her robes and pointed to the one to be used on the third gate. Then they held hands and pointed their other hands at the centre of the Eye, saying the strange spell in the ancient Egyptian language. As before, the Eye floated back to Harry and the bronze gate slowly swung open.

Harry led the way through the gate, and they all nervously looked around the bright landscape. They found themselves in a barren, rocky desert that stretched out before them in all directions - there was no path and no other indication where they had to go.

"Which way?" asked Ron.

They all shook their heads. "When in doubt, take the obvious way," said Harry. "Straight ahead."

The four set off over the rock-strewn ground, glancing to both sides for any sign of movement. "This is weird," breathed Hermione. "There's no breeze, no sun, no desert heat, and there's not the slightest movement anywhere. There wasn't anything about this place in the Amduat."

They walked quietly side by side for the next ten minutes, hardly daring to voice their relief that nothing nasty appeared to be in this hour of the Duat. But if they had, they'd have been wrong!

Harry suddenly stopped and held out his arms to halt the others. "What's that?" he said, squinting into the distance ahead of them.

There was movement - several shapes were coming in their direction, but their movements were strangely disjointed. They all gasped as the figures got closer and they could make out their features.

"Get your wands out," shouted Ron. "I think we're in for a fight!"

Six very tall things, each about seven feet, shuffled slowly towards them. They were the strangest creatures they'd ever laid eyes on; their thin spindly legs supported disproportionately thick bodies, which were hunched over as if deformed. Their heads were straight out of a nightmare, with long pointed chins, wide grinning mouths, long pointy noses, small beady eyes and ridged foreheads that swept up to bald, pointed crowns. They were completely naked, with thick fur surrounding their stomachs and thighs, and they all carried very large and deadly-looking knives, which they brandished above their heads menacingly.

They were about twenty yards away when Ron sent the first stunning spell at the creature in the lead. "Bloody hell!" he exclaimed when the thing just shrugged off the spell, not even faltering in its progress towards them.

Harry raised his wand and sent a powerful Flipendus at the same creature. Again, the spell had no effect.

"Quick Harry," shouted Hermione, holding out her left hand.

Harry grasped Hermione's hand and they lifted their other hands, palms upwards, above their heads and shouted the spell they'd used during the attack on the school the previous year.

"DADEX MER."

A beam of silvery-blue light shot from their upraised hands and met about two feet above their heads. Where the beams met, an emerald green shimmering light appeared. It then spread outwards in all directions for about ten feet, and then cascaded down until it met the ground. All four of them were covered by the emerald green light, just as the first creature raised his knife and brought it down powerfully in the direction of Hermione's head.

She closed her eyes instinctively, but the protective shell of light deflected the knife away from her. The creature grunted in surprise and then bellowed in anger. He again raised the knife and struck, but it couldn't penetrate their shield. The other five things had arrived by now and they surrounded the four, lashing out at them with their knives, but they couldn't break through.

Eventually, after five minutes of trying, the creatures just stood, looking confused and panting from the effort of repeatedly striking the green shield. They roared in frustration, turned around and shuffled back the way they'd come.

Harry and Hermione lifted the spell and they all breathed a sigh of relief. "What the bloody hell were those things?" asked Ron.

"I haven't got the faintest idea Ron," said Hermione, "but I hope that's the last we see of them."

"Why do you think our spells didn't work on them?" asked Ginny.

"Either they're very tough or normal magic doesn't work in the Duat," said Hermione.

"But your spell worked!" exclaimed Ron.

"But that's not normal magic Ron," said Harry. "It's ancient Egyptian, so maybe that's why it worked here."

"Well I hope you've got plenty of those spells up your sleeves," he replied. "I think we're going to need them!"

They walked on through the desert, keeping a wary eye out in case the creatures decided to come back for another go at them, when they again heard the agonised cries of shades. They stopped and looked to their left where they could see the shadowy forms floating towards them.

"What can we do?" shouted Ginny.

One of the shades moved quickly and stood in front of Ginny, undulating, and sending out pleas for help both vocally and telepathically. Ginny instinctively held out an arm, wanting to dispel the shade's agony, when the shadowy form reached out and grasped her, trying to pull her towards the other shades hovering no more than ten yards away.

"No!" shouted Harry, grasping Ginny around the waist. "Help me, all of you."

Ron and Hermione grabbed hold of Ginny and held her firmly, preventing the shade from dragging her away. The shade cried out in an agony of disappointment and two more of them floated over to help pull Ginny into their midst.

"Don't listen to them," shouted Hermione. "They're just like the other ones in the watery realm - they just want to see us fail and drag us down to their level. Keep your minds fixed on something good, like getting through the Duat."

All four concentrated on the thought of achieving their goal, and successfully reaching the end of their quest. The shades howled in protest and then drifted back over the desert, away from the positive thoughts of the four friends.

The four walked on and before long saw the far side of the desert. They hurried towards the rearing cliffs that marked its boundary and soon stood before the fourth gate.

"I need a drink after all that," said Ginny, rummaging in the rucksack on Ron's back for a bottle of water.

"And I need something to eat!" exclaimed Ron, sliding the sack from his back.

The yellow glow coming from around the bend in the canyon grew brighter. Dave Henson tensed visibly as he stared unblinking towards the place where the Death Eaters would soon emerge.

"Get ready," he shouted to his Aurors crouching behind the many rocks that lined the canyon walls. Oliver glanced around to make sure that all his team were prepared for the coming fight, and he nodded in satisfaction at the determined look they all wore. He watched Katie out of the corner of his eye and felt the first tendrils of fear invade his mind at the possibility of her being hurt in the affray - or worse. Katie, however, looked as focussed and determined

as any of them. They all stiffened at the sound of hundreds of feet pounding on the rocky ground, and held their wands ready.

The first of the Death Eaters, about twenty of them, rushed around the canyon bend and flung themselves to the ground, sending curses in every direction, looking for places to take cover. The two teams closest to them laid down a volley of spells, and stunned or killed about half of them where they lay. The rest managed to find refuge among the rocks at the opposite side of the canyon, from where they directed the main force of the black-cloaked army that rushed into sight to the protective cover of the rocks.

The sky lit up with the yellow glow of some of the Death Eaters and the hundreds of beams of light that were flung across the canyon. Several of the Death Eaters dropped, hit by the deadly torrent of spells, but so did some of the Aurors. Dave could see that the two teams closest to the Dark army were coming under increasing fire, and their position became increasingly precarious. There were simply too many for them to handle.

"Fall back closer to us!" shouted Dave. "We'll cover you."

Oliver's team increased their fire, as did the teams in the cave further up the canyon, and most of the fleeing Aurors reached the cover of the rocks beside Oliver's team. Some of the Death Eaters tried to run across the canyon to the opposite side, intending to take up the positions vacated by the two teams and form a second line of attack, but they were cut down by the defending Aurors before they'd managed to get half way across. There followed a lull in the fighting as both sides took stock, and Dave moved stealthily among his forces, giving encouragement and taking stock of their losses.

He moved back beside Oliver, Katie and John, but before he could give his assessment of their position, jerked his head to the right. At the far end of the canyon they could all hear and see the effects of a number of Whammos exploding. Dave sighed, fearing the worse. He knew that his people would soon be caught between two points of attack. All they could do now was wait for the inevitable.

Lord Voldemort stood at the front of the hundred or so Death Eaters at the far end of the canyon, looking along their ranks. "Victory is close," he hissed. "You will be the ones who will tip the balance in our favour, but be careful not to attack the Aurors in the cave unless you get a good target to hit. I don't want the cave damaged in any way that might prevent me getting at the spells. Now go - for victory and glory!"

A loud belch reverberated around the rocky third hour of the Duat. "Sorry," whispered Ron as the other three looked at him with feigned disgust. "Well, I enjoyed those pasties!"

"We'd better get the fourth gate open," Hermione said, looking at Harry. They went through the same procedure as before, and the bronze gate slowly swung open.

"What's going to be here I wonder," said Ginny nervously.

"We'll soon find out," replied Ron as he led the way into the fourth hour of the Duat.

"Sand!" exclaimed Ron as the other walked up alongside him. "All I can see is sand!"

The bright landscape was covered with sand dunes for as far as they could see, the long, deep ripples etched into their steep sides indicating that this realm was no stranger to high winds. Straight ahead, they could see the semblance of a path winding its way between the dunes. "We'd better get started," said Harry pointing towards the path.

The path was quite firm to start with, but they soon had to struggle through the deep sand that had blown from the tops of the dunes. In parts, they had to trudge through sand that came up to their thighs, and they were all soon perspiring and puffing with the effort.

"I hope it's going to get easier than this!" exclaimed Hermione, taking a swig from her water bottle. "This is murder!"

Ron, who was in the lead, walked into the next high sand drift and slowed as it quickly reached the level of his waist. Suddenly he shouted and fell back onto the top of the sand, thrashing about with his arms and trying to pull his legs free. The others stared in horror as a long, sinewy snake reared up in front of Ron, its body wrapped around his right leg. The snake had four short stubby legs and just behind its head sprouted a pair of bat-like wings. It reared higher into the air, poised to strike at the helpless Ron with two very large fangs, which dripped a milky-white liquid.

"Geroff! Geroff!" shouted Ron as he shook his leg in a futile attempt to dislodge the snake.

Harry raised his wand and pointed it at the snake's body, midway between Ron's leg and the snake's head. "*STUPEFY*".

The powerful beam hit the snake and it immediately flopped backwards onto the sand, unconscious. Harry struggled through the sand and helped Ron to unwind the snake from his leg, then pulled him backwards to the safety of the shallower sand.

"Well at least we know that ordinary spells work in this realm," said Hermione after she'd checked that Ron hadn't been bitten. "Those creatures we met earlier must have been immune or something."

They all looked uneasily at the path ahead, not knowing how many of the snake creatures lay in wait beneath the sand. "I don't think I can go through there," said Ginny, shivering despite the perspiration running down her face. She looked pleadingly at Harry, hoping that he could come up with something.

Harry thought, rubbing his chin with his hand. "Well I could transform and fly you across, but I won't be able to carry you all at the same time, two's the most I can carry. And whichever way you look at it, one of you'll be left alone. I don't want to do that - you remember what happened the last time we split up, and those things have got legs and wings, so they don't have to rely on hiding under the sand."

"I don't know about you," said Ron, "but I'd rather see what's coming at me!"

They all nodded glumly, then Harry exclaimed, "Ron! Did you bring any of that rope with you like you did in the labyrinth?"

"Yes, I did Harry," said Ron looking puzzled. "What've you got in mind?"

"I was thinking," he replied. "I can transform and carry two of you on my back. And if we tie one end of the rope to the rucksack and loop the other end around my neck, I should be able to drag one of you over the top of the sand - if you sit on the rucksack."

"I don't know Harry," said Ron doubtfully. "You'll still have to cart three of us at the same time. Even you aren't that strong."

"I know the going will be a bit slow," Harry persisted, "but if we do it in short hops, say from one safe part of the path to the next, I'll be able to take a breather in between. What do you say?"

"I say let's give it a go," said Hermione. "As long as you don't fly too high, Harry. If you find it too much, we'll just have to stop and think of something else. Who's going to ride on the rucksack?"

"You two girls are the lightest," said Ron, "so you'd better ride on Harry's back. I'll take the rucksack."

It must have been a comical sight if anyone had been around to see them. But it was certainly effective, with Harry flying about ten yards above and just in front of Ron riding on the rucksack holding his wand ready in case any snakeheads popped up out of the sand. After about half a mile, Harry landed on a bare part of the path and transformed. Ron walked up to the out-of-breath Harry, who leaned against him, gasping, "This is hard. I think it was worse dragging you along than carrying the girls. Can you and Ginny manage to sit on the rucksack while Ron rides on my back?" he asked Hermione.

Hermione looked at the rucksack. "It's quite big Harry, but I don't think it's big enough for both of us to sit on it. Look, I'm a lot lighter than Ron. What if I ride the rucksack and Ron and Ginny go on your back?"

"Ok," he replied, still a bit out of breath. "I'll give it a go, but hang on for a few minutes for me to get my breath back."

They all sat on the path, using the break to drink more water. After about five minutes, Harry got back on his feet and looked down at the other three. "Come on then, we'd better... What!"

Harry turned and looked up into the sky in the direction that Ron was staring with his mouth wide open. "I think we've got some more company," Ron blurted.

In the distance, Harry could see a number of the snakes, about fifteen of them, flying towards their position. They flew with an odd undulating sort of movement, but they didn't appear to be flying very fast.

"Oh lord," breathed Hermione looking around for some sort of cover, but not seeing any. "We'll have to fight them off here. Arhhhh!" Hermione pointed to her left, towards the top of a large dune about fifty yards away.

The others followed her wide-eyed gaze and saw another ten or so of the snakes slithering down from the top of the dune, heading in their direction. "We'll never be able to fight them all off," shouted Ron. "We can't keep our eyes peeled on the ground and above our heads at the same time!"

"You three take care of the ones on the ground, and I'll have a go at those others up there," said Harry, just before he transformed. He pushed off from the ground and rapidly gained height, trying to get above the fifteen flying snakes. He heard the sounds of stunning spells from below, but didn't have time to check how his friends were doing. Five of the snakes turned in his direction, but the other ten started to angle down to the ground towards Ron, Hermione and Ginny. Harry knew that his friends would soon be overcome by the attack from above, and pulled his wings back into his body, streaking down towards them.

Harry zoomed through the five snakes, scattering them in all directions, and blazed down towards the other ten. The snakes didn't know what hit them. They were still about thirty yards above the three fighting on the ground, their eyes locked on their exposed necks, when Harry stormed into them, his deadly talons stretching to their full extent. By the time Harry had flown through their ranks, five of them had dropped to the sand, their heads hanging lifelessly from their shattered bodies. Harry turned quickly and winged towards the remaining five, screeching loudly when he saw that one of them was very close to Ron's exposed head.

Ron glanced up and ducked, just as the snake struck down at his neck and missed. That was the last thing the snake did - Harry grabbed it in his talons, flew back up to the other four, and flung it directly at them, making them veer away from his friends. Then he again attacked, using his talons and sharp beak to rip at the snakes. They stood no chance and soon all five lay lifeless on the sand.

Meanwhile, the other three stood looking at Harry's aerial fight. Their own fight was over, all twelve snakes lay stunned, the nearest more than ten yards away.

"Harry watch out!" shouted Ron as the five snakes that Harry had scattered earlier closed in to attack him from above.

Harry deftly dodged their attack, and hovered to one side as the stunning spells from his friends below put paid to any further aggressive tendencies from the five snakes, all of them falling to the ground stunned.

Harry landed by the side of his friends and transformed. Hermione rushed up to him and flung her arms around his neck, holding him tightly. As they connected, no words were necessary, each feeling the other's sense of relief that they were still alive and well.

"I hate to break this up," said Ginny, grinning, "but I really would like to get out of this place before any more of them come after us."

Harry kissed Hermione tenderly before stepping back and transforming into his eagle form once more. Ron and Ginny climbed onto his back and Hermione passed the end of the rope up for Ginny to loop it around Harry's neck. Then they set off across the sandy realm, Hermione feeling a little easier now that she was on terra firma once more.

Harry found the new weight distribution a lot easier to handle, and managed to fly for almost a mile at a time before having to land and rest. They all kept a wary eye on both the ground and the sky in case of more attacks, but none came.

"Over there!" shouted Ginny, pointing ahead and slightly to the left. "I think I can see the gate in that big sand dune!"

Harry angled to the left, landed just at the base of the dune and transformed. The four grinned as they looked at the bronze gate, the entrance into the fifth hour of the Duat, happy that they'd managed to survive.

"Well the next place can't be much worse than this one," said Ron, taking a swig from his water bottle. "Hermione?"

Ron's face fell as he saw the look of dread on Hermione's beautiful face. "If the Amduat's right, the next hour is the realm of Sokar," she said quietly.

"Who's he when he's at home?" asked Ginny, feeling slightly nervous.

"He's the demon god of the dead," whispered Hermione. "He's the main demon god of the Duat; he tries to fling the souls passing through his realm into the fiery depths of hell."

"Charming!" exclaimed Ron.

"Come on Hermione," said Harry gently. "We'd better open the gate."

Harry was the first to walk slowly and tentatively through the open gate, and quickly stepped back when he caught a glimpse of what was there. He looked at the others and exhaled loudly. "It doesn't look a very nice place in there!"

"Come on Harry," said Hermione entwining her hand in his. "We haven't got much choice. Let's go in."

Chapter 13 A Prediction Realised

Harry and Hermione led Ron and Ginny through the gate into the fifth hour of the Duat - the realm of Sokar. It closed loudly behind them. They stood with mouths agape when they saw what lay before them. They stood on a rocky floor that sloped down towards two large stone sphinx-like statues, each about eight feet high. The place was dark, but they could clearly see the extent of the realm in the red flames that shot up from a fiery abyss that stretched from the stone statues right to the far side, where they could see the sixth gate in the distance. The place was completely enclosed by rocky walls that rose from the edge of the flames to the ceiling, and just below where they stood and the gate on the far side was a narrow rocky bridge, the two statues guarding it, that twisted and turned as it wound its way above the fires.

"I don't like this," squeaked Ginny, clutching Ron's arm as she looked at the narrow path across the flames.

"Stay close to me Ginny," he said gently. "I'll make sure you won't fall."

"We'll have to cross in single file," said Harry. "I'll go first, you behind me Hermione, then Ginny and Ron can bring up the rear. Ok?"

They all nodded and started down towards the bridge and the two statues. They stopped and looked in horror when the statues started to move. The heads of the sphinxes, each a hideous demon gargoyle sitting atop a lion's body, turned and looked in their direction and roared loudly.

"Bloody hell!" exclaimed Ron. "How're we going to get past those?"

The sphinxes didn't move from their stone bases; they were clearly anchored to the rock at the entrance of the stone bridge, but their heads could easily reach anyone who ventured across their path.

"Any ideas Hermione?" asked Harry, hopefully.

She shook her head slowly. "Sorry Harry, none."

"Could you fly us over them one at a time and land beyond their reach?" asked Ginny.

Harry looked at the flames churning into the air and the narrow band of rock that was the bridge. He shook his head. "I don't think I'll be able to fly in all that turbulence, and even if I could, I don't think that bridge is wide enough to land safely."

"So what do we do?" asked Ron. "What about your protective shield?"

Hermione shook her head. "Although we'll be protected by the shield, they might still be able to push us, shield and all, into those flames."

"Try to stun them Harry," said Ginny.

Harry looked doubtfully at the sphinxes. "They're made of stone, Ginny, but I'll try."

He raised his wand and sent a powerful stunning spell at the statue on the left, but it didn't seem to affect it in any way, it just roared even more loudly. Harry shrugged his shoulders in defeat.

Hermione looked up at the others suddenly, her eyes alight. Then she frowned, shook her head, and looked back down at the ground. "What!" exclaimed Harry. "You've thought of something, haven't you Hermione?"

"Yes," she whispered, "but it's too dangerous."

"Tell us Hermione," said Ron. "*Then* we'll decide if it's too dangerous."

Hermione pursed her lips, then whispered, "We could try to Zapparate past them."

Harry blinked. "What's the rest of it Hermione; what about Ron and Ginny?"

"That's where the risk comes in," she replied. "If we walk up to those statues and they strike at us, we'll have all the urgency we'll need to Zapparate away from there. Ron and Ginny can hold on to us, but we don't know if they'll Zapparate with us."

It was Harry's turn to frown. "You're right - it's far too risky to try that."

Ron looked at Ginny then at his two friends. "There's no other way around them is there! Ginny and I are willing to give it a go."

