

Anima Summa Book 3 - Into the Light

By

Animma Summa

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Chapter 1 - A Death

Arthur and Molly Weasley looked on with astonishment at the number of people that came out through their fireplace and walked into the kitchen at The Burrow. Professor Dumbledore was the first one to arrive.

"I'm sorry to spring this on you both," he said. "I hope you don't mind putting up a few extra people over the summer?"

"No, of course not Professor," Molly replied as Dumbledore walked over and stood next to her, then turned and watched the procession from the fireplace.

Sirius led the way, quickly followed by Remus, Ceri, Oliver, Katie, Charlie, Nadine, Jules Denarnaud, Hermione, Harry, Ginny, Margot and finally Ron.

"We've got enough for two full Quidditch teams," whispered Arthur. "I'd better add a few more rooms to the house I think."

The Burrow was already the most weirdly shaped wizarding house in the country following the magical extensions that had been added the previous summer, and it was soon to become even more bizarre.

Thoughts of house alterations were far from Molly's mind, however. She stared open-mouthed as she saw Ron sidle up to Margot and entwine her hand in his as he looked lovingly into her beautiful green eyes. She returned Ron's look in kind and then glanced shyly at Arthur and Molly.

Ginny, beaming from ear to ear, caught under her parents arms and pulled them towards the pair. "Mum, Dad, come and meet Ron's new girlfriend. This is Margot."

Arthur held out his hand and Margot smiled as she shook it; then glanced nervously at Molly, who was still staring, her eyes wide.

"Pleased to meet you Mrs Weasley," said Margot.

Molly visibly shook herself, stepped up alongside Margot and caught under her free arm, dragging her from Ron's grasp as she led her over to the kitchen table. "Come and sit down Margot, let's get to know each other shall we?" Then her tone changed as she looked back over her shoulder. "Ron, Charlie, Ginny - why didn't I know about Margot sooner than this?"

"Mum!" they all said at the same time.

"Before you get too cosy Mum," said Charlie, "meet our other guests. This is Professor Jules Denarnaud, Margot's grandfather. And these other two lovebirds are Oliver Wood and Katie Bell. Katie's Harry's cousin on his father's side."

Arthur didn't know where to start first. "Margot's? Harry's? We'd all better sit down, I think. It seems we've got a bit of catching up to do!"

Later, while they waited for the 'special' dinner to be prepared by the excited Molly, the five friends sat in the garden talking about the final quest.

"Thoth was an amazing person," said Hermione. "I can remember everything he said down to the last detail."

"So can I," said Harry. "Maybe our minds were more receptive when we were ghosts."

"For my benefit, can you tell me once more what he said about the quest?" asked Margot.

"He said, *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,*" said Hermione.

"How many former existences do you think he had?" asked Ginny.

"Who knows," replied Hermione quickly. "But when we get to the end of the quest, we'll know where and how witches and wizards came into being - how magic started. This is so exciting! I can't wait to find out."

"What bothers me," said Ron, "is the bit about the horror soon to be unleashed. Do you think that's the Disc of Gates that 'You Know Who' has?"

"Professor Dumbledore thinks it could be much worse than that," said Harry. "He thinks that Voldemort may try to bring the Nephilim back from the Dark Realm."

They all shuddered as they thought about it. Dumbledore, Remus and Snape had told them all they knew about the fabled Nephilim and the Dark Realm.

"If they're anything like Lammashtha, then god help us," breathed Ginny.

"They seem to think they're worse than her Ginny," said Harry. "Much worse."

"We've got to keep our minds focused on the quest," said Hermione. "We can't be deflected by what Voldemort might do. In any case, Dumbledore thinks he'll only raise them if he thinks he's losing the war."

"I wonder who the sixth team member will be," said Margot. "Do you think it might be Katie?"

"Why do you think it's Katie?" asked Ginny.

"I don't know, really," she replied. "It's just so strange that after all this time, Harry's cousin suddenly comes into his life."

"But don't forget what Thoth said," said Ron. "He said that we haven't met the sixth member yet."

"No Ron," said Hermione, thinking furiously. "He didn't say that - he said that we don't *know* the sixth one yet. Think about it, we've met Katie before of course, but we didn't really know her - know her to be Harry's cousin. What do you think?"

"I suppose it's possible, but what do we do?" asked Ginny. "Katie obviously doesn't know that she's the sixth one - she'd have told us. Thoth said that she, or he, would seek us out. I really don't know."

"I think it's best if we ignore the sixth one for now," said Harry. "We won't accomplish anything by just speculating. All we can do is concentrate on the final quest. We've got to work out what we've got to do to find out Thoth's previous existence."

They all nodded solemnly, but for the moment not even Hermione could come up with anything.

"No, *you* ask them Oliver!"

"But Katie - it's so embarrassing. We've only just met them and they're good enough to put us up at The Burrow. *You* ask them."

"But it's just as embarrassing for me Oliver! Why don't you have a word with Charlie? Maybe he'll be glad if you suggest that he swaps with me."

"I don't know Katie. Perhaps Charlie and Nadine aren't - you know."

Oliver had spent the last few nights doubled up with Charlie in his room, while Katie was in one of the newly added rooms with Nadine. They'd become used to sharing a tent in the canyon at Qumran, and they were quickly becoming frustrated with the new sleeping arrangements at The Burrow.

Oliver skipped a flat stone over the calm water of the river running at the side of the garden. "I suppose we'll just have to put up with it Katie. In any case, Harry told me that Fred and George had put 'creaking floorboard' charms outside all the rooms, and they only activate after dark - everybody'll know if we start swapping rooms in the middle of the night."

Katie giggled. "How do you think Harry and Hermione are coping?"

"You know the weird things they can do. Maybe they just - what do they call it, Zapparate - to somewhere quiet - who knows?"

"It'll do us some good to show a bit of restraint anyway Oliver. We really can't risk upsetting Mr and Mrs Weasley - not to mention Dad! I've only just found him and I don't want him to think anything bad about me."

Oliver sighed, "He'll never think anything bad of you Katie. Hey, maybe we could sleep in a tent in the garden?"

"No Oliver - everybody will know what's going on if we do that. Now why don't you just be a good boy for a little while?"

"Katie!" said an exasperated Oliver. "A little while might just drag on throughout the summer!"

"I don't think there's much chance of that," she replied, grinning. "As soon as Hermione gets her head into gear we'll be off to goodness knows where."

"Well maybe I'd better tell her to start coming up with some answers soon then," he said a little petulantly.

Katie leaned against his arm, grinning as she looked into the water. Oliver turned and put his arms around her shoulders, looked deeply into her eyes, and pulled her towards him very gently.

"What's the Dark Side up to? Have you heard anything Sirius?" asked Charlie.

Sirius had called a meeting of the protectors in the kitchen to discuss their tactics when they were with Harry and the others on the quest. He had a feeling that as soon as Voldemort deciphered the spells and activated the Disc of Gates, the Anima Summas would be his first target.

He shook his head. "Nothing definite Charlie. I spoke to Dumbledore this morning and he said that Snape has been busy trying to find out what's going on, but apart from a lot of recruiting and one other thing, nothing. It seems that 'You Know Who' is spending all his time on those spells."

"What one other thing?" asked Ceri.

"Snape couldn't find out what exactly, but there's something going on - he picked up a few snippets of conversation about special training for a select band of Death Eaters."

"Perhaps it's something to do with the Disc of Gates," said Remus, deep in thought.

"We don't know," Sirius answered. "But Snape's doing his best to find out more. I'm sure the headmaster will let us know as soon as he hears something."

"What about the spy at Hogwarts?" asked Oliver. "Has anything been heard about Draco Malfoy?"

"Only that his father's arranged for him to finish his education at home," said Sirius. "But Dumbledore thinks that if 'You Know Who' has managed to find out that he's turned away from the Dark Side, then..." He trailed off, letting the others draw their own conclusions.

"So what about our tactics when we get out into the field?" asked Oliver.

"That's why I called this meeting," Sirius replied. "The worst thing about protecting the kids is that we don't really know the conditions and terrain until we actually get there - we just don't get the time to fully research the places in which we find ourselves, so we can rarely plan ahead with any degree of confidence."

"Do you think that will change on the final quest?" asked Nadine.

"I doubt it very much Nadine," said Ceri, grinning wryly. "When those kids get a lead on what to do next, they just want to go and do it straight away. Oh I'm sure we'll get some indication of what to expect, but not in the detail that we'd like."

She looked at Sirius, who nodded for her to continue. "It's best that we adopt the same basic tactics that we used on the second quest. When we're on the move, we surround them, but now that there're seven of us, it might be a good idea for two of us to take up a position well ahead of the main group - scout around to try to pick up advance warning of any imminent attack."

"That's fine, Ceri," said Remus, "as long as we know in which direction we're heading, but we won't always know that. Remember when we followed the Roman road from the gap in Wales? We had to rely on Harry to fly high above to try to pick out the route."

"Well in that case, we just revert to our usual tactics and make sure we give protection from all sides," said Ceri.

"Hang on a minute," said Katie, her brow creased in a frown. "Did you say that Harry had to fly? Does he take his broomstick with him on the quests?"

"Uh... no Katie - but you'd better ask him yourself how he does it," said Sirius, smiling.

"There's one other thing," said Ceri. "We got a bit complacent at Abydos and we very nearly paid a heavy price. First Harry and Hermione decided they wanted a cuddle out under the stars and then Ron went off and did his own thing. So whenever we have to camp out in the countryside, we've got to maintain a watch at all times - we can work out the shifts according to the environment in which we find ourselves."

"And we've got to stress on the youngsters that they can't go walkabouts whenever they feel like it," added Sirius. "But I'm quite sure they learned their lesson back in Egypt."

"Fred and George told me they were working on a new gadget when I last spoke to them," said Oliver. "Have you heard anything about it?"

Ceri and Sirius exchanged puzzled glances. "Not a thing Oliver. Have they said anything to you about it Charlie?" asked Sirius.

Charlie shook his head. "Nothing. Do you want me to get in touch with them?"

"That might be a good idea Charlie," said Ceri. "If they've got something that will tip the balance in our favour out there, I'd like to hear about it."

"What was she like Dad?" asked Katie.

Sirius, Katie and Harry were sitting in the garden one afternoon, talking about Katie's mother and her family.

"She was a very gentle and sensitive girl Katie," said Sirius wistfully. "She didn't have the bravado of Harry's father and she was always on to us about breaking school rules."

"So why were you so attracted to her if she was so different to the Marauders?" she asked.

"I don't know. I suppose it was a bit like opposites attracting. Not much different from Harry and Hermione really - she was always on to you and Ron about breaking the rules wasn't she Harry?"

Harry grinned. "She was when we first met up, but we soon cured her. Didn't Auntie Janice get involved in your escapades at all Sirius?"

"Oh no, Harry. She was dead against it. I remember how we first got together - James was teasing her, trying to get her to help us with one of our pranks against the Slytherins, although he knew she wouldn't, of course. Well, she got a bit upset about it and I remember the tortured look in her eyes. I couldn't help myself - I sprung to her defence, much to the astonishment of the others, and told James to leave her alone. She gave me a very strange look, smiled and whispered her thanks before walking off. Well I couldn't just leave it like that; I wanted to know what that strange look meant, so I followed her. After that, we started to spend more and more time together."

"I can't understand why she didn't rebel against her parents," said Katie. "Why she didn't come back and tell you that she was pregnant."

Sirius sighed, "Her parents, your grandparents Harry, were very strict Katie. I suppose they always lived in fear that something like that would happen to her. I don't know if she ever tried to contact me - James was very reluctant to talk about it."

"But why didn't Dad tell you what was going on Sirius?" asked Harry.

"I'm not sure he knew anything Harry. He didn't really get on with his parents - he was the one who rebelled against the strict upbringing. He was a very strong character, a lot stronger than Janice in that respect, and he didn't have a lot of contact with them after she was taken away from the school. Oh I know he tried to find out the reason why Janice was taken away - he loved his sister dearly - but if he ever found out, he certainly didn't tell me. I've agonised about that ever since I found out about Katie, but we'll never know now."

"What was she like at school - academically?" asked Katie.

"Bright as a button," grinned Sirius. "Always towards the top of the class. When I think about it, she was a lot like Hermione, but without her strength of character. Not that she was a wimp - far from it - but it must have been her over-strict upbringing that prevented her going against any kind of authority."

"How did she get on with my mother?" asked Harry.

"They got on well Harry. They weren't best friends or anything, you see Lilly was in Gryffindor and Janice was in Ravenclaw, so they were only together for any length of time when your mother and father, Janice and I spent time together. But I suppose Janice felt a bit like the odd one out - the studious Ravenclaw amongst three adventurous Gryffindors."

"It must have been hard for her," whispered Katie. "The gentle one amongst the devil-may-care Marauders. She must have loved you a lot to put up with your antics."

Sirius smiled. "We loved each other very much Katie. Never doubt that. I only wish that things could have turned out differently for us all."

"I like your set-up Arthur - very impressive."

Jules was inspecting Arthur's shed, filled with every-day Muggle devices. The piles of dead batteries had long since been removed from around the walls.

"Have you worked out how that clockwork train I brought you last time works Arthur?" asked Arbuthnot.

The Grangers had arrived earlier that morning to spend the weekend at The Burrow, and Arbuthnot had brought a fresh supply of batteries and a few more Muggle items. Arthur's eyes had gleamed with excitement and anticipation as he'd inspected the smoke alarm and mobile phone.

"It's amazing Arbuthnot," he said. "Come and see."

He led them outside to the far corner of the garden, where he'd laid out the track. But the track wasn't quite the same as Arbuthnot had brought him. He grinned and shook his head in disbelief at the changes that Arthur had made. It wove around the trees and shrubs and at one point climbed vertically over an old tree stump.

"That'll never work Arthur," said Arbuthnot, chuckling to himself. "A clockwork engine will never be able to climb over that."

Arthur grinned and wound up the mechanism of the little engine and attached it to the front of a line of four small empty trucks. Then he stood back proudly as it chugged along the track through the trees and shrubs and up to the tree stump, where it easily climbed up one side and down the other.

Arbuthnot gasped, "How on earth did it do that?"

Jules laughed. "A little levitation spell Arthur?"

"Not really Jules," he replied. "I just applied a few charms to the mechanism. They give it extra power when the train needs it. I'm going to extend the track to go around the whole of the garden when I get time, but first I'll need to sort out a little problem I've been having. Those blinking garden gnomes keep hijacking the train and driving it off into the undergrowth, so I'm looking for an appropriate gnome-repellent charm I can use. I don't suppose you know of any Jules?"

Jules chuckled, "I may have one or two that might work, but as you know it's notoriously difficult to control those little blighters. I'll check through some of my books later."

"What are garden gnomes?" asked Arbuthnot, looking confused.

"Believe me Arbuthnot," answered Arthur, "you really don't want to know. Just be glad that you've only got slugs to worry about in the Muggle world."

All three men looked up as an owl flew low overhead, hovered for a few moments as it looked at the crazy antics of the charmed little train, and hooted as it flew towards the other end of the garden where Harry and the others were sitting. It perched beside Ginny, lifted its leg for her to undo the sealed parchment, and then flew to the kitchen window hoping for a few scraps to eat before returning to Hogwarts.

Ginny looked at the envelope and grimaced, "My OWL results I think."

"Go on then Ginny, open it!" shouted Ron, remembering how she'd teased him when his own OWL results had arrived last year. They'd had their sixth year exam results the day before - Hermione, as usual, had finished top of year six, only rivalled by Margot, who'd had equally good marks in the four exams she'd tried. Harry and Ron had been pleased to find that they'd done really well - a testament to Jules' accelerated learning spells.

Ginny continued to look nervously at the envelope, under the amused gaze of Harry and Ron and the sympathetic gaze of Hermione and Margot.

"Would you like me to open it for you Ginny?" asked Hermione.

Ginny shook her head and her jaw set in determination. "No thanks, Hermione."

She tore open the envelope and stared at the parchment for what appeared to be an inordinate amount of time. Her face showed no reaction whatsoever.

"Well?" exclaimed Harry.

Ginny looked up slowly, her eyes wet and her lower lip trembling slightly. "I don't believe it! I've passed them all - I've even done better than Percy!"

Her friends hugged the incredulous Ginny and dragged her off towards the kitchen to give the good news to her mother and the others.

The ghost sat all alone in a very cold and a very dark place. He didn't know where he was, he didn't know how long he'd been there, having lost all track of time, and what's more, he didn't really care. All he knew was that he was dead, and he couldn't stop thinking about it. He was in the very depths of despair.

Once more he thought back to the events leading up to his death...

"I gave you plenty of warning Draco," said Lucius despairingly. "Why didn't you use the time you had to get away?"

"I...I knew it wouldn't do me any good father. I'd have spent weeks, maybe months, wondering when he'd find me. I know there's no escape, so I might as well face the music first as last."

"Just don't say anything to upset him," said Lucius as he led his son into Voldemort's cave.

"Ah... Draco. You're here at last."

Draco shuddered at the evil gleam in the Dark Lord's eyes and stood nervously in front of his throne, glancing at his father every so often.

"Tell me Draco," said Voldemort, visibly keeping his anger in check for the moment, "why didn't you tell me that Potter and his friends went to the pyramids in Egypt?"

"I... I..."

"You WHAT Draco," Voldemort finally exploded. "You thought it wasn't very important perhaps? Or you couldn't remember the way up to the Owlery? CRUCIO."

Draco fell to the ground screaming as the fiery spell hit him in the middle of his chest. Lucius bit hard on his bottom lip, not daring to raise a hand to help him. After thirty seconds, Voldemort lifted the curse.

"Tell me why you didn't let me know Draco, and I'll know if you're lying to me, so don't even think about it."

Draco lifted himself up onto his elbows and stared fearfully at the Dark Lord. Then something seemed to flash through his mind, making him abandon all caution. "I don't think what you're doing is right," cried Draco. "You shouldn't be killing innocent people."

"Ah, so now we have it," hissed Voldemort. "You've turned away from me. You've decided to help Potter have you?"

"No... I... I still don't like Potter, but he and his friends don't deserve to die," whispered Draco as he got slowly up from the floor, his legs shaking as he stood looking up at the Dark Lord.

"Don't they now! And what do you think I should do about you Draco? Do you think that you deserve to die?"

"No, my Lord. I've helped you up to now. Doesn't that count for anything?"

"You don't just decide to leave my service Draco. No one does that. CONSIDER YOURSELF TERMINATED!" Voldemort rose from his throne and pointed his wand once more at Draco.

"AVADA KEDAVRA."

The deadly green beam hit Draco again in the centre of his chest. Lucius suppressed a strangled sob as he watched his son drop slowly to the ground, where he lay unmoving, his eyes staring blankly at the cave ceiling.

"Get him out of here Lucius. No one turns against me - not even your son," hissed Voldemort.

Lucius lifted Draco's lifeless body into his arms and carried him back out of the cave, where he Apparated back to the extensive grounds of his mansion. He shuddered with delayed reaction and thought with dread about what he'd say to his wife. He lifted his head and howled with despair at the cloudy sky. At that instant, he swore he'd get his revenge on the Dark Lord. He didn't know how and he didn't know when, but he knew that when it came, it

would be sweet. He silently cursed the Dark Lord and the way he treated his servants. He, Lucius Malfoy, knew that an efficient and loyal Death Eater force could not be maintained solely by force and terror. He knew that you reaped what you sowed, and that when he took over the reigns of the Dark Side - after Voldemort inevitably met his end - he would know how to treat his servants. He resolved to bide his time, and when the opportunity presented itself, he would make sure that he would be in the right place to take over the leadership.

He carefully laid Draco on the damp earth and stood for a while, looking down at his only son and heir; then he walked up to the mansion to instruct his house elves to prepare a grave in a secluded part of the rear garden.

Draco's ghost - his Ba - raised itself out of Draco's body and looked down at his lifeless form in horror. The shock coursed through him as he stared at what he'd once been. And he wondered what would happen next. He lifted his head to the sky in an instinctive reaction - hoping to see some sort of salvation for his tortured soul.

High above, he saw brightness amid the dark clouds, a brightness that burst open to reveal a portal of light, through which a brightly shining form drifted and moved down to stand at his side. Draco reached out his hand imploringly.

"Wh... who are you?" asked Draco.

"I am a spirit of the Light," replied the shining one. "I have come to give you council. Hear what I have to say. You have done many bad things during your earthly existence and you have thought many bad thoughts. But you have died because you turned aside from the Dark Path. You considered the well being of others when you took the decision to renounce your evil ways, but your path into the Light has not yet been set. You have begun the journey into the Light, but you must do one more selfless act, one more thing that will ensure your place among the shining ones in the Light Realm. You must wander as a shade until that time arrives. You will have time to reflect on your life - consider your next actions very carefully."

The shining form rose back into the light above and disappeared. The air around Draco shimmered, and he found himself standing in a cold, dark place. All was still and silent - as silent as the grave...

He sighed once more as he reflected on his misfortune and wondered what he could do in this deserted place to save his soul from the futility of eternal wandering.

"How's the prototype coming along George?" asked Lee.

"We're just putting the finishing touches to it Lee," he answered.

Fred and George Weasley were sitting in the front room of the Shrieking Shack, eating lunch with their friends and employees Lee Jordan, Angelina Johnson and Alicia Spinnet. Their other five employees, seconded to them by the Ministry of Magic, were still working on the production line upstairs in the hectic task of keeping up with demand for their Whammos. Orders were still coming in thick and fast from both the U.K. and America, and now that school had finished for the summer holiday they no longer had the help of some of the seventh year students at the weekends.

"How're we going to cope if the ministries like it?" asked Angelina. "We're fully stretched already with the Whammos."

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it," said George. "We can probably persuade Cornelius Fudge to lend us a few more ministry employees, but if he doesn't we'll have to try to get hold of some of the students to see if they'd like to earn some cash during the school holidays - I'm sure that Harry and Ron can rustle up some of their mates to help us. What do you think Fred? Fred... Fred!"

Fred jumped. "What?"

"I said what do you think?"

"About what?"

"Have you heard anything we've been talking about?" asked George, looking askance at his brother.

"Uh... sorry George, I was miles away then. Now what were you saying?"

A grin slowly spread over Angelina's face. She'd noticed that Fred wasn't taking much notice of the conversation, and she saw in which direction Fred was staring before George jolted him back to reality. She saved her observations for later, however, after she'd had a chance to fully think through the implications.

"I said that if the new prototype takes off, we'll have to get extra help." George reiterated.

"I'm sure Fudge will come up trumps or maybe we can see if some of last year's seventh years still haven't found jobs yet," said Fred.

The other four grinned at Fred and shook their heads. "I think all this work is getting to you Fred," said Alicia.

"Uh... no, I was just miles away," said Fred. "By the way, I spoke to Charlie this morning - he asked me about the new gadget and whether we could consider giving some to the protectors to try out. What do you think?"

"Anything we can do to help the Anima Summas is ok by me," said George. "We should be able to get it ready for field trials by the end of the day, so we can go down to The Burrow in the morning to give them a demonstration."

"Right! Back to work then," said Fred, getting up from his chair. "That lot upstairs must be getting hungry by now."

They all tramped up the stairs to the workshop to relieve the ministry people, Fred and George walking over to the corner of the room to work on the prototype and the others taking their seats around the large Whammo production desk in the middle of the room. Angelina made sure she was sitting close to Alicia.

"What do you think of Fred's little performance?" whispered Angelina as she leaned close to her friend.

"I think he must be tired Ang - he's been working very hard recently."

"I know he has, but that wasn't the reason why he was so distracted."

"Oh?"

"Didn't you notice where he was staring all through lunch?"

Alicia shook her head, looking baffled.

"He was staring at *you* Lissy. Don't tell me you didn't notice!"

"Angelina! I think you must be mistaken - Fred's never said that he fancies me."

"No mistake, Lissy. He was definitely staring at you all through lunch. What do you think about him? Do you fancy him at all?"

"I... I haven't really thought about it," she replied doubtfully. "Fred's... well, Fred's just Fred isn't he."

"So you'd say no if he asked you out on a date?"

"If Fred asked me out on a date I'd think he was up to one of his pranks - I'd just wait until he said the punch line. You know what he's like."

"Is that a yes then?"

Alicia stared at her friend. "Now did you hear me say yes?"

Angelina grinned slyly. "No - but I didn't hear you say 'no' either."

The next morning, Fred and George prepared to go on their visit to The Burrow. They'd packed a box of their new inventions and had made sure that there were enough stocks of materials up in the workshop for the day's production. Then they Apparated to a quiet spot just outside the confines of The Burrow and walked through the rickety gate into the garden and the welcoming aroma of breakfast being cooked.

"That's one thing I miss Fred," said George. "Mum's cooking. I think we timed this visit just right for a plateful of bacon and eggs."

Fred grinned as they hurried over to the house. Then halfway across the lawn he stopped, his mouth wide open, pointing to the line of bushes that bordered the left-hand side of the garden. "Who the hell is that?"

George looked and gasped, "And what's our Ron doing with her?"

Ron was unaware that his two brothers were watching him closely. Margot was equally oblivious to the scrutiny of the twins as they walked towards the pair engaged in a rather intimate embrace.

"The old dog!" breathed George. "Why didn't he tell us he had a girlfriend?"

"And more to the point, why didn't Ginny tell us?" said Fred.

"Hey!" shouted George, grinning. "That sort of thing is strictly forbidden at The Burrow. If you want to eat, the kitchen's the proper place for that."

Ron and Margot broke apart, Margot looking confused and Ron raising his eyes to the sky in defeat. He'd managed to keep Margot a secret from the twins up till now, but he knew that they'd find out sooner or later.

"Come on then Ron - introduce us!" exclaimed Fred, looking at Margot and shaking his head in bewilderment that his little brother had managed to attract such a beautiful girl.

"Margot, these are my two brothers Fred and George. This is Margot, you two, and no teasing her!"

Margot smiled as they both shook her hand, feeling the same confusion as everyone else who'd met the identical pair. "Which is which?" she asked.

"I'm George," he said. "How on earth did you meet this vision of loveliness Ron?"

Margot blushed prettily as she withstood the gaze of the twins. "I've heard a lot about you two from Ron and Ginny," she said.

"Why didn't you tell us about her Ron?" asked Fred.

"Because I wanted to postpone all the teasing for as long as I could," he replied sullenly.

Margot laughed. "I'm sure they're both very nice Ron. They must be if they're your brothers."