"Ron, if it doesn't work you'll both be killed. I'm not going to risk it," said Harry with determination.

Ginny reached out and held his hand. "Ron's right. It's the only chance we've got to get past, and since it affects us two more than you the decision's ours. We haven't got any other choice."

Harry looked pleadingly at Hermione, who held her head in her hands, wracking her formidable brain for another solution to the problem. "I can't think of any other way Harry. We've got to try it."

"We won't get a second go at it if it fails," said Harry looking forlornly at the two redheads.

"Come on," said Ron moving slowly towards the two roaring sphinxes. "We've got to try."

"All right!" exclaimed Harry. "Look, there's a loose stone about fifteen yards along the bridge, well out of reach of those two things. We'll aim to Zapparate to it, Hermione, but we'll have to be careful not to slip over the edge of the bridge when we materialise. We'll all have to stand very close together and Hermi and I'll have to hold our ring hands. So I'll go in front with Hermione behind me. You, Ron, stand in between us and hold my free hand and you, Ginny, stand behind Hermione holding her other hand. Come on, let's get into position and walk down to the statues."

They walked slowly towards the two sphinxes who roared even more loudly in anticipation as the four drew near. Harry reached out to Hermione with his thoughts, 'We'll have to do this

very quickly, before they can touch us. We'll have to start to concentrate before we get to them. Ready?'

Harry stopped just out of reach of the lunging sphinxes and waited to give the word to the others for the dash into danger. He watched the sphinxes very carefully, seeing that they reared up after each lunge of their monstrous heads, giving them about a two second leeway before the next strike. He waited until both the sphinxes reared up and then shouted, "Now!"

They ran quickly between the two statues, Harry and Hermione closing their eyes in concentration and Ron and Ginny fearfully watching the sphinxes start to strike at them. They struck down wickedly, opening their stone jaws wide and closing them over the space where the four had stood only a second before.

They all breathed a sigh of relief as they looked back at the confused sphinxes from their precarious perch on the stone bridge about fifteen yards away. "Well now we know it works!" exclaimed Ron.

Hermione shuddered. "That was terrible! I can't help thinking what would have happened if it hadn't worked."

"Don't worry Hermione," said Ginny, stroking her friend's back. "It *did* work and we're all safe."

The two sentinels had now returned to their original inanimate pose, looking towards the fifth gate in their tireless stony gaze. Harry turned and surveyed the narrow rock bridge before him, bathed in the eerie red light of the fiery hell below. "Come on, we'll take it slowly - stay close behind me Hermione."

They took their first faltering steps. Ron, who brought up the rear, held onto Ginny's arm, who likewise held onto Hermione's. They could all now feel the heat rising from below and they frequently had to duck down close to the path to avoid the tongues of flame that shot up into the air around them. They had gone about half way across before Harry suddenly stopped, reaching behind to clutch Hermione's hand.

"Hells' bells!" he exclaimed, gazing at the impossible apparition that rose into the air in front of them, effectively blocking their path. Hermione squeezed his hand tightly and whispered, "It's Sokar!"

The apparition rose higher above them, gazing at the four with a disdainful expression on his demonic, but human, face. Two huge wings, sprouting from the top part of his serpent's body, beat slowly in the flame-filled air. He laughed cruelly, the sound reverberating around the chamber from the high rock walls. "WHO DARES TO ENTER THE REALM OF SOKAR? THIS IS NOT A PLACE FOR MORTALS, BUT YOU CAN BE SURE THAT YOU WILL NOT REMAIN MORTAL FOR MUCH LONGER. YOU WERE FORTUNATE TO EVADE MY SERVANTS IN THE LAST HOUR OF THE DUAT, BUT YOU WILL NOT EVADE ME HERE!"

Harry gazed up at Sokar, forcing himself to speak with a purpose and authority that he certainly didn't feel. "We are the Anima Summas and their helpers. Let us pass!"

Sokar raised his head and roared with laughter, then his expression changed and he floated closer until his huge head was no more than ten yards away. "NO ONE TELLS SOKAR WHAT TO DO IN THIS REALM! BY WHAT AUTHORITY DO YOU PRESUME TO INVADE THIS PLACE?"

Hermione sent her thoughts to Harry, 'Use the Eye.'

Harry reached into his robes and pulled out the Eye, holding it up to the nightmare in front of him. "Our authority comes from Horus, and this is his Eye. Let us pass!"

Sokar flew up and spread his wings, beating them powerfully, his serpent body thrashing around below them, sending gusts of heated air over the teens. He roared loudly and leaned forward, preparing to sweep the four into the fiery abyss. Then the crystal at the centre of the Eye grew bright, covering the four friends in a silvery radiance.

Sokar raced down towards them and swept his right wing across the rocky bridge as he drew near, intending to sweep them off into the fires below. He roared once more, this time in frustration, as his wing hit the radiance and bent backwards, slewing him around to the side. Ron gulped loudly as he held tightly onto the cringing Ginny. "Come on - let's get moving."

Harry led the way as quickly as he could across the bridge, all the while holding the eye up above him. Sokar continued to rage above, swooping down repeatedly but failing to dislodge them. They arrived at the sixth gate, perched at the end of the narrow bridge, still covered by the protective radiance of the Eye of Horus.

Harry turned to Hermione. "What do we do now? I've got to put the Eye in the gate - will it still protect us?"

Hermione looked up at Sokar still hovering above them. "We haven't got any choice Harry. We won't get through unless you do that - we'll just have to hope that it'll keep Sokar at bay."

Harry slowly lowered the Eye and placed it in the depression in the gate. They were all relieved to see that the crystal still glowed, covering them with its radiance. Harry and Hermione quickly said the spell and the gate swung open, the Eye floating back to Harry. The four dashed through and the gate slammed shut on the fiery realm of Sokar.

It was strangely quiet in the canyon and the defending Aurors felt very uneasy. They knew that the Death Eaters were still hidden among the rocks around the bend in the canyon because of the yellow glow that illuminated the rock walls behind them.

"What are they waiting for?" whispered Katie. Oliver shook his head slowly and continued to keep a steady eye on the Death Eater positions. Dave, meanwhile, watched the other end of the canyon, waiting for the attack that would inevitable come from that quarter quite soon.

Then, as if waiting for a prearranged signal, the Death Eaters at the bend to their left opened up once more, firing curses in quick succession at the three teams of Aurors opposite the cave and at the two teams defending the far end. The sky was lit up even more as a hundred Death Eaters charged around the far end of the canyon, firing curses primarily at the two teams

closest to them. They quickly found cover among the many rocks scattered around the cliff walls on both sides and continued to pour curses at the thirty or so Aurors defending that area.

Dave directed one team, now of only fourteen Aurors, to aim their fire in support of their badly outnumbered colleagues to the right, while he and the remaining Aurors tried to prevent the enemy to their left from making any further progress towards their position.

Dave groaned with frustration when he saw three Aurors fall from the cave to the rocky floor below, hit by curses sent by the newly arrived Death Eaters. The Aurors knew that they were badly outnumbered and their position was quickly becoming hopeless, but they fought on bravely, knowing what the consequences of failure would be.

"He was a nasty bugger!" exclaimed Ron as he stood just inside the sixth hour of the Duat. The crystal at the centre of the Eye had lost its brilliant radiance soon after the gate leading out of Sokar's realm had slammed shut.

Now they stood in complete darkness, and they raised and illuminated their wands to try to see what faced them in the sixth hour of the Duat, but the light didn't seem to penetrate very far. They looked down to see a rough, gravelly floor that stretched to the limit of their vision, which was only about ten yards. The temperature was quite mild, in stark contrast to the heat of Sokar's realm, and there was no hint of any breeze.

They walked over to a flat rock just to their left and sat down, glad to take the weight off their weary feet. "What now?" asked Ginny. "I don't fancy walking out there until I can see what's in front of us."

"Let's just sit here for a while," Hermione answered. "We could do with a breather. Perhaps we might be able to see a bit more when our eyes get accustomed to the darkness."

"I hope so," said Ron, scrutinising the ground around where he sat, checking that there were no monsters of the eight-legged variety crawling around.

"There's something over there!" whispered Harry, pointing out into the darkness where he'd just seen a very dim glow. They all looked intently in the direction where he pointed, but all they could see was utter blackness.

"It is not usual for mortals to come to this place."

They all jumped and stood up at the sound of the voice that came from their right. Slowly, a figure emerged from the gloom and stood about five yards in front of them, his eyes shining in the light from their wands. He was quite old, dressed in a long white cloak, his white hair falling around his shoulders. His face was dark, revealing his Egyptian ancestry, and he grinned wryly at the nervousness of the young people before him.

"This is the sixth hour - half way through the night and the darkest part of the Duat. What brings you so far into the netherworld?" he asked.

"We are on a quest in search of the great wisdom of Thoth," said Harry. "We have been guided here by the Light."

"You must be the Anima Summas and their helpers," he raised his arm and pointed at them. "You have a great and terrible responsibility, one in which you must not fail."

"Wh... who are you?" asked Hermione.

"I am the spirit of the sixth realm. It is my duty to council the souls of the dead and guide them across to the seventh gate."

"Can you guide us across?" asked Ron.

"Your souls have not yet been parted from your Earthly existence," he replied, "so I cannot give you council, or guide you across this place. You must find your own way, and I wish you well."

"But can't you help us at all?" asked Ginny, staring wide-eyed at the spirit.

The spirit grinned sadly. "All I can do is give you a choice of paths." He raised his right arm and pointed out into the darkness. Slowly, a faint light sprung from the rocky ceiling high above, giving a light similar to that given by a moonless, but starry, night sky. "One path leads to renewal of the soul and the other to eternal darkness."

They could now see two rough paths stretching out into the gloom, one wound to the left of a central mass of rock and the other to the right.

"Choose wisely, children of the Light, for much depends on your efforts in the Duat."

The spirit slowly stepped back into the gloom and was soon lost to sight. "Wait..." shouted Harry, but the spirit had gone.

The four walked onto the path up to the place where it diverged to the left and right, and stood looking in both directions. "How the hell are we supposed to know which is the right path to take!" exclaimed Ron, slapping his leg in frustration.

"Come on Hermione," said Ginny. "You're good at things like this. What do you think?"

Hermione looked at her friend, frowning in consternation. "He didn't give us much to go on did he? What did he say - one path leads to renewal of the soul and the other to eternal darkness, and he asked us to choose wisely."

"What if we walk down each path in turn for a short distance and see if one is lighter up ahead than the other?" asked Ron.

"I don't think so Ron," said Hermione. "It's got to be a bit more subtle than that. He said to choose wisely, so that's telling me that there's something around here that'll tip the balance in favour of one of the paths. But what is it?"

They all shook their heads then Ginny shouted, "Harry! What if you fly up ahead and see where each one leads?"

"No, Ginny," said Hermione quickly. "I get the feeling that once we choose a path, we'll have to stick to it - there'll be no going back. We've got to work it out before we take one step, or one wing beat."

"Well I don't know about you lot," said Ron, "but I think a lot better on a full stomach. Let's go back to that rock and eat a few of our sandwiches while we work it out."

"It wouldn't be a problem you can work out with that golden thingy, would it Hermione?" asked Ron as he munched on a Cheddar cheese sandwich.

"The Golden Section?" asked Hermione rhetorically, thinking hard. "I can't see how. The paths wind around to either side of that central rocky mountain in exactly the same way. I can't see any difference in the paths at all, apart from their direction."

"What about the mountain itself?" asked Harry.

"What do you mean?" asked Hermione.

"Well, perhaps it's got something to do with the mountain. I don't know - maybe there's a sign on one of the sides or something."

"It's worth checking," said Ron, "but it's too dark in here to spot anything on the sides of the cliffs from this distance, and we can't walk down the paths to get a closer look."

"Hmmm..."

"I think you might be on to something Harry," said Hermione, deep in thought. "There could well be a sign, but I don't think it'll be on those cliffs - it'll be somewhere we can find without stepping onto the path. Let's take a closer look up where the path branches."

"What've you got in mind?" asked Harry as Hermione led them up to the path.

"Let's look closely around on the ground by the start of each of the two paths." Hermione lit her wand and held it to the ground just where the paths branched off to the left and right. The others followed her lead and knelt on the ground either side of her, brushing away the dust and gravel.

"I've found it!" Ginny shouted, sitting up and holding her wand close to the ground, just to the side where the left-hand path started. The others walked over and looked at the curious carving etched into the rock floor.

"That looks like Kilroy!" exclaimed Ron. The carving, about six inches long, showed a semi-circle sitting on top of a horizontal line.

Hermione laughed. "I don't think so Ron. There's no nose or hands."

"Of course!" shouted Ginny. "Don't you see? It's the sun sitting on top of the horizon - it's a sign for the sunrise!"

"Or the sunset," said Hermione. "I think you're right Ginny; it's depicting the sun on the horizon, but is it dusk or dawn?"

"Let's see if we can find a carving on the other side," said Harry, walking over to the start of the right-hand path. He swept away the dust and loose rocks at roughly the same relative position where Ginny had found the other sign.

"Yes!" he exclaimed as a rock carving came into view.

"It's exactly the same as the other one!" said Ginny, her smile changing into a frown.

"Any ideas Hermione?" asked Harry.

"Oh yes Harry," she replied ruefully. "One represents the sunrise and one the sunset. The sunset leads to darkness, as the sun disappears below the horizon, and the sunrise leads to renewal as the first rays of dawn signal the birth of a new day. But which is which?"

"That's easy," said Ron, the others looking at him with surprise. "What are you lot staring at! Don't you think I can have a good idea now and again? Anyway, it's obvious which is which - the sun rises in the east and sets in the west. We have to go on this path." He pointed to the right-hand path.

"Brilliant Ron!" said Hermione. "But... uh, what makes you think that that way is east?"

"Well, east is right, west is left isn't it?"

"Only if you're facing north Ron," Hermione replied, "and who knows which direction we're facing - we've come through six gates and for all we know, we've been going in circles."

"Well we can soon find out," said Harry, laying his wand flat on the palm of his hand.

"*POINT ME*," he shouted, and watched as his wand started to swing to the left. When it stopped he looked in the direction it was pointing - directly at the central rocky mountain that divided the two paths. "That's north. Ron was right - the right-hand path is the dawn path."

"Well done Ron," said Hermione, grinning at the broad smile on Ron's face.

"Follow me!" said Ron as he stepped theatrically onto the right-hand path.

The going was easy as they walked across the gloomy realm, the faint illumination from the rocky ceiling still giving them just enough light to proceed without having to light their wands.

"What's that scratching noise?" asked Hermione. They could all now hear the persistent sound, exactly like a quill scribbling on parchment. Ginny, who was walking beside Hermione, suddenly stopped and screamed, lifting her right leg and swatting at her foot repeatedly.

"Something just crawled over my shoe!" she shouted. "It was horrible!"

Harry, who was bringing up the rear, lit his wand and held it close to the ground.

"Aaarrhh," shouted Hermione and Ginny together as they saw hundreds of small, black beetles scurrying around on the ground, trying to get out of the light.

"Beetles - I hate beetles!" wailed Ginny, hopping from foot to foot trying to avoid the small black creatures.

"They're all over the place!" exclaimed Ron as he shone the light from his wand onto the path ahead. "There're millions of 'em!"

"Oh no," Ginny continued to wail. "I'm not going any further!"

Ron grinned at his sister who stood on tiptoes, clutching her robe tightly against her legs. "I didn't know your greatest fear was beetles Ginny?"

Harry smirked, "You'd better keep a close eye out Ron - there might just be a few spiders crawling around amongst them."

"What!" he shouted, stepping back a pace and gazing at the ground.

"I'm only kidding Ron," said Harry as he stepped forward and took the lead. "Come on - let's get going. Keep your wands lit and hold them close to the ground, they don't seem to like the light. Are you ok Ginny?"

"Yes," she squeaked quietly as she held onto Hermione's arm, stretching her wand out in front of her close to the ground.

As they went further along the path, skirting the rocky cliff to their left, the light from the ceiling became a bit brighter, and it became progressively so the further they walked. The beetles had now disappeared, and they could clearly see the path as it wound to the left up ahead. As they came around the bend, the light suddenly burst into startling radiance, making them shield their eyes against the glare.

"The gate!" shouted Harry, pointing to the cliff face on his left. "Come on."

The path led directly up to the bronze gate, which was sunk into the rocky cliff face, and Ron and Ginny waited until Harry and Hermione went through the usual process of opening it.

"Well we're half way through the Duat," said Ginny as she followed the other three through the gate. "We've had a few scares but we're still all in one piece. I'm beginning to wonder whether Margot's dream was just that, and not a vision of the future."

The others didn't reply - they didn't want to tempt fate.

They looked around the seventh hour of the Duat in surprise. It was so unlike the others they'd come through - the floor was completely smooth and grey, as was the ceiling and the two walls that disappeared into the distance on either side of them. The strange place was completely featureless, and it stretched before them as far as they could see. It was a fairly gloomy place, but the diffuse light that sprung from the walls and ceiling allowed them to see without any restriction.

Ron reached out and touched the wall. "It's cold," he said, "and completely smooth. I don't think it's rock or anything - I haven't a clue what it's made of."

The others ran their hands down the wall and then felt the floor. Hermione shook her head. "It feels a bit like cold steel, but I really don't know what it is."

"Which way shall we go?" asked Ginny.

"Straight ahead, I think," Harry replied. The four stepped into the seventh hour and walked across the smooth floor side by side, the two girls arm in arm in the middle.

"What's that?" said Ron suddenly, pointing straight ahead. Low down on the horizon they could just make out some movement. They stopped and stared, waiting to see if whatever was out there would come any closer - and it did.

"Oh hell!" shouted Ron as the form drew ever nearer. He reached out and pulled Ginny and Hermione behind him, then stepped across to stand beside Harry.

"That's one hell of a snake!" gasped Ron.

"And it's no ordinary snake!" Harry added. The large form slithered quickly towards them, too quickly for the four to make a dash back to the wall, and in any case there was absolutely no cover to hide behind.

The snake came to within twenty yards of them and then reared up into the air, its tongue flicking grotesquely out of its mouth. The head was that of a completely bald man, which was why his snake's tongue was so shocking to see. But then, it was no more shocking than his very long and thick body.

The snake spoke with a low, gravelly voice, "You are trespassing in my realm. You will be devoured."

"Wh... who are you?" asked Harry.

"I am Apophis, the god of serpents, and you should not be in this place. I will allow you a short time to prepare before I strike."

"Bugger that!" shouted Ron as he raised his wand and sent a stupefy spell at the snake's head. Apophis raised his head to the ceiling and laughed loudly. Harry, Hermione and Ginny also sent spells at the snake, but had the same negative result as Ron. They edged back slowly, and cringed when Apophis stopped laughing and struck down with his head, stopping only three feet from the four.

"Your efforts are pitiful. Do you think you can hurt Apophis?" Again he raised himself up into the air and roared loudly with laughter.

"Wh... what're we going to do?" whispered Ginny. Harry and Ron shielded the two girls as they edged further back away from the snake.

"Hold onto us," whispered Hermione. "Harry, let's Zapparate - concentrate on the horizon straight ahead." Ron and Ginny held onto their two friends as Harry and Hermione closed their eyes and concentrated. When they opened them again, it was to see the dreadful sight of Apophis looking down at them with disdain.

"You cannot use your puny magic to transport yourselves through my realm! Only I have that power here. Now prepare to die!"