"We're going to like you Margot," said George, smiling. "You must be very special if you can keep Ron out of the kitchen when breakfast's nearly ready."

Ron couldn't conceal a smile. "Margot's one of the helpers now. She's with Ginny and me on the Anima Summas' second quest."

Fred pointed to the box he was carrying. "We've got something here that might help you with that - fresh from the amazing think tank of Weasleys Wizard Wheezes. Charlie wants us to give you all a demonstration on how they work."

The four walked across the lawn and into the kitchen, just in time to join the others for breakfast. Jules looked up in astonishment. "I think I must be seeing double," he breathed.

After breakfast, Fred and George led everyone out into the garden to give their demonstration. They stood in front of the others and each took a small object from the box and placed it in his pocket.

"Right," said Fred, walking back about ten yards into the garden. "Do your worst, Sirius. Try to put a spell on me. You'd better use Rictusempra just in case."

Sirius grinned. "Aren't you sure it'll work then Fred?"

"Well it's worked every time during the trials," he replied. "But you can't be too careful."

"What do they do?" asked Ceri, intrigued.

"Later Ceri," said George. "First the demonstration, then the explanation. Go on then Sirius."

Sirius pointed his wand at Fred, who stood nonchalantly with his hands in his robe pockets, and said the tickling spell. Everyone gasped as the beam of energy sped towards Fred, and just whizzed through the empty space where he'd just been standing a fraction of a second ago. Fred grinned as he stood about ten yards away from his earlier position. "You next Oliver - try something a bit stronger if you like."

Oliver pointed his wand at Fred and sent a full body bind spell - with the same result. Fred was now standing back in his original position.

"How did you do that?" he gasped.

"Let's get back to the kitchen and we'll explain it all," said George.

"So come on then," said Remus as they all sat around the table. "What just happened?"

Fred took the small object from his robe pocket and held it up for everyone to see. "This is a Relocator - our newest invention. We got the idea after we visited Camp Merlin a while ago - one of the Aurors said it might be a good idea to work on something like this."

It appeared to be just a small oval disc, about three inches at its longest axis, with a red button at the centre. He handed the disc to Sirius to inspect, while George walked around the table to give out the other Relocators from the box.

"Well we saw what it does," said Katie, "but how does it work?"

"And what are the operating parameters?" asked Oliver.

"The what?" asked Fred, grinning. "It's a sort of magical battery. It holds a suspended Apparate spell, waiting for it to be activated by the user."

"If you're in the thick of a fight with Death Eaters, and you see a curse coming your way - well you know yourselves from past experience that you just don't have the time to concentrate and Apparate to a safe place. This little thing does most of the work for you. All you have to do is touch the button and you'll be Apparated a short distance away, out of the path of the curse. Just like you saw it do to Fred out in the garden."

"That's amazing," said Ceri. "But what if it just Apparates you into the path of another spell?"

"Ah, that's where the clever bit comes in," said George. "It senses the space around you up to a distance of ten yards in all directions, and it works out the safest place to transport you. And before you ask, we've tested it out on confined spaces - it won't Apparate you into the middle of a solid object - it senses that you wouldn't be safe materialising inside a rock wall, for instance."

"Well thank goodness for that," breathed Ginny.

"But what if all the available space around you is full of curses being thrown?" asked Ron.

"Then, my little brother, you know that you're luck's run out. It will, in fact, relocate you into the path of the least harmful spell, but if they're all, say, the killing curse, then I'm afraid it's goodnight Vienna for you."

"It's a magical device," said Fred. "Not a miracle worker."

"Is the range limited to ten yards?" asked Sirius.

"I'm afraid so, Sirius," said Fred. "We've tried to extend it, but anything further than that distance has produced mixed results. We know that it's completely safe within a ten yard radius, but it doesn't seem to be able to detect solid objects beyond that."

"How many times will it work?" asked Ceri. "In a prolonged fight, we may need to use it more than once."

"We think it's indefinite," said George. "We used the same Relocator about fifty times in quick succession during one of our tests. We think that once the Apparate spell is set on the object, it just stays there."

"Amazing," said Charlie. "I think this could be a real life saver."

"But you have to touch the button to activate it," said Harry. "It can't, for instance, detect a curse from behind and activate itself?"

"We tried to make it an automatic process," said George. "But we just couldn't get it to work - there's just too many variables."

"Can you let us have some of these?" asked Sirius. "I'd be much happier if we had these up our sleeves when the Death Eaters attack."

"Of course," said Fred. "How many do you want?"

"Well there're twelve of us, but we're expecting one other to join the helpers at some stage, so would you be able to let us have thirteen?"

"No problem," said Fred. "You can have them now, and we've still got enough to demonstrate them to the Ministry."

"Just one question," said Hermione. "What if you accidentally touch the button when there's no danger about. What'll happen then?"

"Oh sorry," said George. "We forgot to tell you the most important bit. You have to activate the device before you use it. So when you think there may be a possible attack, you hold your wand onto the button and say, '*CITO FABRICA*'. To deactivate it, you say '*COMPLEO FABRICA*'. Any more questions?"

"Yes one," said Margot. "How on earth do you manage to think up and make something like this? It's incredible."

"I just knew we'd like you Margot," said George, grinning.

"You have to have a bit of a devious mind Margot," said Fred. "We've been into that sort of thing for ages, thinking up pranks to pull on the Slytherins. Ask Sirius and Remus - they'll know exactly what I mean." Moony and Padfoot nodded their heads in agreement.

"Thank you both," said Nadine. "I've got a feeling that we'll be thanking you even more before this quest is finished."

"Right," said George. "We'd better get going Fred. We've got an appointment with Marcus at the Ministry in less than an hour."

Marcus Heatherington-Jones greeted the twins warmly as he ushered them into his office. "Sorry the minister can't be here, he's at No. 10 briefing the Prime Minister on the latest developments."

"You're the one we want to see Marcus," said George. "We've just delivered some of the new devices we spoke to you about to the Anima Summa group and they seemed quite keen to try them out."

"Well if they can do what you say they can, they'll be an important asset in the hard times ahead. I've had a quick word with 'Mad-Eye' Moody and he's keen to put them on trial in his war games at the training camp. How many have you got for us?"

"We've got twenty on us, and we can knock up another twenty by tomorrow morning," said Fred.

"Fine," said Marcus. "I'll take the ones you've got. I'm going over to Camp Merlin this afternoon. Perhaps you can deliver the rest to Moody tomorrow. Right, you'd better tell me how they work."

That evening, Bill Weasley paid one of his lightening visits to The Burrow following a meeting he'd had to attend at Gringotts in Diagon Alley. Like the twins, he was quite taken with Margot and hadn't quite got over his astonishment at seeing his little brother with such a stunning girl.

He collared Sirius over by the edge of the garden, doing one of his frequent security inspections.

"So Sirius, have you spoken to her yet?"

Sirius pulled a face. "No Bill. After the shock of finding out I've got a daughter, I just haven't seemed to find the time."

"You'll regret it Sirius - take it from someone who's let more than one beautiful woman slip through his fingers."

"I know Bill, and I *will* speak to her. It just seems... well, a bit insensitive with Katie close by most of the time. I don't want her to think that I've completely abandoned the memory of her mother."

Bill nodded. "I can see what you're getting at, but that was a long time ago. I'm sure that Katie will understand."

"I hope so Bill, I really do."

Ceri and Nadine were sitting in Ceri's bedroom, talking about Sirius in a very similar way that the two men were talking about *her*.

"He hasn't said anything," said Ceri in answer to Nadine's probe.

"I can't understand him," said Nadine. "Bill was so sure that he'd say something."

"I think I know why, Nadine. He's afraid of upsetting Katie. I can understand the way he feels because I've been feeling the same way. The reason I haven't pushed him into saying something is because I don't want to get in the way of her mother's memory. I know it happened a long time ago, but they've only just found each other, and what would she think if I made a play for her father at such a time as this?"

"I'm sure Katie would understand Ceri, she seems to be a very warm and understanding sort of girl."

"She is Nadine - I can tell from the emotions I'm picking up from her. But I can't help thinking that things have changed, even if it is only temporarily. Don't forget, if Sirius and I get together and perhaps get... married, I'll be Katie's stepmother. I've got to get my head around that - as will Katie."

"So what are you going to do?"

Ceri thought for a few moments. "Nothing Nadine. If Sirius thinks we can get together, he'll have to choose the right time to do something about it. He's got more than one female to think about now."

The next morning, Harry and Hermione strolled hand-in-hand around the garden before breakfast. Harry leaned over and whispered into her ear.

"Have you still got your naughty desires under control?"

Hermione stopped walking and stared at her boyfriend. "Harry Potter - that's an awful thing to say. You know as well as I do that they're under control, as are yours. And anyway, they're not naughty."

Harry grinned. "Just teasing Hermione. Do you think we should have a word with Ron? Give him some advice on how to curb his wicked desires?"

"Honestly Harry, what's got into you this morning? And what makes you think that Ron's got wicked desires on Margot anyway?"

"He's a boy isn't he? I know how I felt before the rings put a lid on my urges."

"And Margot's a very intelligent and sensible girl. She won't let anything like that happen, I'm sure."

"No? Have you seen the way she looks at him?"

"Harry! She loves him, but that doesn't mean that she'll jump into bed with him the first chance she gets!"

"That sounds like a very interesting conversation," said Ron as he and Margot stepped out from the bushes. Margot's face was flushed, but Harry wasn't sure whether that was from embarrassment at listening to the conversation or something else that may have gone on in the bushes.

"Who were you talking about?" asked Ron. "Charlie and Nadine?"

Harry opened his mouth to answer, but quickly closed it as Hermione stepped down hard on his left foot.

"Uh, something like that Ron," said Hermione as she caught under Margot's arm and led her off into the garden away from the boys.

"What was that all about?" asked the confused Ron, watching the two girls walk away from them.

"Don't ask *me* Ron," said Harry, a pained expression on his face as he bent down and vigorously rubbed his foot.

Ron looked down at Harry. "Harry. Can I ask you something?"

Harry straightened up and looked at his friend, wondering what was coming - the last time he'd had that odd expression on his face he'd asked Harry how to go about kissing a girl.

"What!"

"Uh, you and Hermione. Have you... uh... have you... you know, had any strong... urges?"

Harry grinned. "What sort of urges Ron?"

"You know what I mean Harry - you must have felt... certain things... when you're close to her."

"Of course I have Ron. I may be the Anima Summa, but I'm still flesh and blood. Why do you ask?"

"Cause I've had them too. And I'm afraid to say anything to Margot about it - I'm her first boyfriend, and she's my first girlfriend and I don't want to spoil anything between us. What I want to ask you Harry is... how do you cope with it?"

"I've got help Ron," said Harry, lifting his hand and showing Ron the ring.

Ron's mouth dropped open. "You mean... he... he's helping you control your feelings?"

"Not my feelings Ron - just my, uh, let's just say my natural desires."

"You lucky bugger! You can't lend me the ring for a bit can you?"

Harry grinned and shook his head. "Sorry Ron, I don't think Hermione would be very pleased with me if I did that!"

"She knows about it?" asked Ron, incredulously.

"Of course she does - the ring is helping control her desires as well."

"You mean... she felt the same way as you did?"

"Ron - Hermione's flesh and blood as well isn't she?"

"I know that Harry, but... but I though girls didn't get the same sort of urges as us boys."

"What? Oh they do, Ron, believe me they do. What made you think they didn't?"

"I don't know - they're different to us aren't they?"

"Ron - they're not that different!"

"You're lucky Harry - you know exactly what Hermione's thinking and feeling whenever you touch her, but how do I know what Margot's thinking and feeling? Maybe she doesn't feel the same way as I do about... about... you know."

"There's only one way to find out Ron - ask her!"

"What! I couldn't just come out with something like this. She'll think I'm a pervert or something!"

Harry laughed. "She won't Ron. If I'm not too mistaken, she's probably agonising over the same things as you are. Talk to her!"

"How much did you hear?" Hermione asked Margot nervously.

"Enough," replied Margot. "But I don't think Ron realised you were talking about us."

"I'm so sorry Margot. Harry's been in a very funny mood this morning, but we wouldn't hurt you two for the world - you know that don't you?"

Margot smiled. "Of course I do - and thanks for defending my honour."

"We shouldn't have been talking about our friends like that - what you two do is none of our business," said Hermione.

Margot smiled once more, this time a little wryly. "Hermione - Ron's been the perfect little gentleman and nothing like that has happened - he hasn't even said anything about it. I think he's afraid of how I'll react."

"You're the first girl that Ron's been out with Margot. And he's always been a bit shy when it comes to girls. How do *you* feel about things?"

Margot turned to face Hermione, her brow creased and her expression worried. "I've never felt anything like this before Hermione. I love him so much, and I... I... I've been getting these funny... feelings. I think that something's wrong with me sometimes."

Hermione reached out and held Margot's hand. "There's nothing wrong with you Margot. There's nothing wrong with feeling those things - I felt the same things about Harry, and if it wasn't for the rings, I don't think we'd be able to resist them. The rings are helping us control our desires, Margot, but you and Ron only have yourselves to help each other."

Margot's eyes grew wide. "The rings are helping you both?"

"Yes. They told us we have to remain pure in mind and body until the prophecy is fulfilled."

"Since Ron and I are part of the prophecy, then I suppose that applies to us as well, don't you think?"

Hermione frowned. "I suppose you could be right Margot. Look - why don't you speak to Ron about it? Under all that bravado he's a very sensitive and understanding boy. Believe me, if you let this fester and build up, it might cause a rift between you - and it might get in the way of what we've got to do - so speak to him about it."

Margot turned and looked towards Ron speaking to Harry at the other end of the garden, and nodded her head. "I will Hermione. I'll just have to find the right time to do it."

Ginny watched her friends from her bedroom window and wondered what they were talking about. She had the feeling that whatever it was, it seemed fairly serious, and hoped that nothing was wrong. She sighed as she walked over to her bed and sat down, cupping her cheeks in both hands as she leaned her elbows on her thighs.

'I feel like the odd one out,' she thought. 'I wonder who the sixth helper will be, and when... he... will find us? Oh I *do* hope it'll be a boy!'

Crabbe Senior walked into Voldemort's cave and strode up to the Dark Lord sitting on his throne. "You called for me, my Lord?"

"Yes Crabbe, I can't find anything in my library that will help me translate these spells, and time is getting short. If I don't get some answers soon, the Anima Summas will achieve their full powers and they'll be more difficult to eliminate. I've been thinking - Irem is in the desert region, and the spells and disc were hidden there as well. I want you to speak to that group of Death Eaters we met at Petra. I want you to find out if they know of any scholars versed in the arts of ancient languages and ciphers - I've got the feeling that the answer to our problem lies somewhere out there in the desert."

Crabbe nodded. "Yes my Lord. I'll leave for Petra immediately."

Later that afternoon, Crabbe managed to locate the leader of the Death Eaters in the ancient residential area towards the centre of Petra.

The Arab scratched his chin, deep in thought. "There is one that may be able to help the Great One," he said. "He lives near Amman. He's a very old wizard - something of a recluse - he stays in his hut for most of the time, surrounded by his books and parchments. He's always trying to find hidden messages in the ancient writings."

"Can you persuade him to come with me to the Dark Lord's cave?" asked Crabbe.

The Arab nodded. "I'm sure that he'll be honoured to contribute to the cause of the Dark. Come, there's a Portkey to a place close to his home not far from here."

Ten minutes later, Crabbe and the Arab stood outside a mud brick hut that stood not far from the main highway outside the city of Amman. The Arab glanced at Crabbe and then knocked on the door once more, this time more forcefully. After another minute, the door creaked open a fraction and an old and wizened face peered out of the narrow crack.

"Yes. What do you want?"

"Ahmed," said the Arab, bowing slightly. "Greetings. There is something of great urgency that we must speak to you about."

Ahmed glanced at Crabbe, and then opened the door fully. "You'd better come in then," he said as he walked back to his desk and sat down in a rickety wooden chair.

Crabbe explained his mission, and Ahmed listened with increasing interest.

"I may be able to help," he said. "You said these spells are in a script that you've never seen before?"

"That's correct," said Crabbe. "The Dark Lord thinks it may be an ancient cipher, and he wants you to help him unravel it."

"I must admit to being very intrigued," he replied. "When do we leave?"

A little while later, Ahmed bowed to the sinister figure of Lord Voldemort. "It is a great honour to be able to help in your great task."

Voldemort nodded. "I am told that you specialise in ancient ciphers and languages. If you help me to read these spells I will show you something that will make your mouth drool with longing. Succeed in your task and I will allow you to see some of the pages of the Necronomicon."

Voldemort drew out the fabled black book from his robes and held it so that Ahmed could see the cover. Ahmed's eyes went wide and his mouth dropped open to its fullest extent.

"The Necronomicon," he whispered. "I thought it was lost forever."

"This will be your reward if you translate the spells," said Voldemort, grinning evilly as he saw that Ahmed would apply all his vast experience to the full to be able to feast his eyes on the knowledge contained in the Necronomicon. He held out the parchment of spells. "Take these and work at the back of my cave. Wormtail will bring you food and drink whenever you feel the need."

Ahmed reached out and took the parchment, but he didn't immediately look at it. He had eyes only for the Necronomicon.

Charlie and Nadine grinned at each other as they walked down to the cabin in the little valley in the Langedoc, bathed in the warm sunshine of mid-morning. They'd arrived a little earlier and had walked over to the spot where they first found each other, romantically speaking, the previous year. After spending a few poignant minutes there revelling in their memories, they continued on down to the cabin, hoping to surprise Nadine's brother, Demont. Sirius had allowed them to take the day off from their 'protector' duties, since nothing much seemed to be happening at the moment.

"He'll be surprised to see us," said Charlie.

"I know," Nadine replied, grinning. "But he loves surprises."

They walked up to the cabin and went in - but Demont was nowhere to be found.

"Demont. Demont!" shouted Nadine. "Funny, he doesn't usually start on his rounds for another hour or so. I wonder where he is?"

"I hope the magical creatures in the forest haven't started acting up again," said Charlie. "Perhaps that's why he isn't here - he may have gone to the forest early."

"Charlie? Nadine?"

The pair turned and looked up at Demont, standing at the top of the stairs with a blanket covering his middle.

"You lazy so-and-so," said Charlie. "I always thought you were an early riser Demont!"

"Uh. I didn't expect you," said Demont a bit nervously.

"Who is it Demont?" shouted a female voice from the bedroom.

A grin slowly spread over Nadine's face as she stared at her brother. "Who have you got up there brother dear?" she asked, revelling in his obvious discomfort.

A dark-haired, scantily dressed woman peered over Demont's shoulder and stared at the couple on the ground floor of the cabin. "Oh," she said as she raced back into the bedroom, quickly followed by Demont.

"We'll be down in a few minutes," he shouted over his shoulder. "Put the kettle on."

"Well the old scoundrel," said Charlie, grinning broadly. "Perhaps we should have told him we were coming."

"What! And miss all this? No way, Charlie - this is just perfect!"

"You're a wicked little witch," said Charlie, grinning as he caught hold of his girlfriend and planted a kiss on her forehead.

She squirmed free and trotted over to the kitchen, where she filled the kettle, pointed her wand at it, and then poured some ground coffee into the coffee pot.

It was brewing nicely by the time Demont walked down the stairs, closely followed by a nervous-looking woman of about the same age.

"Uh, this is Anne-Marie," said Demont, smiling as he turned towards his girlfriend. "And this is my sister, Nadine, and her boyfriend Charlie Weasley."

They sat down as Nadine poured four cups of coffee and handed them around. She still hadn't lost her grin as she appraised Demont and Anne-Marie. "So, when did this happen then? I *thought* you were hiding something from me Demont."

"Sorry," said Demont. "I wanted to spend as much time as I could with Anne-Marie before you started snooping around. I should have known better than to try to keep it quiet."

Charlie looked at Anne-Marie and saw immediately why Demont had become attracted to her. She brushed a few strands of her black hair away from her dark eyes, eyes that were full of mystery and held that special quality that few men were able to resist. "How long have you been together?" he asked.

"A few months now," said Anne-Marie. "We met at the French Ministry of Magic."

"Is that where you work?" asked Charlie.

"Yes - but I've... uh... got a few days off."

Demont glanced nervously at Charlie and his sister and quickly added, "She works in the Care of Magical Creatures office, and she wanted to come up here to take a look at the dragons that caused so much bother back last year."

Nadine pursed her lips, her eyes twinkling. "Hmm," she muttered almost inaudibly, although Charlie managed to catch what she said, "Curiouser and curiouser..." Nadine was now convinced that Demont was holding something back, and the body language from the pair absolutely cried out that something very mysterious, and perhaps even clandestine, was afoot.

Now Nadine was very similar to her future sister-in-law, Ginny, when it came to picking up on thinly veiled intrigues, and she resolved to find out more about it. She sat, thinking furiously, as she observed her brother and his girlfriend, wondering what she could do to uncover what was behind it all.

Nadine stood up and walked over to Anne-Marie, caught under her arm, and pulled her towards the door. "You boys talk about old times," she said. "Anne-Marie and I've got a bit of

catching up to do of our own." She made eyes at Charlie, and glanced in the direction of her brother. Charlie grinned, knowing that his girlfriend wanted him to quiz Demont.

The two girls walked out into the bright morning sunshine. "I want to know exactly where and how you met," said Nadine. "What he said, how nervous he was - everything!"

Anne-Marie laughed. "Demont said you were a very inquisitive girl."

"Demont?" said Charlie after the two girls disappeared outside the cabin. "What's going on? What are you keeping back from us?"

Demont squirmed as he withstood Charlie's piercing gaze. "Nothing Charlie. There's nothing going on... I... we... we're just a bit embarrassed about being caught with our pants down, so to speak."

Charlie grinned slyly and shook his head. "You've never struck me as being the shy type, Demont. You might as well tell me - you know that your sister won't rest until she finds out what's going on."

Demont sighed and raised his eyes to the ceiling. "I can't Charlie... believe me, I can't."

Charlie and Nadine opened the rickety gate and walked slowly into the garden at The Burrow, having returned from France just a few minutes previously.

"What did he say Charlie?" asked Nadine.

"Nothing. He said that he couldn't tell me - whatever it is."

"Hmmm. Anne-Marie wouldn't say anything either. Oh, she told me how they met and all that, but I could tell that she was holding something back."

"I wonder what the devil it could be?" said Charlie. "I have to admit to being completely baffled by it all. Hey! You don't think that Anne-Marie is Demont's boss' wife, or something like that do you?"

Nadine laughed. "No I don't think so, Charlie. I can't see my brother getting mixed up in anything like that! I wonder if... No! It can't be..."

"What!" shouted Charlie as he saw the way his girlfriend was concentrating furiously on some hidden thought.

Nadine slowly shook her head. "No, it can't be!"

"What!" yelled Charlie, beside himself with curiosity.

"I'll tell you when I've managed to find out a bit more. I may be completely wrong about this, so I don't want to say anything until I'm sure about it."

"Nadine!" gasped Charlie, but his girlfriend just smiled wryly and took off towards the kitchen door.

Voldemort sat on his throne in his cave, looking over his shoulder with irritation every so often. He leaned forward and spoke to Crabbe, who was standing in front of the throne with Travis, Wormtail and Lucius.

"Can't you get him to stop all that babbling?"

Crabbe suppressed a grin as he looked towards the back of the cave where Ahmed sat hunched over the parchment of spells, muttering to himself in Arabic as he wrote hurriedly onto another piece of parchment.

"The leader of the Arab Death Eaters said he was a bit eccentric," answered Crabbe. "But I wouldn't advise stopping his flow of thought - he might be close to unravelling the cipher."

Voldemort grunted in annoyance. "Well I hope he won't be long! I've been thinking - now that we haven't got a spy at Hogwarts any longer, we'll have to find some other way of keeping tabs on Potter and Granger. School starts back in just over a month's time. Any ideas Lucius?"

Lucius jumped slightly. "No my Lord."

Voldemort grunted once more. "Crabbe? Your son is still at Hogwarts isn't he? Do you think he can do a little spying for us?"

"No my Lord," said Crabbe hastily, thinking about the fate that befell Lucius' son. "Vincent and his friend Gregory Goyle aren't very... uh... bright. I don't think they'd be much help to us." He thought for a few moments. "But there may be someone else who could fit the bill. I'll speak to my son tonight and find out where the student lives. Then I'll see what I can do."

"Good," replied Voldemort. "You'd better take this with you." He handed Crabbe the Invisibility Cloak that he'd snatched from Draco after he'd killed him.

"There's something else I've been thinking about - the Anima Summas have their protectors, an elite force that goes with them everywhere. I want to build up my own elite force of Death Eaters in addition to the solid core of special Death Eaters you're training at the moment, specially trained in the arts of detection and elimination. I want them to work full time on finding the Anima Summas and taking care of them. If they can capture them, all well and good - I still want to get at their ancient knowledge - but if not, they are to kill them. I want you to select thirty of the best Death Eaters from the bunch getting the special training. Then I want our best instructors to get them ready for the task. Lucius, you and Travis will be responsible for selecting them and overseeing their training. Now go."

Lucius and Travis bowed and walked out of the cave, leaving Crabbe and Wormtail still standing in front of the Dark Lord's throne. An odd sort of noise suddenly came from the back of the cave, and Voldemort closed his eyes and shook his head. "He's hungry again Wormtail. You'd better see to him."

Voldemort watched Wormtail walk over to Ahmed, then turned back to Crabbe. "Right Crabbe, now tell me who this student is."

Harry's seventeenth birthday party was a somewhat muted affair. Everyone appeared to be jovial, but they were also quite tense. The five youngsters hadn't been able to uncover any leads on the final quest, and they were feeling the weight of the great expectations of the Wizarding Community on their young shoulders.

Dumbledore had made several visits to The Burrow, and although he was very supportive and hadn't put any pressure on them, his very presence spoke volumes about his concern that no progress was being made with the quest. He did his best to put their minds at ease, hinting that perhaps their worrying was creating the blockage to their progress. Although the headmaster said nothing, they all knew that Fudge must have been putting a lot of pressure on him to jolly up proceedings.

Hermione, in particular, felt she was under a lot of pressure. She knew that everyone looked to her to find a way through the cryptic messages and puzzles along the winding and devious path of the quest, and here she was, stumped at the very first hurdle. Harry tried his best to put her at ease, but he knew how she felt about it all.