Then, Apophis lowered his head and fixed the four in a deadly gaze, whispering, "I tire of your silly games." He opened his mouth wide, revealing two deadly fangs, and stretched himself up, high into the air. Then he struck powerfully down. The four closed their eyes, waiting for the crunching pain that would send them into oblivion.

Five seconds later, Harry was still waiting for the impact. He slowly opened his eyes and gasped at the incredible sight before him. Apophis was still above them, his fangs no more than five feet away from them, but he was completely still, frozen in the act of his deadly strike. Twenty white-cloaked figures, their heads completely covered by their hoods, stood around the snake, their arms raised towards him. One of the figures turned and slowly walked up to the four friends.

The figure stopped and bowed slightly, then looked at each of them and spoke in a soft, gentle voice, "We have been sent to protect you through this most dangerous of hours. We have certain... powers... that can suspend time in a localised area. Apophis has been isolated for the moment, but he will soon realise that something is amiss and will exert his own formidable powers to escape from his time cocoon. I strongly recommend that you make all haste to the far side and quickly enter the next gate."

"Who are you?" asked Harry, unsuccessfully trying to see the face hidden behind the hood.

"We are of the Shemsu-hor, spirits of the light allied to Horus and Hathor - it is they who watch your progress through the Duat. We were summoned by them to give protection through this hour, but be warned that ahead lies a place where you cannot be protected. In that place, you can survive only by your own actions. But you must hurry - Apophis will soon have to be unleashed. Go now!"

"Th... thanks for your help," Harry shouted as he ran, closely followed by the others, across the featureless ground towards the horizon.

They ran quickly through the eerie silence, spurred on by the warning, hoping against hope that they'd reach the gate before the roars of an enraged Apophis reached their ears. "There it is," gasped Ron, pointing to the bronze gate sunk into the wall slightly to their right.

They rushed up and Harry hurriedly placed the Eye in the depression at the centre just as they heard the sound of the raging snake in the distance. Harry and Hermione said the spell to open the gate as Ron and Ginny looked across the featureless plain in horror where they could see Apophis streaking towards them. The door slowly opened - very slowly - too slowly for their liking.

Ginny squeezed through first, quickly followed by the others. They turned just inside the eighth hour and watched the door, which was still swinging open. Apophis raged right outside the door, but he couldn't enter - he couldn't leave his realm. They sighed with relief as the gate swung back and closed, shutting out the terrible roars. Then they turned and looked into the eighth hour of the Duat.

Voldemort paced backwards and forwards across the canyon floor, listening to the sounds of fighting. His mind was focussed on retrieving the spells from the cave and he hissed impatiently, waiting for one of his minions to tell him that the battle had been won. He stopped when Lucius trotted around the bend. "Well?"

"We've got most of them my Lord. We've cleared the Aurors defending this end of the canyon but there's about thirty still covering the cave from the opposite side, and there's still about ten Aurors in the cave itself. They've chosen their cover well, so it's going to take time to winkle them all out."

"Show me where they are Lucius," he said as he strode down the canyon. They stopped at the bend and Lucius pointed to the left, where the remnants of the three teams were at the base of the cliff. Voldemort scanned the cliff face behind, illuminated by the many yellow-glowing Death Eaters below.

"There!" he said suddenly, pointing to a section of overhanging rock at the top of the cliff. He raised his wand and closed his eyes as he gathered his powers. Then he sent a powerful beam of energy to a spot just below the overhang. It hit with ferocious power, sending a shower of rocks to the ground below. Then the overhanging rock sagged, stopped, and then sagged again, teetering precariously while loose rocks fell to the ground amongst the terrified Aurors below. Some of them panicked and ran away from the cliff base and were quickly dispatched by the waiting Death Eaters, but Dave, Oliver, Katie, John and a few others ran towards the cliff and dived between a jumble of rocks protruding from the canyon floor, hoping to find some sort of cover when the mountain fell on them.

Then the massive rock above gave up its battle to stay where it had rested for countless ages and toppled into the canyon below, bringing with it a shower of rocks of varying sizes. Most of the Aurors below were crushed, some managed to avoid the rocks but were picked off by the Death Eaters, and a pitiful few were huddled up against the base of the cliff where there was some semblance of protection.

Oliver pushed Katie to the ground and covered her with his body when the deluge of rocks struck. They were protected from the ravages of the larger rocks that fell by the surrounding rocky cover, but were quickly covered by the smaller rocks and loose dirt and sand that rained down from above.

The ten Aurors remaining in the cave looked on with horror as they saw the fate suffered by their colleagues opposite, and they were filled with a rage that gave them the courage to continue defending their hopeless position. For the next fifteen minutes they gamely prevented the hundred or so remaining Death Eaters overrunning them, but their number was gradually being whittled down. The last of them died at the hands of Voldemort, who flung the killing curse that sent him tumbling out of the cave to the rocks below.

Then, at last, silence rained in the canyon. The Death Eaters rose from their positions and gathered around their master below the cave. Voldemort looked up at the cave and then back down at his followers. "We have won a great victory here tonight. I am proud of your efforts and you will all be rewarded." He pointed up at the cave. "In that cave lies the final piece of our great quest, the spells that will activate the Disc of Gates. Savour the moment, my loyal servants, the moment when the Dark Side finally emerges from its slumber and brings order to the world. No longer will the Earth suffer the indignity of Mudbloods - it will rejoice when the superior gaze of Purebloods looks on its surface and the Dark reigns supreme."

The gathered Death Eaters roared their approval and looked rapturously at their leader, who swept his arm around the canyon floor. "Lucius, pick five of my followers to join us in the cave. The rest of you scour the battlefield and revive any of your colleagues who are stunned. Then guard the Portkey site - try to identify and destroy the Portkey, but if you can't, make sure that any Aurors who come through are stopped - I need time to retrieve the spells. Now go, quickly."

Voldemort led Lucius, Wormtail, Travis, Crabbe and the other five Death Eaters up the ladder that had been reset in place, then stepped over the bodies of the Aurors towards the back of the cave, holding his wand before him. He'd set the detection spell and walked in the direction where the dark green light glowed brightest. He reached the back of the cave and saw a low, narrow tunnel. He bent his head and walked slowly into the corridor. He walked for only about ten yards before he came up against the bare rock barring any further progress, but he knew he was very close, his glowing wand had gradually increased in brightness the further into the tunnel he walked.

He looked at the ground and saw the footprints in the sand leading up to the almost invisible entrance low down in the rock wall. He quickly lay down on his stomach and crawled through to the chamber beyond, staring intently at the centre of the floor where the white cover stone lay exposed. He stood and walked over, nodding in satisfaction as he saw the glowing silvery script written on the stone.

He pointed his wand at the stone, breathing deeply as he concentrated, feeling his magical powers build. "*KU KUR - GAZ NURUM*" he shouted and watched the dense black light hit the stone. He quickly crawled back down the connecting tunnel and into the narrow corridor, not wanting to be near when the terrible sounds of battle between the ancient spells began.

He walked back into the cave, hearing the distant screeching that signalled the first phase of the battle to uncover the spells. He sat on the ground beside his close servants while the five Death Eaters kept watch at the cave entrance. Soon, the distant screeching was replaced by a deep pulsing sound and Voldemort knew that it was now only a matter of time before the spells were his.

"Well there's not much doubt about which way we've got to go," said Ron, looking into the eighth hour of the Duat. The gate had just closed behind them, shutting off the raging Apophis, and they stood looking at the immense wall of rock about fifty yards in front of them. It rose right up to the ceiling, about thirty yards above, and stretched to left and right until it met the rocky walls of the realm. A sandy path led from the gate right up to the base of the rock, and disappeared into a cave of about fifteen feet high by eight feet wide on the outside.

They stared intently around to make sure nothing moved before Harry led them onto the path towards the cave. They walked quickly, their experience in the realm of Apophis making them a bit nervous of open spaces, but stopped suddenly just before they came to the entrance. The air at the centre of the cave entrance shimmered and a tall figure, dressed in a long white cloak, appeared. His age was uncertain, but his demeanour was that of an academic, his sparkling blue eyes bearing the unmistakable aura of great wisdom.

He smiled benignly at the four and held out his right hand towards them, speaking with a calm, assured voice, "Have no fear, I come to help not to hinder. Listen carefully to what I have to say." He paused as he dropped his hand back to his side.

"This is the hour of eight. Beyond these rocky walls are eight sealed gates, each protected by eight armed guards. The guards will allow passage through the hour only if you correctly say the name of the god that each gate represents. Prepare yourselves before you proceed into the tunnels and do not falter, for the guards will not look on you kindly if you speak the wrong name."

The spirit shimmered and disappeared, leaving three confused friends looking in one direction - directly at Hermione.

"What," she said nervously. "You think I understood all that?"

"Well if you didn't," said Ron, "you can imagine how much the rest of us understood."

Harry sat on the cool sand outside the cave entrance. "Come and sit down and let's look at this logically."

"I should be the one saying that Harry," said Hermione, smiling at her boyfriend as she sat down beside him.

Harry put up his hand to stop the expected comment from Ron. "I know. You can think a lot better on a full stomach. Let's see what we've got left." He rummaged in the rucksack and pulled out four packets of sandwiches and four pasties, which he passed around to the others.

"Now let's see," he mumbled through a mouthful of pastie. "We've got to go through eight gates."

"And there's eight guards at each of them," said Ginny. "What do you think he meant by them not looking on us kindly if we give the wrong answer? You don't think they'll try to kill us do you?"

"I wouldn't put it past them Ginny," said Ron, "so we'd better make sure we give the right names. And talking of that, I don't even know eight gods, let alone their names!"

"I assume they mean Egyptian gods?" Harry asked.

"I think that's a reasonable assumption Harry," Hermione replied, "but which eight?"

They stared glumly at each other as they finished off their meal, all of them deep in thought.

"Wait a minute!" exclaimed Harry. "It's got to be something to do with the number eight! This is the eighth hour; there are eight gates and eight guards at each one. What do we know about the number eight and gods?" He looked expectantly at Hermione, hoping that she could think of the thing that nagged at the edges of his mind.

"Of course!" Hermione exclaimed. "You're absolutely right Harry. Eight in ancient Egyptian is Shmun, right?" Harry nodded.

"And Shmun is the ancient Egyptian name for Hermopolis," she continued, thinking rapidly. "Now apart from being the place where Thoth was worshiped, Hermopolis is also the place where the Egyptian Creation myth originated - the Ogdoad. The Ogdoad consisted of eight personified primeval forces, or gods, conceived as four couples of deities. Each of the four male gods had a female counterpart, or wife."

Harry smiled at Hermione. "I knew you'd get it Hermi. There was something lurking on the edge of my mind and now that you've said it, it's come back to me. I remember reading about it when we did the research into Hermopolis. Can you remember the names of the eight gods?"

Hermione screwed up her eyes in concentration. "Now let's see. There were the gods of the primeval waters, Nun and Naunet, the gods of boundlessness, or infinity, Heh and Hauhet. Now who were the other two pairs... yes, there were the gods of darkness, Kek and Kauket, and the gods of the air, or invisible power, Amun and Amaunet."

She smiled widely as the other three patted her on the back, but frowned when Ron ruffled her hair.

"Now all we have to work out is which gate belongs to which god," said Ginny.

Hermione's face fell. "There's no way we can work that out from here. We'll have to see if there're any clues when we come to each gate."

"And if there aren't?" asked Ron. No one answered.

"Come on then," said Harry, getting to his feet, "let's get to it."

They walked side-by-side into the cave and had to light their wands as they moved further into the darkness. After walking straight for about twenty yards, the path wound to the left, where they came to the first gate. The path widened as it approached the gate, and they stopped, staring at the eight burly guards that stood four to each side of it. The gate was not unlike the gates that led into each hour of the Duat, but there was no depression in the shape of the Eye of Horus at its centre. The guards hadn't moved as they approached, they just stood looking inscrutably at them, holding their lethal-looking spears at their sides. Apart from loincloths and odd-looking helmets, they were quite naked.

They walked a bit closer, gazing at the gate and the rock walls, looking for any clue that would tell them to which god the gate belonged, but they could see nothing that could help.

"What about those funny helmets they're wearing?" whispered Ginny. All eight guards wore the same shaped helmet, a round metal hat with a crest on top in the shape of an eight on its side.

"That's the universal sign for infinity," whispered Hermione. "So it must either be Heh or Hauhet."

"But which one?" whispered Harry. "Those guards are male, so do you think it's Heh?"

"I think so Harry," said Hermione. "If it was Hauhet, there'd probably be the standard hieroglyph for female on the crest."

"Shall we risk it?" asked Ron.

They looked at each other worriedly; then Harry took a deep breath and walked closer to the gate. The eight guards stepped over to bar the way, but they still said nothing. Harry glanced back at the others and then turned once more to face the guards. "Heh," he said loudly, tensing ready to spring back if the guards showed any aggressive tendencies.

But the guards stepped back to each side of the gate, which swung silently open. Harry nervously walked forward, glancing from one side to the other in case a spear came in his direction, but he was allowed to pass through. The others quickly followed and the gate closed silently behind them.

The next gate was immediately in front of them, no more than ten yards away. The gate was exactly like the last one, and so were the guards who stood four to each side of it. The only difference was the crest on each of their helmets - an ellipse on its side and a half moon above it.

"That's the hieroglyphic for female," said Harry pointing to one of the helmets. "But that's all. There's nothing to indicate which female."

"Since everything is exactly the same as the last gate apart from the female sign," said Hermione, "I think it must be Hauhet."

They all looked around the walls, the floor, the ceiling and the gate in case there was any other indication, but there was none. Harry again stepped up to the gate and again the guards moved to bar the way. "Hauhet," he said loudly.

The guards moved to the side and the gate swung open, allowing all four to walk through.

"Two down, six to go," said Ron.

They walked on along the sandy floor and followed the path to the right where they came to the next gate. This time the guards, four on each side of the gate, weren't wearing helmets, only the brief loincloth that the others had worn. They held the same wicked-looking spears at their sides and stood unflinching as the four approached.

"There's got to be something on the walls, floor or ceiling," whispered Hermione. They all scrutinised the entire area but could find nothing. There wasn't any sort of inscription or sign on the gate either.

"This is crazy," said Ron. "There's got to be something here. But if there is, it's bloody invisible!"

Hermione's eyes opened wide. "Brilliant Ron! Invisible - they're not wearing any helmets like the last lot of guards. Their helmets must be invisible - invisible power is one of the attributes of Amun and Amaunet. And I think this must be Amun's gate since there's nothing here to suggest a female."

Harry again walked up to the guards and said, "Amun." The guards stepped back and the gate swung open.

The next gate wasn't immediately on the other side - the path stretched ahead into the gloomy distance. They walked on for another fifty yards before they came to it. This time, the guards wore helmets, but there weren't any crests at the top. They also wore loincloths, but this time there were symbols decorating the fronts.

"The hieroglyphs for female," said Hermione. "But which female?"

Harry held his head to one side, listening intently. "Can you hear that?" He walked a bit closer to the gate and the sound grew a bit louder. "Come here and listen."

"That's the sound of running water," said Ginny.

Hermione nodded. "You're right. So this must be Naunet - the goddess of the primeval waters."

This time, Hermione stepped up and the guards moved to bar her way. "Naunet," she said. The guards moved to each side and the gate swung open.

"Half way through," said Ron as they walked on along the sandy floor.

The next gate was forty yards further on, around a right-hand bend in the path. Again, the eight guards had the symbol for a female on their loincloths, and they also wore helmets, but without a crest on top.

"Do you think that's Amaunet?" asked Ginny. "The crest's invisible."

"I don't know Ginny," said Hermione. "The guards at Amun's gate didn't have any helmets at all, so I'd expect the same for his wife."

"The only other female's gate we haven't come through, apart from Amaunet's, is Kauket," said Harry. "Do you think it could be her?"

"It may well be Harry," said Hermione. "Perhaps there's a crest on those helmets but we can't see it because it's hidden by the dark - darkness is the attribute of Kauket."

Harry walked closer and peered intently at the helmet worn by the nearest guard. "There *is* a sort of blackness there," he said, then spoke loudly, "Kauket."

The guards stepped aside and let Harry pass through the open gateway.

The next gate was different. There were no guards standing to each side.

"Perhaps they're on their tea break," cracked Ron.

"I really don't think so Ron," said Hermione. "I think they're there, but we can't see them. And if that's the case it must either be Kek, the god of darkness, or Amaunet, the goddess of invisible power."

"If it's Amaunet, there'll be a female symbol somewhere," said Harry.

He walked up to the gate for a close look, and jumped when he felt bear skin brush against his hand. He quickly stepped back. "You were right Hermi. One of the guards brushed against me when he stepped across to bar the way. But I didn't see any area of blackness like I did with Kauket."

"So it may be Amaunet then," said Ginny. "Perhaps the female symbol is invisible too."

"What do you think Hermione?" asked Harry.

"I'll go along with Ginny," she replied. "... I think. No wait; let's not be too rash. We'd better scrutinise every bit of surface around the gate first, just in case there's the female symbol somewhere."

They spent the next ten minutes looking at every inch of wall, floor and ceiling but they couldn't find a female symbol, or any other symbol. Harry again stepped close to the gate and stared intently at the area where he knew the guards would be standing. He could see absolutely nothing. He shook his head slowly, his mind filled with doubt, and walked back to his friends.

"Oh bugger it!" exclaimed Ron, stepping up close to the gate. He closed his eyes and said loudly, "Amaunet."

The gate swung open. Ron grinned as he looked back at the other three, but soon lost it when Ginny stormed up to him and caught him a hefty slap on his arm. "You bloody great idiot," she shouted. "You could have been killed and you wouldn't have seen it coming."

Harry and Hermione stepped gingerly around the siblings and on through the gate. "Are you two coming?" said Harry as he looked back.

Ginny stormed away from her brother, who followed more slowly. "Well somebody had to do something didn't they?" he said pleadingly.

Hermione shook her head. "This is a dangerous place Ron. It doesn't always pay to take chances."

Ginny was still fuming as they walked up to the seventh gate. "What have we got left Hermione?" she asked.

"Nun and Kek," she replied.

This time, the guards were visible and all wore helmets with crests at the top. The crest was a very large and ornate arrangement, showing a human figure with his arms raised above his head, supporting a boat that looked very much like the barque of Ra they'd sailed in earlier.

"I think it's Nun," said Hermione. "I'm sure I read somewhere that he was sometimes depicted exactly like that crest, and the boat signifies water - the primeval waters of Nun."

Harry stepped up and said, "Nun." The guards stood aside and the four walked through the open gate and immediately came to the final gate, which opened after Harry said the last name - Kek - to the guards.

They emerged from the realm of gates, still walking along the sandy path, and out from a cave into the sunlight. They saw the ninth gate of the Duat about fifty yards away, sunk into the rock wall. Five minutes later they stood just inside the ninth hour, looking with disbelief at what was before them.

"I didn't expect to see a jungle down here!" exclaimed Ron, looking at the densely packed trees. An overgrown path led into the confusion of vegetation and disappeared into the dark interior of the forest.

"What jungle!" exclaimed Ginny. "You need to see an optician Ron! All I can see are lush green meadows and temples!"

Harry looked oddly at his two friends. "You both need glasses. There's a big lake out there! Hermione?"

They looked at Hermione, who stood with her eyes tightly shut. She whispered, "There's something in here trying to confuse us. What I saw was a land of tall craggy mountains and canyons. I think that something's getting into our minds and making us see different things. Quick, close your eyes and come close." She reached out her hands and gestured to the others.