It would be at least another week before the breakthrough came.

The next morning, Crabbe walked back into the cave and bowed to the Dark Lord. "It's done, my Lord. The spy will start working for us even before school starts in a month's time. I've given instructions that a watch should be kept on the school in case Potter and his friends decide to visit the library ahead of time. I've arranged for my wife to receive any messages from the spy, and she'll relay them to us here."

Voldemort nodded in satisfaction. "Excellent Crabbe - well done." He glanced over his shoulder to the back of the cave before turning once more to speak to Crabbe. "You've done better than that Arab. Every time I've spoken to him he says he's almost cracked it - and that's at least ten times a day! Are you sure he knows what he's doing?"

"Yes my Lord, he comes with the highest recommendations. Perhaps the ancient cipher is too difficult even for his expertise."

"Humph. Come on Crabbe, let's speak to him and see how far he's got with it."

Crabbe followed Voldemort to the back of the cave and stood over Ahmed, who looked up from the reams and reams of parchment littering his desk.

"How are you coming along Ahmed?" asked Crabbe.

Ahmed shook his head sadly. "Every time I think I've found the key to it, something else crops up to block the way. I'm beginning to think that a very, very powerful wizard has charmed it. I haven't seen anything like this before - the cipher defies any normal method, and even all the abnormal ones I know, to break the code."

"Do you think the Anima Summas may have done it before they hid it?" asked Voldemort.

Ahmed nodded. "I think that may well be the most likely answer, my Lord."

Voldemort straightened and breathed loudly, "Crabbe - you'd better get Lucius and Travis back here as soon as they've set up the special training. I think we've got to pay another visit to Irem - I've got to speak to the Guardian of the Gate again, I think."

It was the middle of the night at The Burrow, the only sounds being the hoots of Hedwig and Pigwidgeon as they spoke to each other out in the garden.

Margot lay sleeping in the bedroom she shared with Ceri, but her sleep was far from peaceful. Her head slowly rolled on the pillow, and her beautiful face contorted in mental torture as she dreamt.

'She stood at the side of her newfound friends, looking at the evil spectre of Lord Voldemort as he raved before them. He held the Disc of Gates high over his head as he glared with venomous hatred at the youngsters before him.

A flash...a new scene...Darkness...

They stood looking down at the ground with horror. There, lying in the pathetic and heart-rending pose of the utterly destroyed, was a lone figure. But Margot couldn't make out the features. She couldn't see who it was who was dead.'

She awoke with a start, the tears running down her face. Ceri bent over the trembling girl, her face full of concern. "What is it Margot? Have you had a dream?"

Margot nodded, and spoke with a trembling voice, "It was awful Ceri. I don't know who it was, and I don't know when it will happen. I saw death, Ceri - I saw a death."

Ceri looked worriedly out of the window of the bedroom as Margot clung desperately to her, sobbing pitifully into her shoulder.

Chapter 2 - Between the Two Rivers

Margot and Ron walked hand in hand around the edge of the garden one morning. Margot hadn't spoken much since breakfast, and Ron's attempts to get his girlfriend to talk didn't seem to be working. He frowned as he looked at her out of the corner of his eye - he could see that something was worrying her.

When they walked around behind the large beech tree at the back of the garden, Ron stopped and reached out to take hold of Margot's other hand, gently pulling her around to face him. "Margot... you seem... uh... a bit worried about something. Do... do you want to tell me about it? You haven't... you know... gone off me or anything have you?"

Margot looked puzzled for a moment as she stared into the concerned eyes of her boyfriend. She hadn't said anything about her horrible dream to anyone other than Ceri - they'd both agreed that it wouldn't serve any useful purpose to worry anybody with it. But at this particular moment she had something else on her mind. Her eyes opened wide as she realised what Ron was saying. "Oh Ron, of course I haven't gone off you. I... I love you - you know that."

Ron's expression changed to one of great relief and he let out the breath that he'd unconsciously been holding.

"Ron," said Margot, looking down at the ground shyly, "it... it's about something that Hermione said the other day. I... I've been getting these... feelings." She looked back up into Ron's eyes, her face colouring up. "Oh... I don't know how to say this!"

Ron pulled her towards him and gently eased her head onto his shoulder. "Just say it, Margot."

"But it's so difficult," she replied. Then she whispered into his ear, "I... these feelings... I can feel them now... they're about us, Ron, and I think you might not like me so much if I tell you about them."

"Margot!" exclaimed Ron as he eased her away to look into her tortured eyes. "There's nothing you can say that'll do that - you know that."

Margot put her head back onto his shoulder, shielding her eyes from the piercing gaze that tried to look into her soul. "Hermione told me that the rings are helping her and Harry with their... feelings. But there's nothing helping *me* Ron!"

Ron's eyes flew open and a red tinge crept up his face - he was glad that Margot couldn't see his reaction. "Margot," he whispered, "Harry and I... talked about it as well. He told me what the rings are doing. He said that you might have these... feelings... as well, but I didn't really believe him."

Margot gasped and she pulled away. "Ron... oh, I knew you'd think I was ... not nice... if I told you!"

"I... I don't think you're not nice Margot. I... I've been having the same feelings - it's all I seem to think about these days. You're the nicest girl I know - it's just that I... I just didn't think you could have those sort of feelings for someone like me."

Margot smiled weakly. "And why not, mon petite chevalier rouge?"

Ron didn't answer - he just pulled Margot to him, holding her tightly.

"I think... Hermione thinks as well... that we should wait until the quest is over before we... before we... you know. We both think that we all have to stay... pure... until it's all over."

"Hermione knows about this?" said Ron weakly.

"Of course - she went through the same sort of thing with Harry last year. But they've got help - we haven't."

"Then we'll just have to be very... uh, careful," he replied, and then grinned slyly. "Perhaps I'll ask Ginny to run shotgun over us."

"You will do no such thing, Ron," she said, drawing back once more. "Ginny's got problems of her own without getting involved in ours."

"What problems?" asked Ron, his face full of concern.

"Just... girl problems Ron. Forget I said anything to you about it. It's nothing that she can't handle on her own."

It was just over a week after Margot's dream before she had the next one. But she wasn't alone - she shared it with the Anima Summas. They all experienced exactly the same details, which they were able to remember the following morning.

"This is weird!" said Harry as he sat talking with the other four the next morning. "Why do you think all three of us dreamt the same thing?"

Margot shook her head. "It's not the first time I've experienced something like that - it was very similar to my dream at the end of the last quest, when I spoke to you in the twelfth hour of the Duat. But although I was dreaming then, you weren't, of course - to you it was all too real."

"All this dreaming stuff is way beyond me," said Ron. "The only things I dream about are Quidditch and food - although not necessarily in that order!"

"Ron!" exclaimed Ginny. "Don't be so flippant - this could be very serious."

"I only said what my dreams are about, Ginny," said Ron, looking hurt. "I know it could be serious."

Hermione had contributed nothing to the conversation up to this point - she sat deep in thought. Then she looked up at her friends. "I think it must be part of our ancient powers and knowledge coming to the surface."

Harry frowned. "What makes you think that?"

"Well, the dream was primarily about us - the Anima Summas - and I think that because Margot was sleeping so close to us, and knowing her ability to experience dreams and visions, she just mentally picked up on it and... well, just joined in. What do you think, Margot, you know more about this sort of thing than any of us?"

Margot thought for a few moments. "Well I've heard of shared dreams between two people before, mainly between two psychically compatible people who are very close. But I've not heard about three people sharing a dream, and it's certainly the first one I've experienced. But I suppose that what you say is theoretically possible, especially considering the joint powers of the Anima Summas."

"That's amazing!" exclaimed Ginny. "I wish I could have joined in on it!" She glanced at Ron a bit warily. "Tell us again what you saw in the dream."

"Well," started Harry, "Hermione and I were walking down by the river bank, and we heard a noise coming from one of the bushes."

"That's where I joined in," said Margot. "I walked through the bushes and up to Harry and Hermione."

"Then the three of us started talking about Thoth," continued Hermione. "And with that, he just appeared in front of us, sitting on the ground reading his book. He didn't say anything; he just looked up at us and pointed to the book. Then he smiled and disappeared."

"Then we had this sudden urge to Zapparate to somewhere," said Harry. "I don't know where - but we just knew that we'd find Death Eaters there."

"Did you feel that as well Margot?" asked Ginny.

"Well not exactly," she replied. "I knew that Harry and Hermione had to go somewhere, but I didn't feel that I had to go there myself."

"Then we all felt this sudden sense of urgency," said Hermione. "It was really strange - a deep-seated feeling that we had to do something. Not the urgency to Zapparate - this was something else."

"What was it you had to do?" asked Ron.

"We don't know," replied Hermione. "I can only describe it like one of those itches somewhere deep beneath your skin - an itch that you can't quite reach to scratch it."

"Then it was over," said Harry. "It wasn't until Margot tackled us about it that we realised that we'd all had the same dream."

Ginny's head suddenly shot up, her eyes ablaze. "Have you read it yet?"

"What?" they all said.

"Have you read it yet!" she repeated. "The Book of Thoth - he was pointing to his book in the dream - then you had this feeling of urgency. I think it's something that's been embedded in

your minds, something that gives you a bit of a jog when something starts to materialise in the Book of Thoth."

"Of course!" said Hermione. "Why on earth didn't we think of that before?"

Harry frowned and reached out to hold Hermione's hand. He sent his thoughts to her, but spoke them as well for the benefit of the other three, "I think it's all part of the lethargy that seems to have settled on us since the summer holidays began. We've all wondered why we haven't made any progress with the quest, but I think it's all been part of the quest."

Hermione nodded silently, understanding Harry's thoughts, but the others just looked puzzled. "What do you mean Harry?" asked Ron.

"Thoth told us that we wouldn't be able to read his book until the time was right. Perhaps it's only now that the time is right. Perhaps all this lethargy and agonising over what to do was just meant to be. Perhaps we were being taught the virtue of patience or something. It's difficult to explain it in words, but you know what I'm getting at Hermione."

She nodded. "I know Harry, and I think you're right. It's as if my mind has been... sort of... opened up again. Even now, I'm beginning to see things more clearly, and think them through. I just haven't been able to do that for the last month or so."

"Before you tell us your ideas Hermione," said Ginny, "don't you think you and Harry should materialise the book of Thoth and see what's written there?"

Hermione nodded and reached out her hand to Harry once more. He caught it and they both closed their eyes, concentrating on materialising the book of Thoth. The surface of the grass in front of them started to shimmer, then the book appeared as a faintly glowing papyrus scroll.

They all looked at it expectantly, but then Ron gasped, "It's still blank!"

"Hang on a minute, Ron," said Ginny. "Last time we saw it there was only one page - but you can see that there's about five pages now. Maybe there's something written on the pages underneath."

Harry reached out and flipped over the pages of the scroll, all of which were blank except for the fifth and last page. They saw that about half the page was covered in Egyptian hieroglyphics.

"What does it say?" asked Margot.

Hermione scanned the columns of script and then summarised what was written. "Thoth is talking about an ancient spell; one that Harry and I can use. He says that in times of strife, the forces of Dark can be located by use of this spell which, it seems, Harry and I already have in our memories - one of the spells that Jesus gave us below Rennes-le-Chateau. We can use it to Zapparate to them."

"Anything else?" asked Ginny.

Harry shook his head. "That's all."

"Why do you think the first four pages are blank?" asked Ron.

"Probably because we're not yet ready to read what's on them," replied Harry. "But I can't see the relevance of this particular spell to solving the quest."

Hermione grinned suddenly. "I think that's part of it. Thoth is just telling us that there are spells and knowledge for us to find - but once we find something, we can't just go off and use it. We've got to be a bit cleverer and use our judgement in how we apply the knowledge - some things are better saved for later use. What do you think?"

"I suppose that makes sense - I think," said Ron, doubtfully.

"I think we'd better tell Sirius and the others about this," said Margot. "That spell might come in handy if we want to locate where the Death Eaters are - you know, to check if they're hiding out along our intended path or something."

"Of course, once we get our full powers, we could use it to locate Voldemort, I suppose," said Hermione.

Harry straightened up from his crouched position suddenly. "Yes! We can use it to get to Voldemort - maybe that's why Thoth told us about it now, before Voldemort translates those spells and activates the Disc of Gates. I think we should find him as soon as possible and stop him!"

"Harry, we can't!" exclaimed Hermione. "Didn't you hear what we've been saying? We've got to apply a bit of shrewdness to this. I think it'll be a big mistake to tackle Voldemort before we've got access to our full powers."

Ginny shuddered. "Come on. Let's find Sirius and the others."

"At last!" hissed Voldemort as Lucius and Travis walked into his cave. "Have you set up the special team?"

"Yes, my Lord," answered Lucius. "As we speak, thirty of our best Death Eaters are beginning their intensive training."

"Good. Crabbe, is the Portkey ready yet?"

Crabbe nodded. "Yes, my Lord. We can leave for the desert immediately."

Voldemort walked over to Ahmed who was still toiling away, trying to crack the cipher that hid the spells. He'd come to look on his task as more than just an intellectual challenge; he now saw it as an affront to the immense knowledge and prowess that he possessed, and he absolutely refused to believe that someone was capable of thwarting his best efforts - even if that someone *had* been an Anima Summa!

"You stay here to work on the spells, Ahmed," said Voldemort. "I should be back later this evening with some answers to help you complete the task."

Voldemort strode out of the cave, followed by Lucius, Crabbe, Travis and Wormtail. He didn't hear what Ahmed muttered under his breath - luckily for Ahmed. "I don't need any help! I just need more time."

Five minutes later, the five Dark Wizards strode purposefully through the cleft in the cliffs and into the ruined city of Petra, heading towards El Deir and the magical entrance to the fabled city of Irem.

The petrified body of Findus Plonger still stood at the entrance to the Temple of Gates, but didn't attract even a cursory glance from Voldemort as he led his group inside. The four torch holders were still in place around the inky black altar, and Wormtail was sent to bring more of the other-worldly dark material from the building next door to replenish what had been consumed when the last ritual had been held.

"Will you use the Disc of Gates to channel the magical energy this time, my Lord?" asked Crabbe.

Voldemort shook his head. "No Crabbe. We'll use the Necronomicon again - I don't want to risk the Nephilim getting through the gate yet."

Voldemort climbed up the steps to the top of the altar and placed the Necronomicon on its black surface. He looked down and waited until the torch holders were filled and lit and his four servants went to their correct places; then he started the ritual.

As he proceeded, Voldemort looked up at the temple walls and saw that once more, some of the pieces of black material started to spark into life. He watched as his helpers knelt on the ground and raised their arms, chanting the strange words of the ritual. He looked back down at the Necronomicon, lifted his wand, and chanted the words that were there. Green light burst from the end of his wand and covered the Necronomicon, while the black material on the walls 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.

The beam 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, 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 once more.

Voldemort could just make out the shadowy form of the Guardian undulating in the background. Then the image became clearer and the Guardian stared into the temple, his evil gaze taking in the dark-cloaked figures before him.

"Voldemort!" said the Guardian of the Gate. "Where have you been? I told you to keep me informed of your progress!"

Voldemort glanced at the Death Eaters below the altar, and again saw that they had not heard the Guardian - the voice was for his ears only.

"That is why I am here," he replied. "I have recovered the Disc of Gates and the spells, but I have paid a heavy price. Hundreds of my best followers were killed or captured in a fierce battle at the place where the spells were hidden. But I prevailed, and I now have the ancient relics."

"And what of the Anima Summas? Have they been eliminated?"

"No," replied Voldemort. "But my campaign of terror has started, and the wizarding communities throughout the world tremble with fear. But there is a problem. The ancient spells have been scrambled in such a way that they cannot be read. I believe that it was the ancient Anima Summas who did this deed before they were hidden. I have come to seek your advice, for all attempts by my best scholars have failed to reveal the spells."

The Guardian stared at the Dark Lord for a few moments. "I am not pleased with you Voldemort. If you are as dark as you say you are, you should have the knowledge to cut through the spell of Light. But no matter - seek out the secret abode of another Dark Wizard, the archenemy of the ancient Anima Summas. The answers that you seek will surely be found within his secret chamber. Go to Abydos - to the tomb of Osiris. At the back of that place you will find a small column of copper that supports a rounded recess that holds, or once held, the likeness of Seth. Twist the column and open it."

Voldemort nodded. "You have my gratitude. I will take my scholars to Egypt and find the answers to the riddle."

"I do not want your gratitude, Voldemort. We grow impatient. I want to know when you have eliminated the Anima Summas. Then we can come into your realm and take our revenge."

"As soon as I have the spells, the Anima Summas will be my first target. When they are dead, I will return and open the portal fully."

"Be quick, Voldemort, our patience wears thin."

The Guardian gazed with evil eyes as the light shimmered, and the gate to the Dark Realm closed. Voldemort stared for a few moments at the spot where the portal had been, and breathed deeply. He fought to control his anger at being spoken to as if he were a mere puppet of the Nephilim, but his anger eased at the thought that he now had the key to unlocking the spells. He placed the Necronomicon inside his robes, then turned and walked back down to the temple floor.

"Come - we have to collect Ahmed and then go to Egypt to find the secret chamber of Seth."

"No Harry! I absolutely forbid it!"

Sirius stared angrily at his godson and run his hand through his black hair once more. "How can you even think of tackling 'You Know Who' before you've got access to your full powers!"

"But Sirius," said Harry, looking abashed, "if we can stop him translating those spells, we'll be saving a lot of innocent lives, I know we would."

"I know Harry," Sirius said more gently. "Look, I'm sorry to have lost my cool, but I really don't think it's a good idea. You'll be placing yourself in great danger, and not only yourself - Hermione would have to be there with you as well. Do you want to risk her getting hurt?"

Harry glanced at Hermione sitting next to him at the kitchen table. "No," he whispered.

Katie leaned across the table and squeezed Harry's arm. "Dad's right Harry. Now isn't the time to go chasing across the country after the Dark Lord. Listen to what Hermione said - she made a lot of sense."

Harry smiled wryly at his cousin. "She always does Katie. I sometimes allow my impatience to get in the way of her judgement, I'm afraid." He turned to Sirius. "All right Sirius, don't worry - I won't do anything stupid."

Hermione smiled at Harry as she caught hold of his hand in hers and gently squeezed.

"Hermione," said Ginny, "you said earlier you were starting to get a few ideas about the quest. Let's go back outside and talk about them."

The five youngsters got up from the table and walked into the garden, where they sat in a circle. Four pairs of eyes stared at Hermione - waiting for her to start talking.

She breathed deeply, looking at each of her friends in turn. "I don't think you're going to like this. We've got to trace Thoth's previous existences back to the place where wizard-kind was started."

"And we haven't got a clue how many former lives he had," said Ron. "We could go on a tour of all the ancient sites in the world for all we know. Remember last year when we had to chase after the places where poor old Pontius lived?"

"I don't know Ron," said Hermione. "But don't forget that we're looking for a civilisation that existed before Egypt, and there aren't many of those as far as we know."

"You've got somewhere in mind?" asked Harry.

"Yes, Harry," she said shaking her head. "I can't believe I didn't think of it before. And this is the bit you're not going to like - especially you Ron."

All four stared at Hermione, waiting.

"Ancient Sumer," she said. "As far as we know, that was the greatest civilisation before the Egyptian dynasties started. In fact, many scholars believe it was the very first great civilisation in the history of the world."

"But it can't be Hermione," said Margot. "Thoth told you to follow his previous existences - plural. So there must have been one or more even earlier civilisations than Sumer."

Hermione nodded. "I know, Margot. That's another thing that's worrying me. We don't know - nobody knows - of any great civilisation before Sumer. So when we get to the stage where we have to look for it, or them, there just won't be any information available. There won't be any books about it, so we won't be able to do any research. What do we do then?"

"First things first," said Ginny. "Let's get the Sumer one sorted - then we'll worry about the rest."

"Where is Sumer anyway?" asked Ron.

Hermione looked at Ron and smiled wryly. "Mesopotamia Ron. The land between the two rivers - Iraq."

"Oh bloody hell!" Ron exclaimed. "It was bad enough having Death Eaters to worry about, now we'll have Saddam bloody Hussein as well!" (*Note: The quest took place before the recent events in Iraq, of course.)

"I don't think we'll have to worry too much about him Ron," said Hermione. "I've got a feeling that the places we'll have to go to will be miles from anywhere - out in the desert where the ancient cities once stood."

"And knowing Saddam Hussein," said Ron quickly. "He'll have probably chosen that very spot to hide one of his chemical weapon stockpiles."

Margot rubbed Ron's shoulder. "Don't be so pessimistic Ron. I'm sure we won't come across anything like that." Ron soon forgot his agitation as he turned and became lost in the warm gaze of his girlfriend's beautiful green eyes.

"How come you know so much about Muggle current affairs Ron?" asked Harry.

"I heard Mr. Granger talking about the situation in Iraq with Dad and Margot's grandfather," he replied.

Margot smiled. "Those three get on so well together. You wouldn't think they would, given their completely different backgrounds."

"It's probably because Dad and Professor Denarnaud are so interested in the Muggle world," said Ginny. "But talking about Sumer - I thought it was called Sumeria, Hermione," said Ginny.

"That's a mistake that many people make, Ginny. The name, Sumeria, has only come into use recently - derived from the name of the people of Sumer - the Sumerians."

"So what makes you think that Thoth was in Sumer?" asked Harry, looking at his girlfriend.

"Because," she replied, "most scholars think that the art of writing started in ancient Sumer. The clay tablets uncovered at the start of the twentieth century have been dated to before the Egyptians. And we know that Thoth invented writing - ergo, Sumer!"

"Ok, you've convinced me," said Harry, smiling. "So what else do you know about the place?"

"Uh - nothing," she replied. "I just remember reading a bit about it when we were researching Thoth."

"And you didn't read about the name of the one who invented writing in Sumer?"

"No, I'm afraid not," she replied.

"Well I suppose that means we've got to get back to Hogwarts to do a bit of reading again?" asked Ron, smiling wryly.

"Spot on Ron," said Hermione. "Let's get back and tell the others."

Ginny grinned. "Oliver and Katie'll be pleased about that."

Hermione frowned. "Why's that Ginny?"

Ginny glanced at Harry. "Uh nothing. I'll tell you later."

She went to follow Ron and Harry as they walked back to the house, but her progress was suddenly halted by both Hermione and Margot as they caught hold of the back of her robes.

"What about Oliver and Katie, Ginny?" whispered Hermione.

Ginny looked to make sure that Harry was out of earshot. "Don't tell me you haven't noticed! Can't you read the body language?"

Margot smiled. "Our sense of intrigue isn't as well developed as yours Ginny. You'll just have to tell us."

Ginny raised her eyes to the sky. "You two are an affront to the female of the species. Though, I suppose you *have* got two very good excuses for not being so attentive! It's obvious that Oliver and Katie are a bit... uncomfortable. I don't think they like the... uh... sleeping arrangements very much."

"Ginny!" gasped Hermione. "How do you know that?"

"I told you, Hermione - body language. And haven't you seen them sneaking off into the bushes down by the river?"

"Oh Ginny!" said Margot. "You don't think that they... you know... in the middle of the night?"

"Oh no, Margot. They don't play midnight musical chairs. Oliver probably knows that Fred and George have put 'creaking floorboard' spells all around the upstairs corridors in the house."

Hermione gasped once more. "I thought they were just joking when they said they'd do that!"

Ginny grinned. "Fred and George are always joking - but they don't joke about jokes. They take their pranks very seriously, you know."

"So..." started Margot.

Ginny nodded. "So they'll probably think that the sleeping arrangements will be a bit more... flexible, shall we say, when we get back to Hogwarts."

"You never cease to amaze me Ginny Weasley," said Hermione as the three started walking back to the house.

Alvis Grimwald looked down at the small village nestling at the bottom of a little valley at the North Eastern end of the Pennine Mountains in North Yorkshire, and glanced across at the line of thirty Death Eaters under his command.

Excitement and anticipation coursed through his veins. This was the first field training exercise to be held for the special squad of Death Eaters, charged with the task of tracking down and capturing, or killing, the Anima Summas. Their instructors sat about half a mile away, perched on the top of one of the grassy summits, and had an excellent view of the action that would soon follow.

The village of Skipleigh only had ten cottages and a small shop, but it housed one of the small wizarding communities that dotted the North Yorkshire Moors. It had been specially selected for the exercise because, in addition to the eleven magical families living in the village, a team of twenty Aurors was also based there, housed in several tents at the edge of the village.

Alvis quickly worked out his tactics, based on the training he and his team had been given, and gestured to his second in command, Hindley Musgrove.

"There are five Aurors on guard duty," he said quietly. "Two at the far end of the village, two at the near end, and one over by the tents. The rest of the Aurors must be inside eating their lunch. I'll take seven of the team and approach from the far side to take care of the guards there. Then we'll go around the back of the village to take the two at the near side. You take the rest of the team and wait for my signal to attack the tents and the last of the guards. Once we take them all out, we can tackle the village people."

"What about the detection devices?" asked Hindley. "They're bound to have the place covered with them, and they'll be far enough away from the village and tents to give the Aurors time to react."

Alvis pointed to the line of tall trees that bordered the lane that led into the far side of the village. "The range of those devices is no more than about fifteen yards. We'll approach behind those trees on broomsticks, high enough above the ground to avoid being detected. Once we get behind the cottages, we'll attack from the roof of the cottage at the far end. They won't know what hit them."

Then he pointed to the hill behind the tents at the other end of the village. "You take the others on broomsticks to a position behind that hill, but make sure you're at least fifteen yards above the ground. Keep your eyes on me and wait for the signal to attack."

Hindley nodded and crept across to the men to pass on the instructions. Alvis selected seven of the Death Eaters and after mounting their broomsticks, flew low behind the ridge, which

led up to the lane at a point about a mile and a half away from the village. Hindley waited a few minutes before gesturing for the rest of the team to fly along the back end of the ridge in the other direction, towards the back of the hill behind the tents.

Ten minutes later, Alvis and the seven Death Eaters perched on the roof of the end cottage, looking down at the two Aurors, who were talking quietly to each other, oblivious to the danger that lurked above them. Alvis looked to the far end of the row of cottages and waited until the two guards walked out of sight behind the far cottage before starting the attack. He motioned to two of the best shots in the team, and watched as the two Aurors were hit by stunning spells - they didn't use stronger curses for fear of causing too much noise. They fell to the ground with hardly a sound being made.