They stood in a tight circle, holding each other tightly, while Harry and Hermione joined minds and reached out to their friends, mentally bringing them into the protective fold of their joint consciousness. Somewhere in the distance, they heard a terrible wailing noise. Hermione sent her thoughts to the others, 'I think we've upset somebody or something. I think we've managed to thwart the confusion. Now open your eyes and say what you can see - you first Ron.'

Ron opened his eyes and slowly looked around the ninth hour. It was a brightly lit desert with sand and rocky outcrops all over the place. A rough path led into the wilderness, winding away into the distance, and where the path disappeared over the horizon he could see a faint reddish radiance dancing over the sand. One by one, the other three opened their eyes and confirmed that they saw what Ron had seen.

"Do you think that this is the real landscape?" asked Harry.

"If we can all see the same thing, then I think it is," Hermione replied. "But we'd better remain in contact as we follow the path, just in case it tries to confuse us again."

"What do you think it is Hermione?" asked Ginny.

"I really don't know. There was nothing in the Amduat about this, but whatever that reddish haze is I don't think it's very friendly."

"Come on, let's start moving," said Harry. They held onto each other as they slowly walked into the desert, all the while keeping their eyes on the dancing red glow on the horizon. The wailing noise had stopped, but they could now hear faint moaning sounds coming from all around them. They looked around fearfully, but they could see nothing.

They walked on along the path through the ninth hour, but the dancing red glow always seemed to be on the horizon in front of them, not getting any nearer. The moaning sounds became louder the further they walked, but still nothing was in sight that could be causing it.

"Do you think it's more of those lost souls - shades?" asked Ron.

"Might be Ron," said Hermione, "but if it is, they're not showing themselves like the ones we came across before."

"That red haze seems to be moving away from us," said Harry. "It's always on the horizon, almost as if it's trying to lead us into a trap or something. Let's close our eyes and concentrate again."

They stood as before, concentrating on a clear image generated by Harry and Hermione. Harry opened his eyes, but saw the same landscape as before, the path winding into the distance and the red haze dancing on the horizon.

They moved on, now sure that their minds weren't being confused again. Then there was a change. The moaning sounds stopped and the dancing red haze disappeared. The land became deadly silent, not a sound could be heard.

"This is just as bad as the moaning," whispered Ginny fearfully. "It's a bit like the calm before the storm."

They all looked around the parched desolation, feeling very vulnerable, but nothing moved. They walked on in silence, their fears slowly building as they went. The silence was palpable, the absence of movement frightening. Hermione stopped, clutching Harry and her two friends tightly to her. She closed her eyes and sent her thoughts to the others, 'Whatever it is, it's using a very subtle form of attack. It's trying to play on our natural fears of the unknown. We've got to remain positive - try not to think about what might or might not be out there. Just try to keep focussed on getting to the other side of this hour.'

They walked on, concentrating on what Hermione had said. Then the wailing and moaning started up again, this time louder than before. The dancing red haze again appeared, but this time over to their left hand side, and its movements appeared almost feverish. All around, they could just make out the dark shapes of shades at the edge of their vision, moaning in torment.

The red haze began to take on a more distinct shape - the shimmering figure of a very large man with grotesque features, his mouth wide open and drawn down at the edges, portraying the personification of torment as he wailed into the desert sky. He moved closer to the four, but then stopped and moved back, his wailing filling the air.

"We're winning," Hermione shouted above the noise. "He can't touch us! As long as we remain together and focussed on our target of getting through this hour, he can't do anything to us."

They concentrated hard as they walked across the desert, their fears now completely dispelled. They climbed a gentle slope and reached the top of a low ridge where they stopped, elated to see the tenth gate only a hundred yards or so in front of them. They moved quickly towards it and stopped, looking back at the tormented red man who gazed down at them from the top of the ridge. The dark shades stood at his side, now defeated in their attempts to halt their progress. The shades slowly moved back down the far side of the ridge and disappeared from sight, and with a final wail, so did the red man.

Harry and Hermione opened the gate and they all walked through.

Oliver groaned as he slowly regained consciousness. He slowly opened his eyes but could see nothing. At first he thought he was blind and moved his head in panic, but felt the relief wash over him as he saw a dim light filter through the rocks, sand and dirt that covered him. He raised himself slowly, feeling the weight of the debris, and struggled to free himself. He turned and lay on his back, methodically moving his arms and legs to ascertain if anything had been broken, and sighed when he felt that everything seemed to be in working order. He held his hand on the back of his head and felt a large lump and the wetness of blood, evidence of a glancing blow by a rock that had fallen from above.

Then he froze, his mind in panic as he thought of Katie. "Katie..." he croaked quietly, turning on his side. Katie lay unconscious, her body clear of debris but with a nasty gash high up on her forehead, the dried blood matted in her hair. Oliver put his left hand behind her head and slowly raised it towards him, desperately searching for any further injuries.

"Oliver," she whispered as her eyes fluttered open. He pulled her tightly against him, smiling with relief.

"Try to move your hands and legs Katie," he whispered. "Make sure that nothing's broken."

After a few moments, Katie whispered, "I don't think anything's broken, but I've got one hell of a headache!"

"Me too," Oliver replied. "We've got to see if the others are ok. Can you move?"

Katie nodded and lifted herself slowly. They looked at the jumble of fallen rocks that lay all around them, and just to one side the huge boulder that had been dislodged from the top of the cliff. Katie gasped when she saw an arm protruding from beneath the boulder, and turned her head away, trying not to think about the state of her colleague who'd been caught beneath it. They both turned when they heard a groan coming from their other side, and dragged themselves over to where the sound was coming from, clearing the debris as best they could.

"Dave!" said Oliver quietly, as Dave Henson lifted his head, sending a shower of dirt down around his face. "Are you all right?"

"I think so Oliver," he croaked. "Nothing's broken anyway. What about the others?"

Oliver slowly shook his head. "I don't know Dave, there's a hell of a mess around here; I think the whole cliff face came down on us. We'd better look around and see if anyone else is still alive."

Dave nodded. "Before we start moving around, let's see where the Death Eaters are."

Ten minutes later, they'd found John Ballot and six other Aurors who'd survived the rock fall. John's left arm and right leg had been broken, and three of the others also had broken legs or ankles. The other three, like Oliver, Katie and Dave, were lucky to have escaped with only superficial injuries and were able to move about with only slight discomfort.

They made the more badly injured as comfortable as possible, propping them up against some of the larger fallen rocks, and then moved quietly forward through the debris to get a better view of the canyon floor and the Spell cave. They saw that the canyon was now empty, but could hear the sounds of talking and movement from around the bend to their left. They could also see the five Death Eaters sitting at the edge of the cave, talking together, and not appearing to be very interested in watching the canyon below.

"They probably think we're all dead," whispered Dave.

"What's that low pulsating?" asked one of the Aurors.

"It's coming from inside the cave," said Dave. "It must be 'You Know Who' trying to uncover the spells."

"We've got to do something Dave," whispered Oliver. "We can't let him get his hands on those spells."

Dave grinned wryly at Oliver. "Look at us Oliver, six left still standing out of two hundred. What can we possibly do to stop him! I can't ask you to do any more than you've done already - it'll just be suicide."

"It'll be certain death for us all, and far more than just the few of us if he gets his hands on those spells," said Oliver. "I'm willing to try, but I think Katie should apparate out of here and try to get back home. The ministry needs to know what's happened here tonight."

"No way Oliver!" hissed Katie. "I'm not leaving you here. If you're willing to try then so am I."

"Oliver's right Katie," said Dave. "It doesn't look as if our man got through to bring back reinforcements. We need to get word back to headquarters."

"Then send John Ballot back," she persisted. "He can't fight but I can."

"What about you three?" he asked the other Aurors. They nodded their willingness to try one final time to stop Voldemort getting at the spells. They all moved back and sat besides the four injured Aurors.

Dave spoke quietly to John and the other injured aurors. "I want you to apparate out of the canyon and lay low until the Portkey site is clear. Then get back to headquarters and tell them what's happened. We six are going to make a final attempt to stop him getting at the spells."

"That's madness Dave," said John. "You'll all be killed."

"Our minds are made up," Dave replied. "Now get out of here - that's an order."

The colleagues solemnly shook hands and the four injured disappeared, Apparating to the gully that ran outside the canyon to await their chance to use the Portkey back to Salisbury Plain.

"We'll split into two groups," said Dave. "You take one group Oliver - Katie and Will - to the left-hand side of the cave and I'll take you other two to the right. You fling a spell up at the

Death Eaters Oliver, and when they look down to return your fire, we'll take them from the other side. After that, well, we'll just play it by ear."

They moved to the edge of the tumbled rocks and then started crawling along the canyon floor to their respective positions, being careful not to make any noise. Oliver, Katie and Will reached the base of the cave at the left and waited for Dave to give the signal to start their assault.

The four walked into a watery tenth hour of the Duat, the gloom of night lit only by the shining light on top of the boat that waited at the water's edge.

"It's the barque of Ra again," said Harry.

"And it looks like we've got the same driver," said Ron, gazing at the cloaked ferryman at the rear of the barque, whose face was still completely covered by the large hood. The ferryman lifted his right arm and pointed to the middle of the boat.

"He wants us to get in, come on," said Hermione, leading the others down to the shore and stepping up onto the wooden plank and into the boat. When they were all on board, the ferryman pushed off into the calm waters of the lake, using his pole as he'd done before in the second hour of the Duat.

They gathered at the front and tried to see where the ferryman was taking them, but they could see only about fifty yards ahead, the smooth water shimmering in the light cast from the top of the mast. Soon, the water became a bit more choppy and they felt the boat move slightly from side to side.

"We've just entered a strong current," said Ron, looking down at the water in front of the boat. Ginny moved over and leaned out over the side, looking down at the swiftly moving current.

"Aaarrggghh," she shouted, and quickly stepped back into the centre of the boat. "There're bodies in the water!"

The other three looked out over the side of the boat and saw a number of bodies, floating on their backs, their deathly-white faces staring up at the rocky ceiling with sightless eyes.

"I read about this in the Amduat," said Hermione with a shudder. "They're the souls of the drowned who were denied a proper burial. They're being guided by Horus towards the next hour of the Duat."

"Where is he?" said Ron, looking around.

"He's not here, Ron!" said Hermione. "He just makes the current flow to the next gate so that the drowned people will be sucked towards it."

"Well at least they're not trying to get at us," said Ginny.

The barque of Ra sped quickly on to the far shore of the lake, and soon a wooden jetty came into sight. "I don't believe this," said Ron. "All we've had to do in this hour is climb onto a boat. Where're the shades, the demons, the puzzles?"

"Don't knock it Ron," Harry replied. "Just enjoy the ride."

The ferryman brought the boat smoothly alongside the wooden jetty, and held it steady while the four youngsters climbed out. Then he pushed off once more, heading back to the far side of the tenth hour.

"I wouldn't fancy spending a night down the pub with him!" exclaimed Ron. "Not exactly the talkative type is he?"

"What makes you think it's a him Ron?" asked Ginny.

"And what makes you think he, she or it can speak?" added Hermione, grinning at the confused Ron.

"Come on," said Harry, chuckling, "let's find the eleventh gate." They walked down the small pier, stepped onto the shore and walked up to the rock wall. They now had to light their wands, the illumination from the barque of Ra having diminished to nothing as the ferryman poled the boat further and further back across the lake.

"There it is," shouted Ginny, pointing to her left. Harry and Hermione opened the gate in the usual way and waited for it to swing open. They walked through and entered a chamber about fifty feet long by thirty feet wide. The floor, walls and ceiling were made from shining white marble, in which were etched carvings of scenes from ancient Egypt.

They jumped when four muscular Nubian guards approached, two from either side. Each of the guards carried a spear, similar to the ones held by the guards in the eighth hour. One of them gestured with his spear towards the front of the chamber, and started walking slowly forward. The four looked nervously at their escort, but they didn't seem to be that unfriendly, merely workmanlike in their manner. When they reached the far side of the chamber, the leading two guards opened a large door and gestured for the four to enter.

They walked into a smaller chamber but the guards didn't follow, the leading two merely closing the door behind them. The chamber was similar to the previous one, with scenes etched into the marble walls and ceiling, but at the far end was a raised dais on which stood five golden thrones.

The four looked curiously around the chamber as they walked towards the dais, but they couldn't see any way out of the place, apart from the way in which they'd just come. Then suddenly, a bright light sprung from the ceiling directly above the thrones, and five figures walked from what must have been a concealed entrance on the left.

The four teens looked wide-eyed at the five figures, who walked towards the thrones and sat down. All five, three men and two women, had the head of a different animal, but human bodies. The one at the centre, the man with the head of a jackal, stood and spoke.

"This is the hall of judgement, and I am Anubis. I, and my four fellow judges will determine whether you should proceed to the final hour of the Duat. We shall do this by assessing your actions in the previous ten hours of the Duat."

All five figures raised their right hand and sent five beams of yellow light at the four. The five beams merged and then spread into four white beams that covered the heads of the youngsters for several seconds before fading.

Anubis again spoke, "You have been judged and you have not been found wanting. You will be allowed entry into the last hour, but as with all things, the choice is yours."

He lifted his arm and pointed it at the wall to his left. The marble in the centre section of the wall shimmered and two bronze gates were revealed, both identical and both bearing the depression of the Eye of Horus.

"You must choose," said Anubis. "One gate leads to the Light and the end of your quest, but the other leads to darkness and death. I bid you fair passage."

Anubis led the other four judges back out of the hall of judgement and the four youngsters were left alone, gazing at the spot where they'd disappeared to the side of the dais.

"Phew!" exclaimed Ron. "They don't hang about do they? We didn't even get a chance to ask a few questions - like how do we choose which gate to go through."

"So Thoth must be behind one of these gates," said Harry. "But which one?"

"Let's see if there's any clues in here," said Ginny. "Do these carvings mean anything to you Hermione?"

Hermione walked around the walls and closely studied the carvings, which all seemed to follow the same theme. "I think they're all showing judgement scenes, like the one we just went through. They seem to follow on in sequence, ending in this one that shows the two gates."

They all clustered around the carving of the gates and peered at it closely. Hermione shook her head. "I can't see anything that'll help us. If only there were some hieroglyphics in the chamber."

They walked back over to the gates and scrutinised the area surrounding them, but there was nothing that indicated which gate was the right one to go through.

"See if the Eye will help us Harry," said Ron. "Perhaps it will glow brighter or something when it gets near the right gate."

Harry pulled the Eye from his robes and walked up to the left-hand gate, where he held it above his head, but the shining crystal at the centre of the Eye didn't increase in brightness. He moved over to the other gate but had the same result. He lowered the Eye and stared at the two gates in consternation. "I don't know!" he exclaimed.

The others walked up and stood beside Harry. They stared at the two gates intently, willing them to reveal the true nature of what lay behind them, but they just stood in stark, enigmatic silence.

Dave looked over at Oliver on the other side of the base of the cave and raised his hand. Then he dropped it swiftly in the signal for the attack to begin. Oliver stood back from the base of the cliff and pointed his wand at one of the Death Eaters who stood with his back to the canyon.

"*STUPEFY*" he shouted, and saw the Death Eater drop to the floor of the cave, stunned. The other four leaned over and saw Oliver below, then raised their wands, but Oliver ran back underneath the protection of the cliff face before they could send any curses in his direction. They leaned out of the cave, trying to pinpoint where Oliver was hiding, but all four fell to the canyon floor when Dave and the other two Aurors fired stunning spells from below the right-hand side of the cave.

"Come on," shouted Dave as he made a dash for the ladder. "You wait here at the bottom and I'll see what's happening inside the cave." He climbed quickly to the top and peered over the edge into the dark cave. When he saw that no one seemed to be inside, he gestured for his two Aurors to follow him up the ladder. The three stood at the top, wands held before them and peered into the gloom. Oliver, Katie and Will started up the ladder, ready to join them.

All was strangely silent as Dave slowly walked into the cave, trying to see into the darkness. All that could be heard was the weird low throbbing that came from somewhere inside.

Then, without warning, three sickly green beams sprayed out from the darkness at the back of the cave and Dave and his two companions fell to the ground, their staring but sightless eyes testimony to the killing curses that ended their brave lives.

"Get back down," shouted Oliver after he'd seen the fate of his colleagues. They scrambled back down the ladder and over the jumble of rocks at the base of the cave, taking what scant cover they could find behind some of the larger rocks there. Travis Wormtail, Lucius and Crabbe lay on the floor at the edge of the cave and started flinging curses down at the three Aurors, who returned stupefy curses that stunned both Crabbe and Travis.

Oliver pulled Katie closely towards him as Lucius and Travis peppered the rocks around them with curses, and then Voldemort strode into view, his face a mask of anger. He pointed his wand at the three hiding below and sent a powerful Flipendous curse towards them, blasting the rocks they were hiding behind. He sent two more powerful energy beams down at the three and hissed with satisfaction as he saw them roll down to the bottom of the canyon, where they lay unmoving and silent.

Then Voldemort laughed. "They dared to challenge me and lost. Revive those others Wormtail, and keep a sharp look out in case there are any more Aurors lurking around down there."

Wormtail did as he was bid and he, Crabbe and Travis kept watch over the dark canyon below, while Lucius and Voldemort sat further inside, making tentative plans for the future.

Travis and Crabbe chuckled when Wormtail told them what had happened, pointing down to the place where they could just make out the still forms of Oliver, Katie and Will.

"What are we going to do?" asked Ron impatiently. "We can't just stand here forever looking at these two bloody gates!"

"Harry," said Hermione. "Let's see if we can feel anything coming from behind them."

She reached out her hand for Harry to hold and then they both walked up to the left-hand gate. They closed their eyes and concentrated, trying to feel behind the bronze gate, trying to pick up any emotion or psychic vibration that would give them a clue as to what lay beyond.

Then they moved over to the other gate and did the same. After a few minutes they broke their connection and turned back around.

"Well?" asked Ginny.

Hermione shook her head. "Nothing very decisive, but we both felt that what lies behind the left-hand gate gave off slightly the better aura. But there wasn't a lot of difference between the two, in all honesty."

"Shall we risk the left one then?" asked Ron.

"Well I can't see what else we can do," said Harry. "Are we all agreed?"

They all nodded and Harry walked over and placed the Eye in the depression at the centre of the gate on the left. He then joined hands with Hermione and they said the final spell that opened the gate. Hermione still worried about the twelfth spell, but mentally shrugged - it was too late to work out what it meant now.

They all walked into the final hour of the Duat and the door clanged shut behind them.

"Oh Lord," breathed Hermione as she surveyed the landscape of the twelfth hour. "I hope we haven't picked the wrong gate!"

The rocky walls were close on both sides, seeming to press in on them. They glowed and flickered with an orangey-red light that lit up the otherwise dark realm. Columns of rock rose from the ground to the ceiling and they could see several pools of molten mud churning and bubbling between them. The narrow valley stretched before them into the distance, and they all shuddered at the stark cruelty of the landscape.

"Well there's only one way to go," said Harry.

"I just wish this place didn't remind me of what hell must look like," said Ron.

The ground was cold and hard as they walked along the bottom of the valley, their nostrils detecting the terrible stench of sulphur rising from the churning pools of mud. They looked around them fearfully, wondering if anything would attack them in this dreadful place. Hermione glanced at Harry walking beside her, his glasses reflecting the flickering light that

came from the cliffs on either side, and she suppressed a shudder. She was beginning to get a very bad feeling about this place, and she moved closer to her boyfriend, clasping his hand in a tight grip. They walked on into the darkness.

From somewhere up ahead there came the sound of hideous laughter, and the four came to a stop, pulling their wands from their robes. They looked around intently as they walked on, their dread building slowly.

"PREPARE TO DIE, MORTALS."