Alvis then led his men, flying just below the ridgeline of the cottage roofs, towards the place where the other two Aurors were slowly patrolling. He looked towards the hill behind the tents and saw Hindley hovering just above the summit, looking towards him. He raised his arm in the air, and then dropped it, while at the same time muttering to his hot shots to take out the two guards below.

The Auror standing close by the tents looked up in surprise as he saw more than twenty black-cloaked figures bearing down on him from the sky. He opened his mouth to shout a warning, but was hit by a killing curse before a sound left his lips. Then the flying denizens landed and were soon joined by Alvis and the other seven Death Eaters. They split up into small groups and stormed into the tents, flinging curses ahead of them.

The remaining Aurors were caught completely by surprise and stood no chance. Within a few minutes they were all dead, no mercy having been shown to them. Alvis looked with satisfaction at his team - not one of them had been hurt in the skirmish - and then led them towards the cottages, directing half the team towards the back end of the little village.

By this time, some of the residents had stepped outside their homes to see what was going on - they'd heard the sounds of curses being flung during the attack on the tents. Some of them managed to Apparate away, grabbing hold of their children, but some weren't so lucky. They shared the same fate that the Aurors in the tents had suffered.

All the action had been seen by a young girl, a witch of about twelve years old, who'd been out walking in the hills at the other side of the valley. She looked on in growing horror as she observed the attack, and dropped low to the ground, trembling with fear. She'd never understand why she couldn't drag her eyes away from the terrible carnage in the valley below, but from one point of view, it was a good thing that she saw everything that happened.

It would be her that would give Marcus Heatherington-Jones the realisation that a new breed of Death Eater was at large - a force that was intelligent, resourceful and deadly - far different from the usual fare served up by the Dark Side.

Professor Dumbledore had a grim expression on his face as he listened, together with his team, the protectors and the five youngsters, to Marcus giving his report on the attack at the village. Cornelius Fudge, 'Mad Eye' Moody and Jules Denarnaud were also there in the headmaster's office at Hogwarts.

"That doesn't sound like any Death Eater force that I've come up against," said Oliver. "We were overcome by sheer numbers at Qumran, and they didn't employ any sophisticated tactics. But this is different. Eighteen Aurors and twenty three villagers killed and two Aurors stunned, and not one Death Eater hit in return!" He shook his head in sadness and disbelief.

"I think the conflict is entering a new phase," said 'Mad Eye'. "We can only hope that there aren't too many such Death Eater teams out there."

"And it took a twelve year old girl to tell us about it," said Marcus. "If it wasn't for her, we'd still be in the Dark. The two Aurors who were stunned, and the few villagers who managed to escape, didn't have a clue what happened."

"I can't believe that there are many Death Eater teams like that out there!" Sirius suddenly exclaimed. "Your average Death Eater is high on brutality and short on brains - this group must be the elite of the whole sorry bunch of them."

Dumbledore looked with narrowed eyes at Sirius. "I think you've hit the nail right on the head there, Sirius. I've been pondering why such an advanced force using sophisticated tactics would want to attack a harmless little village. Now this is the first we've seen of them, so I wouldn't mind betting that this was some sort of training exercise - a flexing of muscles prior to more important engagements."

"What've you got in mind Albus?" asked Fudge.

Dumbledore glanced at Harry and the other four teens and pondered for a few minutes before answering. "I can't be sure, but it's best that you hear what I'm thinking, just in case. I can't help feeling that they're a team being specially groomed to prevent these youngsters completing the final quest."

Charlie gasped, "What makes you think that they'll be their target Professor?"

"Voldemort hasn't had much luck stopping them up till now," he replied. "So it's reasonable to assume that he'll try something a lot more potent. He probably wants to buy some breathing space until he can get at the spells to activate the Disc of Gates. After that, he'll probably feel that he'll be invincible."

"If you're right, Professor," said Ceri, "we're going to have to be far more alert and aware of possible dangers than we've been up till now. It's a good job we've got the Relocators from Fred and George!"

"I may be completely wrong about this, of course," said the headmaster, "but it doesn't hurt to be aware of the possible danger. Severus - I think you'd better make it your priority to try to find out as much as you can about this group."

Snape nodded. "Yes Headmaster. There's a meeting of the local group in a few days time. Goyle Senior will be there, and he's usually a bit loose-lipped if prodded in the right direction. I'll do my best."

"Thank you Severus," said Dumbledore, and then looked at Hermione. "Right - what about the quest? I assume you're here to use the library?"

"Yes Professor," she replied. "We think that we have to go to ancient Sumer, but we don't know a lot about it, so we've got a bit of reading to do."

Dumbledore stroked his beard reflectively. "Sumer eh - now there's an ancient civilisation! But you may not be able to find a lot of books on it in the library - at least not in the main sections. Your best bet is the Muggle section I think, but if you feel you need more, I'm sure we can purchase them."

He raised his eyebrows towards Fudge, who nodded solemnly. "I'll get two of the people in my office to buy some. They're avid readers of anything to do with Muggle history, and they tell me there's a very good bookshop not far from Diagon Alley. I'll get them on it as soon as I get back to the office."

"Thank you Cornelius," Dumbledore replied. "Right. A spot of lunch anyone?"

"The headmaster was right," said Hermione. "There's not a lot about Sumer in the library at all."

The five sat around their usual table in the library looking at the three books in front of them - all they'd been able to find. Ron and Margot selected one of the books to read, Ginny and Harry another, and Hermione picked up the final one, before settling down to find out as much as they could about ancient Sumer.

An hour later, Ron let out one his usual comments, "This book is so bloody boring!"

"It's all we've got Ron!" said Hermione, looking towards Margot.

"I'm afraid Ron's right about this book Hermione," she said. "Most of it is about the descriptions of Ubaidian pottery, down to the tiniest detail. There's not a lot about the Sumerian culture at all."

"Ours is the same as well," said Ginny. "Just a list of excavated artefacts and their descriptions. It's just so dead! What about yours Hermione?"

"Not a lot better, I'm afraid," she replied. "The frustrating thing is that it just hints at Sumerian culture and their religious beliefs, and just lists all the cuneiform tablets that's been unearthed. I think these books were written by academics for academics, as a sort of reference to the purely archaeological aspects of Sumer. What we need are books that'll bring their civilisation to life. We need to know who they were, how they lived, what they believed, and of course, who their gods were."

"We'll just have to wait for Fudge to send us what his people have been able to find," said Harry.

Ron glanced at Hermione. "You mentioned cuneiform tablets. What are they - some sort of headache pill or something?"

"Ron!" she exclaimed, as Ron doubled up laughing, leaning against the grinning Margot.

"Sorry Hermione - I couldn't resist that," he said. "What are they anyway?"

"They're the oldest known examples of a written language," she replied. "It says in my book that the Sumerians, and the Akkadian and Babylonian civilisations that followed them, used cuneiform writing on cylinder seals and clay tablets to record details of commerce, their literature, religion and science. They used pens made from sharpened reeds to make wedge-shaped impressions in the soft clay, and then baked the tablets hard in a kiln to make a permanent record. Over a hundred thousand of them have been unearthed at various archaeological sites in Iraq. This is what we need to get our hands on - the translations of what some of the more interesting ones say."

"So they've been translated then?" asked Ginny.

"Not all of them," she replied. "There seems to be various stages in the development of the writing, and not all of them have been deciphered. And even the ones they know how to translate haven't all been translated yet - there's so many of them. Some scholars make it their life's work."

"If there's so many," said Ron, looking aghast at Hermione, "you don't intend for us to read them all do you?"

"Of course not, Ron," she replied. "We'll be very selective - we only want to find out about the general society and Thoth's life and work in Sumer."

"Thank god for that," he replied, looking relieved.

The spy sat silently under the Invisibility Cloak at the other end of the table, listening to what was being said, but sighed silently when it was clear that not a lot of information would be forthcoming until the new books arrived at the school.

The books arrived early the following morning, brought by the two ministry employees who staggered out of the fireplace in the headmaster's office, laden with two armfuls of books. The headmaster directed the two middle-aged witches down to the Great Hall where the five youngsters were finishing off their breakfast.

Hermione jumped up from the table when they walked in, and rushed over to them, smiling. "You've managed to find quite a few then?"

"Oh yes," replied one of the women, seeming a little nervous in the presence of the Anima Summas.

"We've got a fair selection," said the other woman. "We've made sure that you've got the mainstream commentaries, maps of where the ruined Sumerian cities are in relation to the places in modern Iraq, translations of the more famous tablets, their religious beliefs, science and even some books on the more revolutionary ideas on how the tablets should be interpreted."

"I hope they're what you want," said the first woman. "But if you need more, just get in touch with us at the ministry."

"Thanks. Thank you very much," said Hermione as she watched the pair walk back out of the great Hall. "Come on, you lot," she said, turning back to her friends. "Help me get these up to the library."

Shortly afterwards, the five sat around the table in the library - six counting the invisible spy.

Hermione and Margot spent a little time sorting the books into various categories, and then sat down. "Right," said Hermione. "Who wants what? I'll read the books on religion and science."

"I'll have the ones on the geography of Sumer," said Ginny.

"I'll have the mainstream commentaries," said Margot.

"I'll take the books on the tablet translations," said Harry.

Everyone looked at Ron, who stared back. "What!" he exclaimed. "I'll have the last lot then - what is it anyway?"

"Revolutionary ideas," said Hermione.

All four of his friends burst out laughing, leaving Ron puzzling at their hilarity. "What are you lot laughing at? I'm ok with revolutionary ideas!"

"Right Ron, we're only teasing," said Hermione. "I suggest we all make notes of the more interesting things we find - we don't need to write reams and reams, just write the book, the page number, and a brief note of what it's about. Right?"

"Right Hermione," they all chorused.

By lunchtime, they'd each read about two books each - or at least part of two books each. They'd skipped the more uninteresting and irrelevant pages. What they read must have been interesting, given the gasps that went up from each of them at various points throughout the morning - even Ron stared wide-eyed and exclaimed loudly at something he read. They decided that they'd take a break from reading after lunch, and update each other on what they'd noted from their books so far.

After lunch they again settled down in their seats in the library, looking forward to hearing what each of them had found. "It's probably a good idea to start off with the general history of Sumer," said Hermione.

"That's me," said Margot, looking down at her notes. "Right, now let's see... Ancient Sumer, or Ki-engir as the Sumerians called it, was a collection of about twelve city-states in southern Mesopotamia, in what is now the southern part of Iraq. It came into existence between 5000 BC and 4000 BC, although the civilisation was at its height between 3500BC and 2000BC. No one knows where the Sumerians came from, and it's been a puzzle to scholars that the advanced culture just seemed to spring up from nowhere.

"Each city was fortified and had a temple, many of them in the form of a Ziggurat - that's a sort of stepped pyramid - and dedicated to one of their gods, and it had a surrounding rural area, where they performed agriculture and reared cattle. The arid plains were made fertile by a series of irrigation canals that they built to take the fresh waters from the two main rivers

and their tributaries. They traded with other less advanced cultures and much of their recorded writings related to commerce. They also developed the first known law system. In around 1900 BC they were invaded and conquered by the Amorites, a Semitic people. The existence of Sumer wasn't even known until just over a hundred years ago, the cities having fallen into ruin and covered by the desert sand. All that remains now are a collection of mounds which have been partially excavated, any further work having been halted because of the political situation in Iraq."

Margot looked up. "You next Ginny."

Ginny cleared her throat. "Sumer was located between the lower reaches of the two great rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates - that's what Mesopotamia means, between the rivers. It was mainly a flat plain brought to life by irrigation canals. Since those times, the area has changed - the rivers have changed their courses and some of the tributaries have disappeared. For example, the Sumerian city of Ur once stood on the banks of the Euphrates, close to the Persian Gulf, but now it's about ten miles south of the river and the sea has silted up so much, the ruins now stand well inland.

"Just to give you a general picture of Iraq, it's bounded on the east by Iran, the south by Kuwait and Saudi Arabia and the west by Jordan and Syria. The northern hilly areas comprise the Taurus Mountains to the northwest and the Zagros Mountains to the northeast. You next Harry."

"Hermione's already told you about the written language - Cuneiform, but I must say it's a very odd one! To give you an instance - in English, as in most other languages, there's just one word for a number, say three sheep or three bottles - three is always the same word. But in Sumerian, there're about sixty words for three - depending on what's being described. The 'three' for sheep is different to the 'three' for bottles. Anyway, there're loads of Sumerian texts preserved on clay tablets and there's also Akkadian and Babylonian ones that are similar, a lot of the stories being based on the original Sumerian ones. A lot of the tablets are just lists and prices of goods, but there are some famous literary and religious works as well.

"Perhaps the most famous is the Epic of Gilgamesh - a series of twelve clay tablets telling about the exploits of the Sumerian king of the city of Uruk. There's the Atrahasis - that's the Sumerian creation story, and the Enuma Elish - another creation epic. A tablet called 'The Deluge' tells about the flood - very similar to the Flood in the bible. A controversial tablet is the Sumerian King List - the scholars have discarded it as purely mythical because of the length of time they reigned. And then there's the hymns, poems and proverbs."

Ginny grinned. "Tell us a Sumerian proverb, Harry."