They all jumped at the powerful voice, and looked in horror at the man that stood before them.

"It's Seth," whispered Hermione. They all stared at the large and hunched man that blocked their path. His head was horrible - the head of an animal that none of them could recognise. His large, red eyes stared at them unblinking, and the slobbering mouth revealed a terrible set of fangs when he spoke.

"YOU HAVE NO RIGHT IN THIS REALM. YOU HAVE CHOSEN UNWISELY AND I WILL NOW CONSIGN YOU ALL TO THE EVERLASTING DARKNESS."

"Quick Harry," shouted Hermione. "Use the Eye. If anything can beat Seth it's the Eye of Horus."

Harry quickly pulled the Eye from his robes and lifted it above his head, pointing it directly at Seth.

Ron shouted in defiance at the horror before him, "Horus took your left one, and now we'll take the other!"

Seth roared with rage and pointed his right hand at Harry. A powerful red beam shot straight at him and hit the Eye at the centre. Harry gasped when the Eye suddenly disappeared

Seth laughed hideously. "I'VE TAKEN THE EYE BEFORE AND IT'S SIMPLE FOR ME TO DO IT AGAIN. NOW DIE!"

"Harry quick - let's try to Zapparate. Hold onto us you two."

Harry reached out and held Hermione's hand, but it was too late. Before they'd had time to Zapparate, another powerful red beam flung by Seth caught all four of them at the same time.

Harry looked at Seth with horror, eyes wide, as he felt the life slowly draining from his body. He turned to look at Hermione, trying to connect their minds, but he was powerless to do anything. His last thought was one of despair as he saw the look of shock and horror in the eyes of his beautiful girlfriend. They all fell slowly to the rocky floor, as if in a dream, and lay side by side as they died - friends in life and friends in death. They were dead by the time that Seth turned and walked back into the depths of his realm, and all lay still and dark in that terrible place of death.

Further back down the valley, the astral glow that was Margot watched in horror as a cry of despair escaped from her taugth throat. She lifted her hands over her mouth and gasped as the

tears streamed down her anguished face, looking at the four prone figures as they lay, unmoving and lifeless, on the cold, hard floor.

Chapter 14 Thoth

Sirius paced agitatedly backwards and forwards between the two paws of the Sphinx, glancing alternately at the eastern sky and towards the group sitting with their backs against the Sphinx's right leg. They were all agitated, fearful of what may or may not have happened to the four youngsters in the light of Margot's dream.

Sirius walked up to Ceri, who was sitting beside Bill. "What time is it now?"

"About five minutes later than the last time you asked me," she replied. "Come and sit down, Sirius, you're going to wear yourself out walking around all the time."

"I can't relax Ceri - it's not long 'till dawn. I just hope those four kids are all right."

"We're all worried Sirius," she said, glancing at Bill who was staring dejectedly at the sandy ground, "but they'll be ok, I'm sure of it."

Ceri looked at Bill once more, rubbing his shoulder, trying to ease his fears, fears that he'd hardly stopped talking about all night. None of the group had been able to get any sleep that night; they'd initially talked about the quest and Margot's dream and then, as the night wore endlessly on, they'd separated into three smaller groups, talking quietly or just gazing into the night sky. Nadine and Charlie sat huddled together, Nadine whispering words of comfort. Sirius, when he wasn't pacing about, sat with Remus, and Ceri sat next to Bill, who was taking the revelation of Margot's dream really hard. He knew, of course, that the quest was dangerous, but he'd perceived that danger coming from Death Eaters rather than the quest itself.

Sirius sat back down alongside Remus, glancing every so often at Bill and Ceri. Then the first faint glow of the false dawn started to light up the eastern sky. Everyone now stood up and started walking around the Sphinx enclosure, looking up at the limestone walls, the eroded body and head of the Sphinx itself, and towards the open ground towards the east, hoping to spot the four youngsters approach. Then the first rays of the sun shot from the eastern horizon and lit up the Sphinx.

They all became more alert, and Remus ran outside the enclosure, climbed up onto the limestone cliffs and peered all around below and over towards the pyramids, but there was no sign of them. Fifteen minutes later, they began to get very anxious.

"I'm not leaving here until they get back!" said Sirius, running a hand through his hair.

"What if they're still in that tomb?" asked Bill suddenly. "It looked like a very steep descent, and goodness knows what was down there."

"They'd have shouted if they were in trouble Bill," said Ceri, "and in any case, Harry's got the 'Find me' stone. He'd have contacted Sirius."

After another fifteen minutes and still no sign of them, Sirius slapped his hand hard against his thigh. "I'm going to check out the tomb. You lot stay here in case they make an appearance."

"I'm coming with you Sirius," said Bill, walking up and looking intently into Sirius' eyes.

Sirius stared back for a few moments and then nodded. "Ok Bill. Let's go."

The two men walked silently side by side across the Giza plateau, past the southern flank of the Great Pyramid, and into the western necropolis. They found Djedi's tomb exactly as they'd left it, the capstone to one side and the portcullis still raised, revealing the dark entrance.

"Give me a hand Bill," said Sirius. "I'll go down first."

Bill helped to steady Sirius as he climbed into the small enclosure and squeezed through the entrance onto the stone steps leading down into the tomb. Bill quickly followed and raised his wand, adding to the illumination from Sirius' wand. They walked slowly down the long flight of steps and entered the tomb. There was no sign of the four, just the sarcophagus that stood at the centre of the dark chamber.

"Over there," said Sirius, pointing his wand at the low archway. Bill held his wand close to the dusty floor.

"They certainly went that way," he said. "I can see their footprints in the dust."

They both stooped under the archway and entered the passageway. After walking for several minutes they came to the small antechamber. Bill again held his wand to the floor, seeing the youngsters' footprints leading to a blank wall, between two statues.

"They must have gone through there somehow," he said, walking up to the blank wall. Both he and Sirius felt all around, tapping the wall to check for a space behind it, but it appeared solid.

Sirius hung his head dejectedly. "They must have entered the Duat Bill; how, I can't even begin to guess, but at least we know they're not trapped in the tomb."

Bill nodded glumly. "We'd better get back, they may have turned up by now for all we know."

They climbed back out of the tomb and walked back across the plateau towards the Sphinx. Bill glanced at Sirius and cleared his throat. "You're a lucky guy, Sirius."

"What?" Sirius looked startled.

"I said you're lucky - very lucky to have a woman like Ceri."

"What?"

"Look Sirius, I know we haven't exactly seen eye to eye and I suppose it's my fault really. When I first met Ceri I admit I was interested, very interested. But after she made it plain that my interest wasn't returned, we became very good friends and I started to notice a few things, like the way she looks at you when you're not watching us."

"But she hasn't said anything to me about it," said Sirius, stopping and staring intently at Bill. "In fact, she told me that she didn't want anything like that to happen again. She hasn't said anything at all about being interested."

"Perhaps not, but have *you* Sirius?" Bill grinned and walked on ahead.

Sirius quickly caught up. "Has she said anything to you Bill?"

Bill shook his head. "No. But I think you should both sort things out between you. I know you've both had very difficult times in the past, but that's exactly what it is - the past. Start living for the present and the future Sirius. And don't forget, women are very prone to changing their minds!"

Sirius wanted to say more, but was interrupted by Charlie who ran towards them. "Did you find anything?" he shouted. "They still haven't shown up here!"

Sirius and Bill both groaned and hurried back to the Sphinx with Charlie, where they told the group what they'd found in the tomb.

"Well at least we know they got inside," said Remus. "All we can do now is wait for them to come back out again, but this waiting is killing me."

"Spread out around the Sphinx," said Sirius, "and as soon as anyone spots them, give a yell."

Voldemort's head jerked up - the deep throbbing sound had finally stopped. He rushed down the narrow tunnel at the back of the cave and crawled through into the chamber where the battle of ancient enchantments had taken place. He stood for a few moments, looking at the smouldering cover-stone where it lay beside the hole at the centre of the chamber, then he quickly bent down and looked inside.

There, at the bottom of the lined hollow space, lay a folded piece of parchment. He gently lifted it out and opened it, spreading it out on the ground. He held his illuminated wand close, looking at the strange script that covered the parchment from top to bottom. He frowned in disappointment; he hadn't really known what he'd find, but he'd expected to be able to read the instructions to activate the Disc of Gates.

He crawled back through into the tunnel and walked into the cave. "Crabbe, Lucius - look at this. Tell me if you've seen anything like this writing before."

Crabbe and Malfoy stared at the parchment for a few moments, but shook their heads slowly. "I've seen many different languages, both ancient and modern, in the many Dark Arts ritual volumes I've read," said Crabbe, "but I've never come across anything like this before."

Voldemort hissed with frustration. "Let's get back to the others. I need to spend some time studying this back at the cave - I can check some books in my library that deal with ancient languages."

The first light of dawn filtered down into the canyon as Voldemort climbed down the ladder and walked across the loose rocks to the canyon bottom, where Lucius stood waiting for him.

Oliver slowly regained consciousness. He could hear talking, and opened his eyes to see Voldemort, not more than fifteen yards away, talking to a Death Eater. Oliver suppressed a groan as he felt the sharp pains in his chest and legs, and tried to listen to the conversation.

Voldemort looked around the canyon floor, littered with the bodies of both Aurors and Death Eaters. "We've lost a lot of our best Death Eaters here Lucius. I want you to begin training more - select the best from around the country - I want a solid core of Death Eaters I can rely on, and we'd better step up our recruitment activity as well. I'd hoped to start my terror campaign in earnest after getting these spells, but it may take some time to decipher this script. Come on, let's get back to the cave."

Oliver watched the two black-cloaked figures disappear around the bend in the canyon and then let the suppressed groan escape from his lips. His breathing was ragged and painful and he coughed, feeling a trickle of blood run down his chin from the side of his mouth. He looked to his side and groaned again, this time at the sight of Katie and Will laying not more than five yards away. Katie was very pale and he could see that her left arm was twisted under her at an odd angle, and there was a lot of blood matting her hair.

Oliver tried to rise, but he collapsed back to the ground when the pain shot through his chest and legs once more. He paused briefly until the pain started to subside and then crawled slowly over to the two prone figures, dragging himself along the ground. He reached Will first, and held his wrist, checking for a pulse. He sighed when he felt the strong beat, and shook him gently.

Will moaned and held his hand to the deep cut on the side of his head. "What happened?"

"They've gone Will, but so are the spells. Help me check Katie - she's just to your right."

Will stood up groggily and went over to Katie, where he bent down and put his hand to the side of her neck. He shook his head as Oliver reached them. "Not good, Oliver. There's a pulse, but it's very weak."

"Get back to the Portkey site Will. Get some help here as quickly as you can." Will nodded and walked down the canyon, stepping over the fallen bodies of friend and foe alike.

Oliver adjusted his position so that he lay alongside Katie. He looked at her lovely, but very pale face, and brushed the strands of hair away from her eyes. "Katie... Katie," he whispered, gently shaking her shoulder, but he could get no reaction from the girl.

"Be quick Will," Oliver whispered into the dawn sky. "For God's sake hurry."

Back at Hogwarts, Margot lay on her bed in Ginny's dormitory. She'd spent a distressing evening with her grandfather and Professor Dumbledore, who tried their best to allay her fears. Dumbledore told her about the dangers they'd faced in Rennes-le-Chateau, not only from the quest but from Death Eaters as well, and they'd come through it unscathed. They both tried to tell her that perhaps her dream was misleading, that she'd misinterpreted what she'd seen, that perhaps they were just sleeping, taking a rest from the rigors of the Duat. But Margot knew the truth of it. She knew that what she'd seen was unmistakable - her friends had died.

She hadn't been able to sleep that night, not for a long time, and it was close to dawn when she finally drifted off... and dreamt.

'She was back in the place of her earlier dream, but this time it was different. She wasn't seeing the future; she was seeing the present. Something in her dream made that very clear.

'She watched as her four friends walked cautiously through a dark and frightening place, looking around them fearfully, trying to detect the direction from which the next attack would come from. She watched, rooted to the spot, as they walked on and disappeared into the darkness.

After a while she was able to move and she hurried after her friends. When she saw them, a cry of despair escaped from her taugth throat. She lifted her hands over her mouth and gasped as the tears streamed down her anguished face, looking at the four prone figures as they lay, unmoving and lifeless, on the cold, hard floor.

'She moved towards them and stood over them, looking down into their deathly white faces. She bent down beside Ron and lifted his lifeless hand - it felt cold to the touch. She cried out once more and stood back up, the tears of mental anguish falling from her eyes.'

Harry was dead - he knew that with absolute and awful certainty. His ghost had been roused by someone who was crying above him.

His shadowy form rose from his body and looked down at it with a certain amount of detachment. Then he looked to the side to see Margot, her hands covering her face, crying in despair. He reached out and touched her, his hand moving through Margot's astral form.

"H... Harry?" she said, her voice taut with tension and despair. Then she looked in wonder at Ron and the two girls as their ghosts rose slowly from their bodies and stared down at their corpses in confusion.

"Margot!?" Ron drifted over and tried to hold the girl, but he just drifted through her.

"Margot?" asked Hermione. "What are you doing here? Have you died too?"

"No - I'm in the middle of a dream - a vision of the present. What happened to you?"

"Seth killed us," said Ron. "I think I upset him by calling his masculinity into doubt."

"Oh Ron," breathed Margot, reaching out to him. Then she stopped suddenly, looking beyond Ron into the darkness ahead.

"We might have died," said Hermione, her ghostly brow creased in thought, "but if we can see Margot's mind here - her astral form - and she's dreaming about the present, then this is real - we're not in some sort of limbo or horrible dream. We're ghosts now, just as real as Sir Nicholas and the Fat Friar. This is just a new existence for us."

"And you haven't finished your quest yet," said Margot, pointing over Ron's shoulder. "I think that's where you have to go."

The four ghosts turned and looked at the place where Margot was pointing. At the base of a very large column of rock, about thirty yards further down the rocky valley, was a

shimmering gateway - not like the gates that they'd opened through the twelve hours of the Duat, but a silvery-blue portal that undulated like the agitated waves on a lake.

Harry drifted over towards it, but found that the closer he got, the more difficult it was for him to move. He stopped when he was about ten yards from the portal and turned around. "I can't get any closer - something seems to be holding me back."

The other three moved towards him, but couldn't get any closer to the portal than Harry had. "We've got to go on," cried Harry. "We can't stop now - but what's happening? Why can't we reach the portal?"

Margot walked up alongside them and stood directly in front of Hermione, her eyes bright and sparkling. "Hermione! Remember the spell - the twelfth spell!"

"The twelfth spell?" Hermione asked, looking puzzled. "Of what use is that now? We can't use it on the portal, we can't get near it."

"No Hermione," said Margot with urgency. "Don't ask me how I know this - I just do - but you mustn't use it on the portal." She pointed back to their bodies lying on the rocky ground. "You have to say it over your bodies!"

Hermione's eyes went wide with surprise as she thought of the spell. It was fixed firmly in her mind after the hours she'd spent pondering over how they'd have to use it. She said the English translation out loud for the others to hear, "*Guard your Star self, O lion, for which the command levitates, that the Child of Light will appear in glory in the morning.*"

She looked at her friends, understanding now dawning in her mind. "We have to join together and say this together - the ancient Egyptian version. Harry! Let's see if we can still link our minds."

Harry reached out and entwined his diaphanous hand in Hermione's, and then smiled as he felt her thoughts and emotions. "Come on, let's do it!"

The four drifted back and stood over their bodies; then they all entwined their hands, Hermione sending the words of the spell into their minds. She nodded and they all spoke.

"Udjedj en efzau tju ru peri udj iu khou sasep nixnew em nehhepu."

At first, nothing happened; then they were slowly drawn back down to the ground, and they merged with their physical forms.

Margot stood to the side, staring down at her friends, wondering what would happen next. Slowly, a glow began to appear in each of the four bodies. Then four more ghostly forms rose from them, but this time they were much brighter.

"You look a lot brighter Hermione," said Harry.

"I don't feel any different though," she replied, looking down at her prone form on the ground. "We're still ghosts - but we've been changed somehow, although I can't think how."

"Let's try to get to the portal," said Ron.

The four ghostly friends drifted across the rocky floor and easily reached the portal, where they turned towards Margot, smiling at her.

"We have to go now Margot," whispered Ron, looking at the beautiful girl wistfully. "Perhaps I'll be able to come to visit you later, even if it *is* only as a ghost."

Margot raised her hand to her mouth and let out an anguished sob, looking at Ron with tearful eyes. Then she waved as the four turned around and stepped through the portal.

Margot woke with a start back at Hogwarts and wiped away the tears that were running down her face. She jumped out of bed and dressed quickly, looking towards the window that let in the first rays of the morning sun. Then she raced down the spiral staircase, out through the portrait hole, and along the corridor, running to her grandfather's guest room.

She burst inside and ran up to the sleeping Jules, shaking him awake. "Grandfather, I've just had another dream - I've been with them again."

Jules became instantly awake, looking at the tortured face of his granddaughter. "Go up to Professor Dumbledore's office, Margot. I'll join you there after I've dressed."

Jules and Professor Dumbledore glanced at each other worriedly as Margot related the details of her dream. When she finished speaking, Jules shook his head. "I don't know what to make of it."

"It could be that they have to complete their final task as spirits of Light, but it just doesn't make sense," said the headmaster. "Ghosts can't perform magic. I'm as much in the dark about this as you are, Jules."

Margot sat wringing her hands. "I can't believe I won't see them again." Then she brightened. "But Ron said he'd try to visit me, even if it *is* only as a ghost."

Jules put his arm around his granddaughter as she lapsed into another fit of sobbing.

"How could they let this happen?" asked Harry, feeling depressed as they drifted through a rocky tunnel. "What good are we to the Light side now? Everybody knows that ghosts can't do magic, so how're we going to stop Voldemort?"

"I really don't know Harry," said Hermione, stopping and entwining her arm through his. "But at least we're all still together." Ron and Ginny reached out, wanting to feel the comfort of their friends' minds. After a few moments they drifted on down the tunnel.

They turned the next corner and stopped. In front of them was a bronze door, this time without any depression at the centre. Hermione pointed to the carving above the doorway of a man with the head of an Ibis. "Thoth," she whispered. "This must be the secret Sanctuary of Thoth."

"How do we get through without the Eye?" asked Ginny.

Ron smiled at his sister. "We just drift through Ginny. Ghosts can do that can't they!"

They entwined their hands once more and all four drifted towards the door - and through into a brightly lit chamber with a conical-shaped rock at the centre, jutting up from an otherwise smooth floor. The walls were similarly smooth, although they were covered in countless bookcases filled with scrolls and parchments. In front of the rock stood Seshat, and at her side was a man dressed in a shining white robe. But it wasn't only the robe that was shining - he was aglow with radiance, similar to the way Jesus had appeared, from the tips of his toes to the end of his long Ibis beak.

Seshat walked over to the four and smiled warmly, greeting them with obvious pleasure and affection. "Welcome once more, brave souls. I am gratified that you have survived the rigors of the Duat and reached the end of your quest."

"But we haven't Seshat," whispered Harry. "We died - Seth killed us."

Seshat smiled at Harry, an enigmatic smile; then turned back to the man. "This is my father - Thoth."

"Welcome Anima Summas and brave helpers," said Thoth as he removed the Ibis mask from his head and put it on the floor behind him. "I find it helps to wear this when new arrivals enter my chamber - it tends to reassure them; confirms that they've come to the right place."

He stood back up and gazed at the astonished youngsters with kindly eyes. His face was that of an amiable old gentleman, his lightly wrinkled face surrounded by a mass of shining white hair. The four gazed at Thoth, amazed that they could feel the aura given off by his immense intellect and goodness.

"You didn't really think that I had the head of an Ibis, did you? It seemed to please the ancient Egyptians to depict me in that way, so I perpetuated the myth. In reality, I'm just like you only older - a lot older!"

"So is it true that you are also Mercury and Hermes?" asked Hermione.

"Of course," he replied, chuckling quietly. "And one or two others as well - but those were in other times and other existences. Now, there are many things that I must tell you. You have learned much during your quest, but I see that you do not fully understand what has happened to you during the last part of your journey through the Duat."

He walked over and touched each of the four in turn, feeling their confusion, learning what they knew and didn't know. Then he stepped back to stand beside Seshat.

"Why did we die?" asked Ginny, shaking her head. "We did everything right up until the final hour, then we chose the wrong gate to go through."

"But you did not chose the wrong gate," said Thoth. He looked around his chamber, gesturing with his arms. "You have arrived at my secret chamber; you have come into the Light."

"So if we chose the right gate, why did we die?" asked Harry, feeling very confused.

"Let me explain, but first let's get a bit more comfortable." He walked over and sat on a pile of sumptuous cushions at the right side of the chamber, and Seshat sat beside him. He gestured for the four to join them and they sat down, although they didn't really need to, of course, they were just as comfortable drifting in the air.

"First, you need to understand the true meaning of life and death," said Thoth, gazing at the stone that stood in the centre of the chamber. "Of the body there is one. Of the spirit there are four, of which three you are aware and have experienced - the Ab, the seat of awareness of right and wrong, your moral fortitude. The Ka - the ghostly form of the flesh, which may not stray far from the tomb. The Ba - the soul, the innermost being of the spirit. You know all these, and it is only the Ba that may enter my chamber. You see, that is why you had to die, for without death, you could not have completed your quest."

"So let me get this right," said Hermione, her eyes ablaze and her mind ecstatic at what she was learning. "We already know about the Ab, Osiris and Isis explained that to us. The first ghostly form that rose from our corpses was the Ka, and we couldn't get to the portal because it can't wander very far from our physical bodies. So when we said the twelfth spell, our Ka returned to the body and released the soul - the Ba. That's why the spell was necessary, so that we could travel to your secret chamber."

Thoth nodded, smiling. Hermione glanced at her friends and they also nodded, signifying that they understood things so far. "So what's the fourth form of the spirit?"

"That you have yet to experience," Thoth replied. "It is the spirit of Light - the Akh - it is this that rises to the higher plain of existence - to the place you know as heaven - into the Light. It is the highest form of the soul - the incorruptible spirit - the Ba and the Akh in one. All these things, the four forms of the spirit, are joined with your corporeal body at your conception to form your Earthly existence, and are separated at death. You are born below - the Earth - to commune with nature, to grow as you tread your path through life, to feed your spiritual selves - just like the tree that starts as a single shoot, but grows many branches as it feeds on the fruits of the Earth. If you follow the right path, you will feed your Light side and build up your spiritual strength to flower into the highest form of existence - the Akh. I remain in my chamber to guide the souls of the good and true, to transform the Ba into the Akh and send it on its way to another, better, existence in the Light."

"Is that what you're going to do to us?" asked Ron.

"Yes, brave one. After you have learned what you have come here to learn, I will transform you into a Shining One, an Akh, and send you on your way above."

"But, if you do that, if you send us up into the Light," said Harry, "how can we fulfil the prophecy? How will we be able to complete the final quest?"

"And how will we be able to defeat Voldemort?" asked Hermione. "Ghosts can't do magic."

Thoth laughed, "The Akh is capable of many things, including what you call magic, although they rarely involve themselves with the affairs of mankind. Once they reach the place of their highest existence, they no longer wish to return to the realm of the purely physical. Only a few of us concern ourselves with that, mainly to guide and instruct, to ensure that the balance is maintained between good and evil, for what you know as good and evil are merely two aspects of that which stemmed from the first time - Zep Tepi." He turned and pointed to the

conical-shaped rock at the centre of the chamber. "This is the symbol of the first time, the Ben-Ben stone which was the primeval catalyst that shaped the physical world into what you see today. But that should not concern us now - when you finally reach the Light, you will know of these things and many others.

"But before you are transformed, I must give the knowledge to the Anima Summas, the knowledge that will help you to find the final source, the last part of your great adventure. You have the ancient spells, given to you by my fellow guardian, Jesus, and you already have great knowledge of the above and the below - some of the secrets of life and death. And you have also learned much in your search for my sanctuary, for in truth much of the knowledge you sought was the experience of the quest itself. Now I give you the last part of my knowledge."

Thoth stretched out both hands and placed them on Harry and Hermione. Then, after a few moments, he withdrew his hands. "Your journey has not yet ended. I have placed in your minds the Book of Thoth, now long gone from the physical realm that is the Earth, but still alive in my mind and now yours. You will be able to materialise the book and read the secrets of the ages, but only when it is needed. If you are not ready for the discovery, the pages will remain blank, only filling when the time is right. This is your final quest. Seek out my former existences and follow them back to the beginning of wizard-kind - to the beginning of magic. When you finally arrive at the source of our kind, you will find one last magical spell, the spell that you must use to deal with the horror that will soon be unleashed on the Earth, the horror that threatens to disrupt the balance.

"Until now you have been four, but to complete your final quest you must be six. Two others must join you on your quest. One you already know - the one that has helped you find me, the one that anchored your minds to the true reality of your plight. The other you do not yet know, but that other will seek you out, do not seek for the one yourselves. Now it is time for you to rise, for you to experience the Light."

"So we have to complete our task as spirits of the Light? As Akhs?" asked Hermione.

Thoth didn't answer - he just smiled, and then said, "Come, children of the Light, stand by the rock of creation."

Seshat rose and led the four over to the rock at the centre of the chamber, then she stepped back and smiled at them. "It has been good knowing you, children of Light. I wish you well."

Thoth raised his hands and pointed them, palms uppermost, at the four. He closed his eyes and said the spell in English, so that they could understand, "*The celestial portal to the horizon is opened to you, and the ancestors are joyful at meeting you. They take you to the sky with your soul, you having been endowed with a soul through them.*"

Harry looked at his three companions, and saw them suddenly glow with a great brightness, as bright as Thoth appeared. He looked down at his hands and saw that he, also, was aglow with the radiance of Light. Then the four Akhs started to rise up above the conical rock and into the ceiling, and then into a series of narrow tunnels, always leading upwards.

"Where the bloody hell are they," gasped Sirius as he met back up with the rest of the protectors between the paws of the Sphinx. It was now about an hour after the first rays of the sun rose above the horizon. They'd split up and walked all around the Giza Plateau looking for the four kids, but they hadn't seen hide or hair of them.

Ceri shook her head. "I can't believe it! I was so sure they'd be ok!"

"Well I'm not leaving here until we find them," said Bill, his eyes haunted by the spectre of losing his two young siblings.

"Neither are we Bill," said Charlie. "Any idea where to look next?"

Bill shook his head. "They're not anywhere on the Plateau, that's for sure, so they must be inside one of the Pyramids or still down below somewhere. They say the place is riddled with tunnels and hidden chambers, most of them not yet discovered. I just don't know where to start."

"Let's look inside the Great Pyramid then," said Nadine. "At least we'll be doing something."

"Remus - will you and Ceri stay here in case they show up at the Sphinx?"

Remus looked at his friend, then at Ceri, and nodded. The rest of them walked out of the enclosure and up onto the Plateau, heading towards the huge structure that was the Great Pyramid.

They journeyed up only for a few minutes before they stopped in a dark place, illuminated only by their own inner radiance. They looked around in confusion. They expected to arrive at a very bright place, but this appeared to be just a rectangular chamber with smooth rock walls and a black sarcophagus standing at one end.

"I know this place," breathed Ron. "I've been here before. I'm sure this is the King's chamber in the middle of the Great Pyramid."

"I think you're right Ron," said Ginny, looking around the dark chamber.

"Why have we come *here*?" asked Hermione.

"To be re-united."

They all jumped and turned around, looking with awe and wonder at the far side of the King's chamber. There, shining as brightly as the four friends, stood four beings of Light. Two they knew - they'd already met them at the start of their journey into the Duat - Osiris and Isis. The other man looked startlingly like Osiris, and the other woman was just as beautiful and graceful as Isis.

Osiris smiled as they approached. "Greetings once more, children of Light. Let me introduce my companions." He turned to the man. "This is my son, Horus, and his wife, Hathor."

All four smiled at the look of awe on the youngsters' faces. Hermione cleared her spiritual throat, "We have to thank you for saving us from Apophis, but as you see, we still died."

"Yes, you did," said Isis. "But that was for a purpose, a purpose for which you are now fully aware."

"You had to experience death to enter into the presence of Thoth," said Hathor. "But although you died, a thread still lingers within."

"A strand still binds you to the physical world," said Horus. "It is true that your hearts no longer beat and your lungs do not draw breath, but still that thread remains."

"You did a brave and wonderful thing when you journeyed through the Duat," said Isis. "Mortal beings have no business there since it is the realm of the dead. The Shewbread we gave you at the start allowed you to perceive what was in the Duat, but it also did one other thing. It fed your Light bodies to enable you to stave off the worst efforts of Seth. It allowed that strand that connects your mortal bodies to the spirit to remain intact."

"That is why you had to use the twelfth spell to release your souls," said Hathor. "That spell is not needed by the spirits of the dead who journey through the Duat, but it was needed by you for you were not truly dead."

"But our Kas were released from our bodies without the use of a spell," said Hermione.

"That is true," said Osiris, "but even there you needed help. Your friend, the seer, cried the tears of mental torment at the sight of your death. It was her love that released your Kas, and it was her that gave you the strength to see that your quest was incomplete. She anchored you to reality and stopped your natural impulse to wander the Duat in despair."

"When Thoth said the spell that would elevate you to the Light realm," said Horus, "that thread that lingered in your physical bodies prevented you completing the journey into the Light. The chamber in which we now stand, which is directly above the Sanctuary of Thoth, is the focus that enables the Akh to complete the journey into the Light, but you were anchored to the place where your bodies lie." He pointed to the ground behind him. There, lying on the cold hard floor of the chamber, were their bodies, pale and cold.

"What has happened here is a very rare and wonderful thing," said Isis, "one that will not be seen again in many, many lifetimes. We will now, each of us, use a spell to re-unite your spirits with your bodies so that you may continue your Earthly existence and complete the prophecy. The spell is rare and can only be used once by a being of Light. That is why there are four of us here, so that all four of you can be re-united."

Horus raised his hands above his head, and there, in a shimmering yellow light, appeared the Eye - the Eye of Horus. He handed the Eye to his father, Osiris, who turned and muttered a spell in ancient Egyptian, pointing the Eye at Harry's body. The body rose slowly from the floor and floated over to the black sarcophagus, then gently lowered into it. Osiris spoke to Harry, "Anima Summa, child of Light, stand over your fallen body."

Harry drifted over and stood astride the sarcophagus, above his dead body. Then Osiris raised the Eye and said the ancient spell, again in English so that they could all understand, *'O Ancient One, turn your face and look on this Child of Light, for your gaze brings reunification*

of the Akh with the Ba and Ka. If your gaze lives, this child will reunify within the gaze of the portals of Light.'

Harry's Akh stared in astonishment as he felt himself drawn back down into his body. He floated horizontally above it, and then lowered towards it, blending in seamlessly with his physical existence. After a few moments, Harry coughed and opened his eyes. He lifted himself into a sitting position and gazed down, clasping and unclasping his hands as if to make sure that he was really alive. Then he stared back up at Osiris. "Thank you," he whispered.

He stood up onto shaky legs, feeling a bit stiff, and watched his three shining friends as they went through the same process of re-uniting with their bodies. First, Isis took the Eye from her husband and re-unified Hermione. Then Hathor re-unified Ginny and finally Horus did the same for Ron.

Then they stood together, there in the King's chamber, alive once more. They watched as the four beings of Light waved to them and slowly disappeared. None of them would ever forget the look of love and respect that was in each of their faces just before they disappeared completely.

Once more, like in the secret chamber below Rennes-le-Chateau, the four gathered together, linking minds as they tried to come to terms with the momentous events of the last few hours. And they had a lot to come to terms with; after all, they'd experienced death. After five minutes, they broke apart.

"Ron," said Harry, "aren't feeling hungry yet?"

Ron looked startled for a moment, and then rubbed his stomach as the rumble of hunger pangs filled the King's chamber. "Bloody hell, I'm absolutely starving!"

"Uh Ron, Ginny," said Hermione. "Do you know the way out of here?"

"Follow me!" exclaimed Ron as he walked to the far left corner of the chamber. He led them through a low connecting tunnel into the grand gallery and down into a rough passageway that led up out of the Great Pyramid. They emerged into bright sunlight and stood for a few moments, breathing the air of the physical realm."

"Where the bloody hell have you been!" The four looked down at the base of the pyramid to see Sirius, his hair a mess, shouting up at them. They walked gingerly down the huge stone blocks and jumped the last few feet onto the sand of the Giza Plateau, where Bill and Charlie raced up and held Ron and Ginny in a tight hug. Sirius and Nadine did the same with Harry and Hermione.

"Where the hell have you been?" asked Sirius more gently, his eyes slightly wet. "We've been frantic looking all over the place for you."

Harry grinned at his godfather. "It's a very long story, Sirius, and I'm sorry we're a bit late - I suppose it takes a little while to recover after you've been dead for a few hours."

"What!" Sirius exclaimed. "Never mind, don't say anything - let's get back to Ceri and Remus, they'll be at their wits end by now."

They walked quickly back over the desert towards the Sphinx, intent on getting to the other two - so intent that they didn't notice the black-cloaked figure looking at them suspiciously from a little way off in the desert. The figure followed them all the way to the Sphinx, where he found cover closer to the group to get a better look. His dark eyes flashed with recognition when he saw Harry's scar, and he turned quickly and walked towards the outskirts of Cairo.

Ceri pounced on Hermione and hugged her tightly while Remus expressed his relief to the other three. At Ron's insistence, they ate a late breakfast, finishing off the sandwiches and pies that Nadine had brought with her. While they were eating, the four told the protectors what they'd experienced and what had happened just before, during and after meeting Thoth.

Bill in particular, who wasn't fully used to being with the four and the scrapes they got into, couldn't believe his ears. "You're putting me on, aren't you? Thoth and the others - they're just a myth!"

Remus grinned at him. "When you've been around these four for any length of time Bill, you'll come to realise that nothing, and I mean absolutely nothing, is ever beyond the realms of possibility."

After they'd finished, Harry stood up. "Before we get back to Hogwarts, there's something we have to do."

Hermione, Ron and Ginny got up and stood beside Harry, who smiled. "We need to seal Djedi's tomb again, we don't want anyone going down there and violating the place."

Sirius groaned, "It was one thing to push that capstone off, but to lift it back on is going to be murder!"

"Don't worry Sirius," said Hermione, grinning at Harry, "you won't need to lift a finger."

They all walked back across the Plateau, past the Great Pyramid and over to the place where Djedi was buried. They found the tomb exactly as they'd left it; no one had discovered it so far away from the tourist route.

The adults watched in amazement when Harry and Hermione joined hands, pointed their free hands at the capstone, and said a spell in ancient Egyptian. A silvery-blue light covered the stone and it rose effortlessly into the air, floated above the tomb and dropped down into place. Then the surrounding sand started to churn and swirl about. After a few minutes, the site was left exactly as it had been before they'd discovered it. Djedi was now laid to rest once more, and the entry into the Duat concealed.

On their way back to the Portkey site, Sirius and Bill tackled the four youngsters. "How did you get into the Duat?" asked Bill. "We went down into the tomb and found your footprints leading to a blank wall."

"When we went down, there was a bronze gate," said Harry.

"I think the gate must appear only at sunset," said Hermione. "Or, of course, it was placed there just for our quest. We'll never know now."

Ceri was pleased to see that Bill shook Sirius' hand warmly before they left, but she didn't manage to catch what they were whispering about. Bill then stood back as the Portkey activated, waving as everyone disappeared with a loud 'pop'.

The four lagged a little behind the others as they walked up to the steps leading into the Entrance Hall at the school.

"It must be Margot," said Ron. "Who else could it be?" They were discussing the two additional helpers that Thoth had told them about.

"I don't think there's much doubt about that Ron," said Hermione. "She was the one who anchored us to reality and pointed us in the right direction. But who's the other one?"

"Thoth said that he, or she, would find us, not the other way around," said Harry.

"You're a bright one to talk Harry," said Ginny. "You were the one who ignored all the advice about finding your Anima Summa."

Harry grinned, "Maybe I've learned my lesson Ginny."

"You can't help wondering who it will be though," said Ron as they walked up the staircase to Dumbledore's office.

"Margot's going to have a shock," said Ginny. "She thinks we're all dead!"

Ron quickened his pace and shot in front of the others, making sure he was first to go up into the office. "Margot!" he shouted as he saw her talking to Jules and Dumbledore.

She turned around, looking stunned, and then a strangled cry escaped from her throat as she flung herself out of her seat and rushed over to him, throwing her arms around his neck as she cried tears of joy onto his shoulder.

Dumbledore and Jules walked across, looking equally stunned, as the rest tramped into the room. "We thought you were dead!" breathed Jules. "What happened?"

Two hours later, they sat deep in thought after listening to the incredible story in all its amazing detail. Jules sighed loudly, "So Margot has to join you on the final quest."

"Yes Professor," said Harry. "There's no doubt about that. But we'll look after her, don't you worry."

"Oh I know that Harry," he replied, "but I can't help but worry. You seem to get yourselves involved in the most dangerous affairs."

Margot, who sat close to Ron holding his hand, grinned. "It looks like I'll get out and see a bit of the world then."

Everyone looked around when the door opened with a crash, and Cornelius Fudge came tumbling through. "Sorry Albus, I always seem to be crashing in on your meetings, but I've

got some terrible news. 'You Know Who' has got his hands on the spells at Qumran. One of our Aurors arrived just a few minutes ago and broke the news. I'm afraid that almost all our Aurors on guard there, two hundred of them, have been wiped out. We're assembling a relief team as we speak."

Harry looked at the others with horror on his face. "Oliver and Katie," he whispered.

He stood up and gestured to Hermione, then spoke to his friends, "You stay here, we'll go to see if we can help." They joined hands and closed their eyes, concentrating on Oliver and Katie. Then they disappeared, Apparating to the bottom of the Earth, fearful of what they'd find at Qumran.

They materialised a few yards from the stricken Oliver, who was cradling Katie's head in his arms, whispering to her. They looked around at the terrible carnage for a few moments, both feeling sick with grief at so much devastation; then they stepped towards Oliver.

"Oliver," said Hermione quietly. "She's not ...?"

Oliver looked up, startled to see Harry and Hermione standing over him. He shook his head slowly. "No. But I don't think she's going to last very long. I can hardly hear her breathing now."

Harry nodded to Hermione and they both caught hold of Oliver and Katie's arms and concentrated. Harry just had time to take in the terrible scene of the conflict in the canyon once more before they all disappeared, materialising a few moments later in the hospital wing at Hogwarts.

Madam Pomfrey rushed up and quickly examined the two badly injured Aurors, and then turned to Harry. "Get the Headmaster and Professor Snape here immediately. We're going to have to work fast if we're going to save this girl's life."

Harry rushed off, leaving Hermione to help the nurse levitate Oliver and Katie onto two hospital beds. A few minutes later, Harry returned with Dumbledore, Snape, Fudge, and the rest of his friends and protectors. They all wanted to know what had happened and what state the two unfortunate Aurors were in. Madam Pomfrey tutted in annoyance at the crowd, but didn't bother to clear the room - she was far too busy.

"Professor Snape," she said urgently, "I need more of that special potion of yours, the one that maintains heart-beat and breathing. I really need to get her as stable as possible so that I can start to repair the damage; I'm afraid she won't survive the treatments unless she can be stabilised."

Snape nodded and rushed from the room. Oliver, meanwhile, was trying to get out of bed, his eyes full of anxiety at Katie's plight. Madam Pomfrey moved to his bed, trying to calm him down. "We'll do everything we can for Katie, but you have to lie still. You have some nasty chest and leg injuries and you're not helping matters by moving about so much." She lifted a small vial and poured a few drops of a dark brown liquid onto his lips. Oliver's eyes became clouded and he sank back onto the bed.

"That should keep him quiet for a few hours," she said, turning back to Katie. "Come on Severus ... come on!" she muttered, feeling for Katie's pulse once more.

"Thank goodness," she gasped as Snape rushed back into the room, holding a small glass of yellow liquid. The nurse lifted Katie's head and slowly poured the liquid into her mouth, mopping her chin as some of it spilled out. Then Madam Pomfrey sighed, looking up at the crowd standing around the two beds, "I can start to help her now. Would you mind staying for a while, Professor Snape? I may need your help with some of the potions I'll have to brew." Snape again nodded.

"Now the rest of you had better leave; there's nothing you can do here. Oliver will be unconscious for at least three hours, and Katie ... well, it all depends on how she responds to the treatment, but if it goes well, she won't regain consciousness for several days at least. Could I have a private word with you Headmaster?"

They all tramped out of the hospital, leaving Snape and Dumbledore standing at the foot of Katie's bed. The nurse waited for the room to clear before speaking, "Headmaster, she's critically ill and I really don't know if she'll survive. All we can do now is hope for the best and wait. It may be an idea to contact her parents - just in case."

Dumbledore nodded grimly and took one last look at the unconscious pair before walking out of the hospital. Fudge was waiting for him outside. "I'd better get back Albus, I have to find out if there are any more survivors out in the desert, and then, of course, there's the terrible task of informing the families of the poor souls who didn't survive. The one who gave us the news didn't know a lot of detail, but Oliver may be able to tell us more. Will you let me know when he regains consciousness? It's very urgent that we speak to him."

Dumbledore nodded, "I'll let you know as soon as he can talk. We have to find out as much as we can about what happened out there last night. I'll be honest with you Cornelius, if Voldemort's got his hands on those spells, then we're in for a torrid time. Thank goodness that Harry and the others have completed their second task and they're now just one quest away from gaining their full powers. I just hope that they'll get them in time."

Fudge looked a very worried man as he walked slowly down the staircase and out into the grounds of Hogwarts.

"I'd better get a message to Fred and George," said Ginny sadly as she walked towards the common room with her four friends. "They'll want to know about Oliver and Katie."

"Oh I hope they're going to be all right," whispered Margot. "They looked to be in an awful state."

Harry and Hermione exchanged a worried glance. "What we saw out in that canyon was terrible," said Harry. "There were bodies all over the place, Aurors and Death Eaters. It must have been hell out there."

"We've got to concentrate on the final quest now," said Hermione. "If Voldemort's got his hands on those spells we really don't have a lot of time."

"You said his name, Hermione," said Ron. "That's the second time I've heard you say it."

Hermione smiled wryly, "After learning the secrets of life and death, Voldemort doesn't hold the same sort of fear for me as he did before. And if Harry can say his name, so can I."

"Talking about life and death," said Ron. "We'd better make sure that Margot knows everything that we know, since she's part of the team now. I know she heard what we said in Dumbledore's office, but I don't think that words did it justice - what we experienced in Egypt. I think we have to link minds and let her *feel* what we know."

Hermione nodded, "You're right Ron; she's part of us now. Let's go to the library, it should be quiet there at this time of day."

"I'll catch you up," said Ginny as she hurried in the opposite direction, heading towards the owlery.

A short while later, Ginny walked into the library and sat at their usual table. She didn't see, and neither did the others, Draco Malfoy standing close by under his invisibility cloak.

"Margot," said Harry, "we're going to link minds, all five of us. You're going to feel the emotions that we feel, and we'll feel yours. You'll also be able experience what we went through - we'll relive in our minds what happened after we left you back in the twelfth hour of the Duat. Are you ok with that?"

Margot smiled and nodded.

"Ok," said Harry, stretching out his arm and placing his hand on the table. Hermione, Ron and Ginny did the same, making sure that they were all touching. Then Margot stretched out her hand and made contact with the other four hands. Harry and Hermione closed their eyes, sending out their emotions.

Margot gasped, "Oh, it's so... so beautiful." Then she fell quiet as she experienced the final part of the journey and the meeting with Thoth and Seshat, and the re-unification of their spirits and bodies in the King's chamber.

When they finally broke contact, Margot looked stunned, but she had a smile on her face. "I just didn't realise before what you four had together. And I can't believe I'm part of it now. Up until now, I've spent most of my time alone - even in my dreams and visions I was alone."

She glanced at Ron shyly. "Do you really feel that way about me Ron?"

Ron was taken aback somewhat, but he held her hand and looked into her eyes. "You know I do, Margot. You felt what I feel, and... I felt what you feel."

Ginny cleared her throat loudly, "I really hate to break this up, but don't you think there's a better time and place for you two to carry on your romance?"

They all laughed, jumped to their feet, and walked out of the library and up to Gryffindor common room.

Draco, still hidden by his cloak, slumped into one of the chairs vacated by the five friends. He stared at the table in front of him and tried to make sense of what he'd just seen and heard. He couldn't fully understand what had gone on, of course, but what he *did* understand, what he'd

come to realise more and more over the past few weeks, was the profound nature of the friendship shared by his erstwhile enemies.

'Former enemies,' he thought, grinning wryly. 'Who'd have thought that I'd be envious of Potter and his friends?'

Draco slowly walked out of the library and down to Slytherin common room, where he bumped into Crabbe and Goyle.

"Where've you been Draco?" asked Crabbe. "Spying on Potter?"

"Shut up Crabbe!" Draco exclaimed as he walked quickly up to his dormitory, leaving two fat and gaping mouths behind him.

Oliver regained consciousness the following morning. Madam Pomfrey had kept him under further sedation knowing that he wouldn't get the rest he needed if he were awake and worrying about Katie. She'd healed his three broken ribs and broken left leg, and also the nasty cut on his right calf.

For a few moments, Oliver couldn't remember where he was and shot up into a sitting position, thinking that he was still in the canyon at Qumran. Then, as he looked around, the full realisation of what had happened hit him like a ton of bricks. He shot out of bed, wincing as he held his chest, and hobbled over to Katie's bedside. He looked at her pale face and closed eyes, his stomach churning uncontrollably as he looked around for the nurse.

"Back to bed this instant!" she said as she walked purposely out of her office.

"How is she Madam Pomfrey? She looks so pale."

The nurse relaxed her features and smiled sadly at the distraught Oliver. "She's still alive, and we've healed her superficial injuries, but we just have to wait to see if our treatment to her head injury is successful. She took a powerful blow that cracked her skull and all I can say is that she must have a very strong will to live. Many would have succumbed to an injury like that. But she's still with us, and I'm very hopeful that she'll recover. Now the best thing you can do is get back into bed - your injuries are healing nicely and I don't want you undoing the work we've done."

"Thank you Madam Pomfrey," he said as he eased himself back onto the bed, "but I have to speak to Professor Dumbledore straight away. I've got some urgent and terrible news for him."

"I'll ask him to come to see you," she replied, turning around and walking to the door. Then she stopped and turned back towards Oliver. "Oh and by the way, there was an unruly mob trying to get in to see you earlier this morning. I told the Weasley twins and their friends to come back later this afternoon once you've had a chance to recover fully."

Half an hour later, the Headmaster walked into the hospital wing accompanied by Cornelius Fudge. They briefly spoke to Madam Pomfrey to get the latest position with Katie, then walked over and sat at Oliver's bedside.

"Thank you for coming," he began. "I have to tell you what happened back there in the desert." He turned to Fudge. "Any word on other survivors, minister?"

Fudge looked sadly down at the floor before replying, "Only a handful I'm afraid Oliver. Eleven, including you and Katie, out of ten full teams." He looked angrily towards the window, then softened his gaze as he spoke to Oliver once more, "I'm afraid Dave Henson didn't make it, and neither did any of the other team-leaders."

Oliver closed his eyes and whispered, "I saw Dave die. He was hit by the killing curse. I saw 'You Know Who' talking to one of the Death Eaters when I regained consciousness. He had the spells, Headmaster, I'm afraid I couldn't stop him."

Oliver turned his head to the side, pressing his face into the pillow, feeling deep remorse at what he perceived as his failure. Dumbledore reached out and squeezed his arm. "We already know that Oliver, and it wasn't your fault. No one could have done anything more to stop him. One hundred and ninety fallen Aurors and more than three hundred Death Eaters they took with them are testimony to that. Now I want you to think carefully Oliver. Is there anything more you can tell us about Voldemort's actions - you said you heard him speaking to someone."

Oliver thought back to what he'd heard. "He was talking about the spells. He said that it might take some time to decipher the script."

"Ah," said Dumbledore, a flicker of hope in his eyes, "so he can't make any sense of them. This buys us some time Cornelius and with luck, if the writing's anything like that message that Harry and Hermione unscrambled on the cover stone, he won't be able to get at the spells for some time yet."

"At least it'll give us more time to build up our forces again. I'd better tell 'Mad Eye' that he's in for a busy time. Thank you Oliver, we'd better let you get some more rest for now. I'll be back in a few days with some of my team to debrief you in more detail about what happened."

The two got back to their feet and started to walk towards the door. "Professor Dumbledore," said Oliver, "can I speak to you for a few moments please?"

Dumbledore nodded at Fudge as the minister turned and walked to the door, then sat back down. "What is it Oliver?"

"Katie," he said, looking longingly to where she lay in the next bed, "she was about to tell me who her real father is when the attack started. Can you tell me who it is?"

Dumbledore thought for a few moments, and then said, "I think it's best if you hear it from Katie."

"But... but she may not..."

"Don't think that way Oliver. She's a strong girl, and the nurse told me that if she's managed to last this long there's every chance she'll recover." He looked at Katie reflectively then continued, "Her father still doesn't know he has a daughter, even though he stood on this very spot looking down at her sadly yesterday. I wanted to tell him, and I've agonised all day and night about it, but I won't go against Katie's wishes that she tell him herself."

Oliver nodded in understanding.

"It's no use Hermione," said Harry, looking at the shimmering papyrus scroll on the table in front of them. The five friends sat around the table by the window in the common room, gazing at the Book of Thoth that Harry and Hermione had materialised a few moments before.

"It's completely blank!" exclaimed Ron, looking at the bare single page then back up at Harry.

"Thoth said that we'd be able to read it only when we were ready," said Hermione, "so that tells me that we've still got other things to do before that happens."

"Like what?" asked Ginny.

"Don't forget that Thoth gave us a few pointers to the final quest, so we can start to work on those. And of course, we've still got our own studies to complete before our exams. They're only two months away now."

"What are you going to do Margot?" asked Harry. "Have you had to sit any exams before?"

"Oh yes, Harry," she replied. "Grandfather's a stickler for exams, and he's always very devious with the questions he sets. But he said I can sit some exams at Hogwarts this year, and he seems to think I'll finish top of year six, but I can't believe that, not with Hermione here."

"Well I can't see how you'll beat her," said Ginny. "She always gets full marks, except for Potions. Hey, perhaps you *could* beat her if you manage to get in Snape's good books."

"There's no chance of that," said Ron, smiling at Margot. "She's a Gryffindor now and we all know what Snape thinks about Gryffindors."

They all looked at the table when the Book of Thoth suddenly disappeared. "Where'd that go to?" asked Ron.

"Back into our heads," Hermione replied. "We'll try again when we've managed to unravel some of the clues that Thoth gave us."

Voldemort sat in his cave, tapping the arm of his throne impatiently. He looked up and grunted in satisfaction when he saw Lucius Malfoy walk in.

"You summoned me my Lord?" he asked, bowing briefly.

"How are the training and recruitment exercises coming along Lucius?"

"We've stepped up the recruitment campaign and the inner circle is currently compiling a list of their best Death Eaters. I'm currently working with Crabbe and Travis to devise the most rigorous and searching training schedules we've ever undertaken. We should be ready to begin within the week."

He looked at Voldemort with just a little unease, knowing that he hadn't been called just for that reason. "Have you had any breakthroughs with the spells?"

"No Lucius, but I've only just begun the research. Tell me, Lucius, I asked you to see your son a little while ago."

Lucius cringed, knowing that the subject would be brought up sooner or later. "Yes my Lord, I spoke to him before we left for the attack at Qumran. He told me that things are very quiet at Hogwarts, Potter and his friends don't seem to be up to anything unusual at the moment."

"Then why have I had a report from Egypt that they were seen coming out of the Great Pyramid? On holiday were they?" He speared Lucius with a deadly gaze, his mouth pulled into a taut line as he waited for the answer.

"Egypt my Lord? I had no idea. I'll go to Hogwarts straight away and ask Draco what's going on."

"I think I know what's going on Lucius. I think that Potter has completed his second quest; why else would he be in Egypt? AND I DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT IT LUCIUS!"

Lucius closed his eyes in the face of the Dark Lord's wrath; then opened them once more to see his master appraising him, the wrath now gone but the face still stern.

"By all means go to Hogwarts Lucius," he said quietly, "but don't ask your son about his actions - I'll do that myself. I want him here tomorrow night, after I've finished my research for the day. Now go."

"Yes my Lord," said Lucius, bowing more deeply than before. Then he turned and hurried out of the cave.

Oliver sat at Katie's bedside, holding her limp hand and gazing at her face. He'd refused all efforts to get him down into the Great Hall for food, not wanting to leave his girlfriend's side. He'd had a harrowing morning following the visit of Katie's parents. Although they didn't blame Oliver for Katie's condition, he blamed himself for not keeping his promise to them that he'd keep her safe.

Katie had been this way for days now, and although her breathing had improved, she'd not shown any sign of regaining consciousness. Fred, George and the others had been very supportive when they'd visited yesterday, and Angelina and Alicia had spent most of the afternoon sitting with Katie, talking to her softly in the hope that she'd be able to hear them.

He looked towards Madam Pomfrey as she fussed around outside her office, and then sat bolt upright. He'd just felt the slightest pressure on his hand, the hand that held Katie's. He looked up at her face and saw her beautiful eyes looking at him steadily.

"Katie," he whispered, a tear of happiness running down his face.

"What happened Oliver?" she asked, her voice very weak.

"I'll tell you later Katie. I'll get the nurse."

He shot to his feet and ran over to Madam Pomfrey, who looked startled and then moved quickly to the bedside. She examined Katie for a few minutes and then smiled. "You're going to be just fine, my dear. A few days rest and you'll start to feel a lot better."

She smiled at Oliver as she walked towards the door, on her way to inform the headmaster of the development.

"How long have I been like this?" she asked

"Five days Katie," he replied quietly. "You had a nasty crack to your head when 'You Know Who' attacked us."

"So what happened Oliver?" whispered Katie. "Did 'You Know Who' get the spells?"

Oliver didn't want to tell her about that, and especially not about the terrible casualties. He looked away and didn't answer, but the expression on his face told Katie everything she wanted to know.

"How many Oliver? How many of us survived?" she asked.

Oliver squeezed her hand. "Eleven," he whispered.

He leaned over and held her close when he saw the stricken look in her eyes. "I'll tell you more about it later Katie, but I really think you need to get some sleep now."

Any chance of her getting any sleep was lost when the door opened and Professor Dumbledore strode in, leading Fred, George, Lee, Alicia and Angelina. They were all grinning broadly as they walked over to the bed.

"How are you feeling Katie?" asked Dumbledore as he smiled down at her.

"A bit groggy Professor," she replied, "but Madam Pomfrey says I'll be ok after a few days."

"Excellent," he replied. "Right, I'll let your friend stay here for a few moments, but the nurse will be back shortly and you know how she feels about a crowded hospital wing."

After he'd gone, her friends gathered round her bed a bit reluctant to touch her.

"I'm not made of glass you know," she said as she saw their nervousness.

Alicia hugged her and Angelina quickly followed. Fred, George and Lee were content to just sit by the bedside alongside Oliver.

"These two told us that you and Oliver are together at last," said Angelina.

"And we want to know exactly what happened as soon as you're better," said Alicia, glancing at Oliver shyly.

Katie grinned weakly as she held out her hand for Oliver to hold. "He's my boyfriend now," she said quietly.

"What's all this!" said Madam Pomfrey. "Come on you lot, out!"

They all waved as they left, promising to come back the following day.

Katie took a deep breath and held out her arms to Oliver, who held her close. She whispered into his ear, "I want to see my real father Oliver; I have to tell him about me."

"Are you sure you're up to it Katie? It can wait, you know."

She thought for a few moments. "He really needs to know Oliver, and the sooner I tell him the better. Would you mind asking Professor Lupin to come to see me?"

Epilogue Relative Revelations

Harry and his four friends sat in the library before dinner, hoping to make a start on their research into the clues that Thoth had given them. They desperately wanted to make some progress for they knew that the time would soon arrive when Lord Voldemort would be at the height of his powers. But they were just too tired.

Even Hermione felt that she wouldn't be able to do justice to their search for more information. That morning, they'd all been through an accelerated learning session with Professor Denarnaud and had gone to bed straight afterwards, but first making Neville promise to wake them when he returned from afternoon classes.

"We shouldn't have asked Neville to wake us," said Ron, stifling a yawn.

Hermione nodded. "I think it was a mistake too. Come on, we're not going to get anything useful done today, let's get some more sleep."

They all got up and walked out of the library and along the corridor towards the common room.

"Oh no," said Harry, "what does *he* want!"

Walking towards them was Draco Malfoy, and they were all surprised to see that his two goons weren't with him. Ginny looked at him strangely, wondering why he wasn't wearing his usual sneer. He walked up and stood in front of the five friends, looking down at his feet nervously.

"What do you want Malfoy?" asked Ron, his distaste clearly showing.

"I uh... I have to speak to you," he said, still looking nervous.

"What could you possibly have to say to us?" asked Harry, his distaste showing just as much as Ron's.

"It... it's very difficult," stammered Draco. "I have to leave Hogwarts soon, and I wanted to tell you something before I go."

"Leave as in permanently?" asked Ron, his face breaking into a smile.

"Be quiet Ron," whispered Ginny. "He's obviously upset about something - let him speak."

"Thank you Ginny," said Draco, causing four pairs of eyebrows to be raised at his use of her Christian name. "Look, I'm not proud of what I've done and I'm sorry - very sorry. I ... I've been spying on you since the beginning of last year."

"Why you..." Ron took a step towards Draco, his face twisted in anger and his hands balled into fists, but he was stopped by Ginny who stared at the Slytherin through narrowed eyes.

"Let him speak Ron," she said. "He's obviously got a lot more to say."

Draco smiled at Ginny. "I had an owl from my father last night - he's coming for me soon to take me to see 'You Know Who'. You see, although I continued to spy on you, I didn't report anything back to him. Ever since my father took me to see one of their raids I've known that I could never be one of them - I could never kill anybody in cold blood like that - it sickened me. One of the girls they killed looked just like you Ginny." He smiled sadly at the redheaded girl, a look of longing in his eyes.

"So if you weren't intending to report anything, why did you still spy on us?" asked Ginny quietly.

"Because ... because ..."

"Because what?" asked Harry, looking at Draco through narrowed eyes.

"Because I've come to realise what's been missing in my life," he continued. "Seeing the way you were together... I know I can never have friends like you - what you have and share made me realise what's important in life. Look, I'd better go now."

"Why does Voldemort want to see you?" asked Harry.

"My father said in his note that he's found out that I haven't been reporting your movements, and he's not pleased with me."

"So he'll give you a hell of a row and a few Crucios no doubt," said Ron. "What makes you think you won't be coming back to Hogwarts?"

"Because my father said that he's in a rage, and he's already told me what he'd do if I didn't do exactly what he told me to do."

Ginny gasped and put her hands over her mouth. "You've got to get away from here Draco - before your father gets here."

"Why didn't you leave when you had your father's note?" asked Hermione. "It seems to me that he gave you the chance to escape Voldemort's clutches by sending you the note in the first place."

"It's no use, Hermione. I wouldn't be able to hide from him for long - his servants are everywhere. I'd only be delaying the inevitable. I have to go now - I just wanted to say sorry."

Draco took one last look at Ginny, the longing clear to see in his expression, then turned and walked slowly back down the corridor.

"He's changed," said Margot. "He's not a bit like the boy who came onto me in the dance."

"He's changed, all right," said Harry. "And he seems sure that Voldemort's going to kill him."

"We've got to help him Harry," said Ginny anxiously. "We can't just let him go like that."

"Let's see Dumbledore," said Hermione. "Perhaps he can protect him here at Hogwarts."

The five ran along the corridor towards the headmaster's office, and saw him just about to walk down the staircase towards the Great Hall and dinner.

"Professor Dumbledore," shouted Harry.

He turned and waited for the youngsters to approach. "What is it? You look a bit anxious about something."

"It's Draco Malfoy," said Hermione. "He just spoke to us. He said his father was coming to take him to see Voldemort - and he's sure that he's going to be killed."

"He told us that he's been spying on us, but that he's changed and hasn't sent any reports to Voldemort," said Harry.

"You've got to help him Professor," said Ginny pleadingly.

Dumbledore sighed, "I hadn't realised he'd changed so much. Oh I knew he'd been spying on you - I'd suspected as much for a long time. I only found out for sure a few months ago, but I didn't want to turn him in to the ministry - I preferred to try to change him, to get him to see that the Dark Side wasn't the right way to go. Professor Snape has been working with Draco in a very subtle way, trying to improve his outlook on life and the way he views those whom he sees are less fortunate than himself. It looks like it's had the desired effect, but we'd better get to him before his father does."

Dumbledore hurried down towards the Slytherin common room with the five friends in tow. They met Snape as they walked down to the dungeons. "Severus, have you seen Draco Malfoy?" asked Dumbledore.

"No Headmaster, but Goyle just told me that he's left with his father. Something about his mother being very ill."

"Oh no," groaned Dumbledore. "Quick, we've got to catch up with them."

He hurriedly told Snape what had happened as they all rushed up to the Entrance Hall and out into the school grounds. But there was no sign of Draco and his father. They searched the grounds and Snape hurried into Hogsmeade, but there was no sign of them anywhere.

Draco had gone.

Remus Lupin walked down the corridor towards the hospital wing, wondering why Katie Bell wanted to see him. He'd struck up a very good rapport with her during her time at Hogwarts, but that was far from unusual; he'd got on well with most of the students he taught - apart from the Slytherins.

He opened the door to the hospital and saw Katie lying in bed with Oliver sitting next to her. He walked over and smiled. "How are you feeling Katie? We were all relieved to hear that you're out of danger."

Katie smiled nervously at Remus. "I'm feeling very tired Professor, but I should be back to normal after a few days."

"Oh, would you like me to come back later? It's important that you get some rest, especially after what you went through."

"No Professor, please stay. What I have to tell you is very important to me." She made eyes at Oliver, who excused himself, saying that he'd pop down to the kitchen to get a sandwich.

Remus sat in the chair that Oliver had vacated and smiled at Katie, a puzzled look on his face. "So, what's so important that you have to speak to me in particular?"

Katie took a deep breath. "You probably don't know this - what am I saying! You definitely don't know this, very few people do, but soon after I was born, my parents adopted me. I always wondered about my real parents, but my adoptive ones would only tell me that my mother died not long after I was born, back when 'You Know Who' first terrorised the country. But they refused to tell me about my father. All they'd tell me is that I was conceived here at the school, and my mother was taken away soon after. My mother's parents made sure that no one said anything to my father - he still doesn't know that I exist."

Katie took another deep breath. "Since I left Hogwarts, it's become more and more important to me that I find out who he is, and thanks to Professor Dumbledore and Oliver, my parents finally relented. Just before the attack at Qumran, the headmaster told me his name. That's why I need to speak to you, Professor."

"Me? I think you must be mistaken Katie. Since I was... struck down with the curse of the werewolf all those years ago I've made it a point not to form any sort of attachment with a girl - you see, any children I might have would be werewolves as well; the curse would be passed on in my genes. So I can honestly tell you that I can't be your father."

Katie looked horrified for a moment, and then gave a short laugh. "Oh no. I'm so sorry Professor; I didn't mean to give you that impression. I know that you're not my father. The reason that I want to speak to you is because I got cold feet about telling him, and I want your advice."

"Did Professor Dumbledore tell you your mother's name?"

"Yes. Janice - Janice Potter."

Remus gasped and he looked, wide-eyed, at Katie. He whispered, "My god - James' sister. Whoa. We never knew - not even James, or at least I don't think so." He looked down at the floor for a while, deep in thought. "I seem to remember that James was very upset when his sister left Hogwarts, but he'd never say why she left. He wasn't his normal self for a while after that, and to be honest, even with hindsight I don't know whether he ever found out about it..."

He suddenly looked up at Katie and whispered; "Harry's father wasn't the only one who was upset when Janice left school. So that means that your father is..."

"Yes, Professor, my father's Sirius Black."

Remus let out a long breath of air and shook his head. "He is going to be so surprised when he hears this. He moped around the school for months after Janice left and I know he tried to find out why she left and where she went. He was always talking to James about it, but either James didn't know himself, or if he did, he certainly didn't tell Sirius. He and Janice were inseparable back then and we all thought that they'd get married after they left school. But we were all very young back then, and after we left school we all became involved in the conflict with 'You Know Who', so there wasn't any time for Sirius to find his girlfriend.

"Oh, he knew where her parents lived and he even went there, but they'd moved house. James said he'd lost touch with them, but I wonder if that was just a ploy to stop Sirius badgering him. Then James had the message that Janice had been killed in a Death Eater attack - he was devastated, and so was Sirius."

"Professor?" asked Katie. "I don't know my father at all - I saw him around the school at the end of my seventh year but I haven't even spoken to him. I don't know what to expect when I tell him he's my father. That's why I wanted to speak to you first - I know you two are very close friends. Professor Lupin, how do you think he'll react?" Katie looked nervously at Remus while she waited for him to reply.

After pondering for a few moments, Remus grinned. "First off he'll probably be shocked; then he'll be elated that he's got a daughter - especially one like you. And if I'm not mistaken he's going to feel deep regret and remorse - I know how he reacted when he wasn't there for Harry during his formative years. It wasn't his fault, of course, but that's Sirius for you."

Remus suddenly laughed and shook his head slowly. "You know what this means of course, Katie? Not only is Sirius Harry's godfather, he's his uncle as well! Or at least he would have been if he'd married Janice. And you realise, of course, that Harry's your first cousin?"

Katie stared at Remus with her mouth wide open, and gasped, "Of course! I hadn't really thought about it that way - I haven't had much time to think about it at all. Only minutes after I found out I was pitched into the battle at Qumran. What's Harry going to think about all this?"

"Believe me Katie, Harry's going to be over the moon! He's always thought that his only surviving relatives are those horrible Dursleys, and when he finds out that Sirius is his nearly-Uncle and you're his cousin, well, you can imagine how he'll react. But I wonder why Professor Dumbledore hasn't said anything about this before?"

"He was sworn to secrecy Professor," she replied. "And I suppose that secrecy applied to Harry as well."

Remus stretched out his arm and held Katie's hand gently. "Katie - do you want me to tell Sir... your father?"

Katie stared at Remus for a few moments, and then shook her head slowly. "No Professor, I still want to tell him myself. Would you mind asking him to come to see me when he has time? But please make sure that he doesn't come straight away, I've got to get my head around all that you've told me first. And thank you - thank you very much for listening."

Remus smiled at Katie as he got up to leave. Before going out through the door he turned back to her. "Good luck."

Two hours later, Sirius quietly opened the door to the hospital wing and walked inside and over to Katie's bed. He saw that Katie was sleeping, and so was Oliver, who was slumped in the chair at the side of the bed holding the girl's hand.

Sirius grinned wryly - he'd have to wait to find out why Katie Bell wanted to talk to him - and quietly crept out of the room, waving to Madam Pomfrey as he went.

The following morning, Hermione woke early and put on her dressing gown. She went out through the dormitory door, heading for the shower room, when a slight noise caught her attention down in the common room. She walked onto the landing at the top of the spiral staircase and looked down to see Ginny sitting over in the corner, her chin in her hands, staring sadly out of the window.

Hermione frowned and walked down the staircase. "What's the matter Ginny? Why the sad look?"

"Morning Hermione," she replied. "Did I wake you?"

"No. I was just going to have a shower when I spotted you down here on your own." Hermione pulled a chair up closer to her friend, and leaned forward as she looked pointedly into her friend's eyes. "What's bothering you Ginny?"

Ginny stared at Hermione for a while, and then she told her what was troubling her, what had been troubling her for quite some time. "Oh Hermione. I see you and Harry together, and now Ron and Margot - you're all so happy, and I'm glad, really glad, but I haven't got anybody. I feel like I'm out in the cold. I... I don't think I'll ever find someone like Harry or Ron."

Hermione grinned a sad little grin. "Ginny Weasley - you're one of the most beautiful girls at Hogwarts, and come on, it's not like you're getting old or anything - there's plenty of time for you to find the right one. I know it must be hard seeing Harry and me, Ron and Margot, but come on! You're the youngest of the five and I just know you'll meet someone soon."

"Do... do you think it might be the sixth one? The one who's going to join us on the quest?"

"It might be, Ginny. But we don't even know if it's a boy yet. Look, just be patient. It'll happen before you realise it, I'm sure."

"I hope so Hermione," said Ginny, managing a smile.

"Uh Ginny," Hermione said slightly warily, "I saw the way you looked at Draco yesterday - you don't fancy him do you? You've been looking a bit sad ever since we found out his father had taken him away from the school."

"Hermione! How could you think... well he has changed hasn't he? And he is sort of good looking when he hasn't got that smirk on his face."

Hermione held Ginny's hand tightly and stared at her intently. "Ginny. You do know we might never see him again don't you?"

"Yes," she replied sadly, "I do know that - why do you think I've been so sad?"

"Mr Black?"

Sirius looked up from his breakfast and saw Oliver standing by the table. "Oliver - please - call me Sirius, come and sit down and get some breakfast."

"Thank you, uh... Sirius. I don't mind if I do."

"How are you feeling Oliver?" asked Remus.

"Much better Professor - thanks."

"And how is Katie this morning?" asked Ceri.

"Still a bit weak, but she's getting better. Sirius, the nurse told me you called by last night, but we were both sleeping."

"Yes, I intended to pop in after breakfast. What does Katie want to speak to me about?"

"I uh... she'd better tell you that herself, I think."

Sirius looked quizzically at Oliver and then at Remus. "You two know what it's about don't you? So why is it such a secret?"

Remus and Oliver exchanged sly glances but remained silent.

"Hmm - very mysterious," said Sirius quietly. "Oh well, I've finished here, so I think I'll call in to see her now. I must admit to being just a little intrigued by all this."

After he'd gone, Ceri pierced Oliver and Remus with an inquisitive stare. "What was that all about?"

"Uh, no doubt Sirius will tell you about it later," said Remus, grinning at Oliver.

"Katie?" Sirius walked up to the girl lying in her bed in the hospital and sat on the chair beside her. "I must say you're looking a lot better today, how are you feeling? You must have had a terrible time of it in the desert."

Katie smiled nervously at her father, and she couldn't help the little tear that flowed slowly down her cheek, but she didn't really know whether they were tears of the joy of seeing her father at last, or of terror at what his reaction may be.

"What's the matter Katie?" Sirius looked at her anxiously, wondering if she was still in a lot of pain. "Shall I call the nurse?"

Katie shook her head and forced a smile. "No - I don't need the nurse, but *you* might after you've heard what I've got to tell you."

Sirius frowned, looking at Katie intently, intrigued at what she was about to say.

"You were... with Janice Potter when you were at Hogwarts weren't you?"

"Janice?" whispered Sirius, thinking back to his schooldays and his former girlfriend.

"She was my mother. Her parents took her away from the school when they found out she was pregnant with me."

Sirius stared wide-eyed at Katie, letting the startling revelation sink into his mind. Then he gasped, realising what Katie was telling him, "You... you're my daughter?"

"Yes. I'm your daughter." Katie studied Sirius' reaction, holding her breath.

"My god! I never knew - you've got to believe me Katie, no one ever told me about you!"

Katie smiled. "I know that. It must be a big shock for you. I've been trying to find out who you were for a while now and... and I didn't know how you'd react - but I felt you needed to know."

Sirius pushed his hand through his dark hair. "A daughter! I've got a daughter! Good God!"

Katie continued to study Sirius' reaction, still feeling very nervous about it.

Sirius stopped nervously stroking his hair and gasped once more, "Harry! You're Harry's cousin - you know that don't you?"

"Yes - Professor Lupin made me realise that last night."

"He's going to be so pleased to hear this news," said Sirius, breaking into a smile.

"And what about you? Are you pleased - or not?"

"Me? I'm over the bloody moon!" Sirius stood up and moved close to Katie. He tentatively reached out and held her hand, looking deeply into her eyes. "A daughter - I can't believe it - and such a beautiful daughter as well." His eyes were wet and he self-consciously brushed at them.

Katie grinned broadly and then let out a cry, the tears now flowing freely, and raised herself up and pulled Sirius to her, hugging him tightly.

Remus and Oliver grinned at each other as they peeked around the hospital door, then slowly closed it and walked towards Gryffindor Tower.

Katie pulled back and looked closely at her father. "We've got a lot to talk about - a lot to catch up on."

Sirius nodded. "You look a lot like you're mother," he whispered. "You've got her eyes."

They both looked round as the door opened and Harry walked in. "Remus and Oliver told me you wanted to see me?" he said, looking from Sirius to Katie and back in confusion.

"Uh - pull up a chair Harry," said Sirius, grinning. "We've got some great news for you!"

Over the course of the next week, Harry, Sirius and Katie spent a lot of time together. As Remus and Sirius predicted, Harry was ecstatic at finding out Katie was his first cousin. He'd always thought that there was no one left on his father's side of the family, and he couldn't keep his eyes off Katie, often pinching himself to make sure he wasn't dreaming.

Not a lot of research was done into the final quest over this period. Hermione and the others were delighted for Harry and Sirius - and for Katie, and so were Fred, George and Katie's other friends at the Shrieking Shack. Hagrid was very emotional about it all - he even threw a special party for them one afternoon outside his hut.

Then it was back down to business. Fudge arrived at Hogwarts with Marcus Heatherington-Jones and 'Mad-Eye' Moody, wanting to de-brief Oliver and Katie now that they were fully recovered, and also to get an update on the state of the final quest. After introducing Marcus to everyone, Fudge addressed the people packed into the headmaster's office. Dumbledore and his close aids were there, as were the five friends and their protectors, and, of course, Oliver and Katie.

After going through the painful details of what happened at Qumran with Oliver and Katie, Fudge sighed and shook his head slowly.

"It's been strangely quiet over the last couple of weeks," he said. "There've been no incidents, but we've heard rumours that there's a lot of Death Eater recruitment and training going on. I can only assume that 'You Know Who' is building up his forces once more, but he can't have unravelled the spells yet."

"That seems to fit with what he spoke about in the canyon, minister," said Oliver.

"When he *does* find out what those spells are," said Dumbledore, "we can expect trouble - big trouble. And the first thing he'll want to do is get his hands on Harry and Hermione - he'll want to take their spells and knowledge for himself."

"How is the final quest coming along?" Fudge asked.

Dumbledore answered, holding up his hand to stop Harry saying anything. "It's coming along, Cornelius, but we both know that these things can't be rushed at all."

Fudge nodded. "Of course. I just hope you complete it before 'You Know Who' gets a chance to do any serious damage."

"How's the training going?" Sirius asked 'Mad Eye'.

"Busy - very busy. We've taken on more of the older Aurors to help us train the extra recruits we've had ever since that terrible business at Qumran."

"Cornelius," said Dumbledore, "we should strengthen the protection for Harry and the others - they're going to be Voldemort's first target, you know."

"I know, but it's difficult Albus," he replied. "Our forces are currently badly depleted so I don't think you can expect to get anyone in the short term."

"What about these two?" asked Dumbledore, nodding at Oliver and Katie.

"They're our best and most experienced Aurors!" Fudge exclaimed, and then he looked at Marcus and 'Mad Eye' and raised his eyebrows enquiringly.

They both glanced at each other and nodded.

"Very well," said Fudge. "Provided, of course, that they agree to it. After all, they've both been through a very harrowing experience, and protecting the Anima Summas is a bit like jumping out of the frying pan and into the fire. What do you two say?"

Oliver and Katie grinned broadly. "We accept, minister. We'll both be happy to join the protectors - I know that Katie feels the same as me - we want to do as much as we can to get back at 'You Know Who' after what he did to Dave Henson and the others."

"Great!" said Sirius, winking slyly at Dumbledore. "That's settled then."

"How long do you think we've got before 'You Know Who' surfaces again?" asked Marcus.

"It's difficult to tell," answered Dumbledore. "I don't think he'll find it easy to decipher the spells, and I'm sure he won't do anything until he gets them. And he'll want to build up his forces in this country again - he lost a lot more people than we did, don't forget. All in all, I think we might have a breathing space of maybe a month or two before he's ready to start up his campaign of terror again."

"Right!" said Fudge. "We'd better get back and leave these to get on with things. Thank you all for your time."

After they'd gone, Sirius grinned at Katie. "I hope you didn't mind us nudging Fudge into giving us your services?"

"Of course I didn't Dad," she replied. "We get to spend more time together now."

There wasn't much time for research over the next month or so. Jules had increased his learning sessions, and Dumbledore had insisted that they all, including Margot, attend extra practical classes. So they were either doing schoolwork or sleeping for most of the time.

They did get one worrying bit of news though - and it affected Ginny more than the others. Dumbledore told them that Lucius Malfoy had sent him a note, informing him that Draco wouldn't be attending Hogwarts any longer - he had hired a private tutor to complete his son's education. Dumbledore looked very sad when he told them, and they all feared the worst.

Then the exams were on them - and Ginny's OWLS. To everyone's surprise, Ron wasn't phased one little bit - he put great faith in Professor Denarnaud's accelerated learning methods and felt confident that he'd do well in their sixth year exams. Then they were over, and they could relax briefly before starting in earnest on their final quest.

It had been decided that they'd all stay at The Burrow once more over the summer - including Oliver, Katie, Margot and her grandfather, who insisted that he stay with her.

Ginny hadn't told her parents about Margot yet - she preferred to see their faces when Ron told them himself.