Harry looked at his notes and turned to the page in one of the books. "Now let's see... here's one. *'That which is given in submission becomes a medium of defiance.'* And here's a very appropriate one." He looked slyly at Ron. "*He who eats too much will not be able to sleep.* Do you get trouble sleeping Ron?"

"No I bloody well don't Harry," he said, grinning. "But there, I don't eat too much, I've just got a big appetite."

"Yeah Ron," said Hermione, "we believe you. Me next.

"Like Harry said, there're a lot of texts about religion. But after reading about it, I just couldn't help thinking that it's so unlike other religions in the world. For instance, the Sumerians didn't treat their deities like gods at all. They seemed to treat them as people, but people with higher intelligence and who lived for a very long time. They wrote about them eating, sleeping, having children and that sort of thing.

"Anyway, there were four chief gods - their main god was Anu, the sky god. Enlil was his son and later took over as the chief god. Enki was the god of water, wisdom and creation and Ninhursag was the great mother goddess. There were seven gods who decreed fate - the four I've already mentioned together with Nanna the moon god, Inanna, his daughter, the goddess of love and fertility, and Utu, his son, the sun god.

"There were a number of other lesser gods as well, called the Anunnaki. They've got their own creation story, again very similar to the bible, and they've even got their own Garden of Eden - they called it Dilmun. Now as far as science is concerned, they were an incredibly advanced people when you consider we're talking about more than five thousand years ago. They were the first to make bronze, they invented an accurate calendar and based they're measurement of time on the 60 minute hour, they practiced astrology, and they developed the studies of mathematics, astronomy and other sciences."

"Since you mention astronomy Hermione, did you read about the planets they knew about?" asked Ron.

Hermione frowned. "No Ron, the authors of the books merely mentioned the Sumerians knew about astronomy. Why do you ask?"

"Because in the first book I read, the Sumerians named the planets after their gods, just like we did."

"What's so special about that Ron?" asked Ginny.

Ron grinned. "Because they named all nine planets, that's why!"

Margot gasped, "That's impossible Ron."

"We only discovered Pluto in about 1920 Ron," said Hermione.

Ron just raised his eyebrows and grinned.

"No!" exclaimed Hermione. "Don't tell me that mainstream Sumerologists are the same as mainstream Egyptologists?"

"Afraid so Hermione," he replied. "There's loads of stuff in the alternate views of Sumer that the archaeologists have just ignored or consigned to fantasyland."

"I'm not going to rant!" she said, visibly keeping her temper in check.

"Hang on a minute, Hermione, this could be important," said Margot, staring at Ron. "Have any of you come across anything that's been excavated that could have been a telescope?"

They all shook their heads.

"So how did they manage to see Pluto?" asked Margot. "You need a fairly powerful telescope to see that planet."

"And not only that, Margot," said Ron. "They knew that the sun was the centre of the solar system and all the planets revolved around it. And they knew that the Earth is round - something that we didn't find out until after Columbus' time. Oh yes, there was one other thing - they recorded a mysterious tenth planet which they called Nibiru. Not even the alternative theorists have a proper answer to that one - except for one writer who surmises that Nibiru is a planet that has a very elliptical and eccentric orbit and visits our region of space every 3,600 years. He thinks that the inhabitants of that planet visited Earth and stayed here to form a colony - and they were none other than the gods of ancient Sumer!"

Hermione gasped once more, her face flaming with indignation. "Are you sure about this Ron? It's not some fanciful guess by the people who wrote those books?"

"Quite sure," he replied. "Read them for yourself if you don't believe me. The authors are respectable researchers, or they were until they wrote these books - the establishment have written them off as loonies, even though the evidence from the tablet translations is staring them in the face."

Hermione fumed, "I believe you Ron. This is yet one more example of the facts not fitting nicely into the established paradigm of mainstream historians. How much more information have we got to uncover before they realise that the accepted history of mankind is flawed. Ohhhh!"

"So if they didn't have telescopes, or at least as far as we know they didn't," said Margot, "how did they know about the true nature of the solar system?"

"It says in these books," answered Ron, "that their gods told them."

Hermione started to cool down, with some effort. "And one god in particular, no doubt - Thoth!"

Harry leaned over and squeezed her shoulder. "What about Thoth, Hermione? Did you find anything to link one of the gods with him?"

"Well yes and no, Harry. It said in one of the books that the Sumerian Thoth was called Nanna and he was the same as the Babylonian god called Sin, but I'm not so sure they're right."

"Why not?" asked Margot.

"Well to start with, there doesn't appear to be any Sumerian god credited with the invention of writing. And there's not a lot about Nanna - just that he was the moon god, as was Thoth, of course, but it just doesn't feel right somehow. I'm going to look at the attributes of the other gods to see if I can come with something better."

Half an hour later, Hermione shattered the silence in the library with a loud shout, "Got him!"

The others shot up in their seats and stared at her.

"Listen to this," she said. "He is well disposed to mankind and plays a central role in many epics, so his character and abilities are well known: he represents intelligence and technical capabilities. He is a master craftsman, 'Lord of cunning and skill' - referring to the body of experience, knowledge, skills, and traditions which are the basis of a craft or occupation and form the basis of civilization as a whole. He is the patron god of white magic, and is often depicted holding a staff with two serpents entwined around it. In Sumerian mythology, he is most of all the god of wisdom, of craftsmanship and arts."

"That sounds like him," said Ginny. "The staff sounds just like the Caduceus held by Mercury."

"What's his name Hermione?" asked Harry.

"Enki - one of the chief gods. His seat of power was in the southern-most city in Sumer, where he had a temple - the temple of Enki at Eridu. Eridu is said to be the first city ever built in ancient Sumer."

"Is the temple still standing?" asked Margot.

"There's a photo of the Eridu site in this book," she said, holding it up for the others to see.

"Bloody hell!" exclaimed Ron. "It's nothing but a load of old sand dunes and open trenches."

"It's completely ruined, I'm afraid," said Hermione sadly. "But there's a plan of the temple layout here as well, so they must have found something - it's probably buried inside one of those mounds. The site was excavated in the 1940's."

"Where exactly is Eridu?" asked Harry.

"About 196 miles southeast of Baghdad - it's near a place called Abu Shah Rain."

"We'd better see Sirius and the others," said Harry. "And bring that book about Eridu with you Hermione - they'll no doubt want to study the pictures and site maps before we go there."

"Uh, one thing," said Ginny. "How are we going to get there? I doubt if even Dumbledore knows of anyone in Iraq who can set up a Portkey for us."

"If it comes down to it," said Hermione. "We'll just have to Portkey to the border with Kuwait and walk, or uh, fly into Iraq. How far is it from the border to Eridu Ginny?"

Ginny looked at one of the large maps of the region and quickly estimated the distance. "It's about eighty miles."

"I'm not walking eighty miles through the desert!" exclaimed Ron. "We fly - right, Hermione?"

Hermione pulled a face. "Come on - let's see the others."

Professor Dumbledore drew some surprised glances, and smiles from the five youngsters, when he announced that he could arrange for a Portkey to Eridu. "I know a wizard living close to the Iraqi border in Kuwait - I'm sure that he'll Apparate to the site to set up a Portkey."

But don't expect it to be in place until tomorrow night - he'll have to take some special precautions to avoid the Iraqi Death Eaters - there're quite a few of them there!"

"Shouldn't we wait until daylight before we go poking about in the ruins?" asked Charlie.

"I don't know, Charlie," answered Sirius. "If that Kuwaiti wizard thinks it's safer at night, maybe we should take a leaf out of his book - he knows the area and the situation there, after all."

"But how are we going to find our way around the ruins in the dark?" asked Remus. "And we can't risk lighting the place up with our wands - it'll be too risky."

Sirius thought for a few moments. "Let's see that photograph of the ruins again Hermione."

Hermione placed the photo on the headmaster's desk and they all pored over it for a few minutes.

"Where do you think the Temple of Enki is?" asked Oliver.

Hermione looked closely at the photo and pointed to a large mound at the centre. "I think it must be under that mound somewhere," she said. "You can just make out the excavation tunnels at the side, just above where that path winds around to the left."

Sirius looked at the headmaster. "Do you think you could ask your wizard friend to position the Portkey where that path runs below the bottom of the mound Professor - just below those excavation tunnels?"

Dumbledore looked at the photograph and nodded. He pulled out a piece of parchment from his desk drawer and held it over the photo with his left hand, and then pointed his wand at it as he muttered a few words. A copy of the image rose slowly from the photograph and etched itself onto the underside of the parchment. Then the headmaster picked up a quill and made a mark on the parchment where Sirius had asked for the Portkey to be placed.

"I'll get this to Ali as soon as the meeting's over," he said.

"Thanks Professor," said Sirius. "We'll go at night now that we know exactly where we'll arrive. All we'll need to do is climb up to those tunnels, and once inside, it won't matter if we use our wands for lighting."

"In the mean time," said Ceri, "we can study this book about Eridu and familiarise ourselves with the terrain."

"And we can try to find out a bit more about the Temple of Enki," said Hermione. "Come on, let's get back to the library."

The youngsters continued to read all they could find on Enki and Eridu until it was nearly time for the evening meal, when Ron shut the book he was reading with a loud slam, making the others jump. "Dinner time!"

"We'll have to be careful tomorrow night," said Harry, getting up from his chair. "If there're as many Death Eaters in Iraq as Dumbledore thinks there are, we'll have to be on the lookout as soon as we Portkey there."

Ron put his arm around Margot, protectively, as they walked towards the library door. "We didn't run across any Death Eaters last summer, so maybe we'll be lucky this time as well."

"I hope so Ron," said Harry.

The spy grinned and waited until the library was empty before getting up and rushing off to a clearing just inside the Forbidden Forest, where the owl was kept in a hidden cage, to write a note to Crabbe's wife.

The following morning, the five sat eating breakfast in the Great Hall. The protectors had already left, with the exception of Nadine who waited until the teens started to leave before calling to Ginny, who walked over and sat down beside the French girl.

"Charlie and I went to visit my brother the other day Ginny," she began, "and it turned out to be a big surprise - for all of us. Demont was still in bed when we got there, but he wasn't alone."

Ginny gasped, "You caught him in bed with a girl?"

Nadine grinned. "It wasn't intentional - it was the middle of the morning, after all. But that's not all what I wanted to talk to you about. You and Demont were quite close last year, weren't you?"

Ginny nodded, looking puzzled.

"You see, there's something very odd going on but neither Charlie nor I could get anything out of Demont and Anne-Marie - that's his girlfriend's name. I was wondering whether he might say something to you, being so close, and I wanted to ask you if you'll come to France with us when we get a chance."

"Of course I will, Nadine. But what makes you think there's something fishy going on?"

Nadine shook her head slowly. "It's hard to put my finger on anything tangible, but it was just the way they acted together."

"You mean their body language?"

"That's exactly right Ginny. They seemed very cagey, and acted as if they were hiding something. Charlie thinks that Anne-Marie might be married to Demont's boss, but I don't think that's it, somehow."

Ginny grinned. "Naught, naughty Demont! So if you don't think it's that, what *do* you think it is Nadine?"

Nadine looked about conspiratorially to make sure that no one could hear and then leaned close to Ginny. "Well I can't be sure, but to me, everything points to..."

When she'd finished talking, Ginny stared at Nadine in disbelief, eyes staring and mouth wide open. "No!" she gasped

"Don't breath a word to anyone about this Ginny - I haven't even told Charlie what I think. But when we manage to get to the cabin, I'd like your help in trying something out to either prove or disprove what I think."

Ginny nodded. "Yeh - wow! You can count on me, Nadine."

Voldemort was in his cave waiting for Ahmed to collect his notes and a few books on Egyptian hieroglyphics when an owl flew in and dropped a note in front of Crabbe.

The large man bent down, picked it up and spent a few moments digesting its contents. "It's from my wife, my Lord. It seems that our spy has found out that Potter and his gang are going to an ancient site in Iraq tonight - called Eridu - it's just over the border from Kuwait. There's a sketch attached to the note that gives the approximate position of the site."

"Hmmm, so they've started their final quest," said Voldemort, thinking furiously. "Wormtail, Travis - take the sketch and contact the special squad immediately. I want you two and the squad in place to stage a little welcoming party for Potter. But make sure that you don't get in their way; once you get there, Alvis Grimwald will be in complete charge and I don't want you interfering with his tactics. Just observe what happens and report back to me. Lucius, Crabbe, Ahmed - come on, the Portkey to Abydos should be activated in a few minutes."

After dinner that evening, Dumbledore, McGonagall and Flitwick stood outside the main school entrance. The five teens and the protectors stood a little way away, waiting for the time when the Portkey would be activated.

Remus grinned. "Isn't Snape going see us off this evening Headmaster?"

"No Remus - he's gone to that Death Eater meeting he told us about."

Sirius called for the team's attention, "Before we go, I want you all to activate your Relocators, just in case we get into a bit of bother. From now on, we'd better keep them active whenever we're out in the field. We can't be too careful."

Everyone nodded, held their wands to the little devices and said the spell that activated the Relocators.

"Come on everybody," said Oliver. "It's just about time - grab hold of the tree branch."

Professor Dumbledore looked grim as the team disappeared. He turned to the two professors. "I've got a strange feeling about this quest. I don't know why, but there's something niggling at the back of my mind - I wish I could put my finger on it."

Severus Snape stood just inside the little clearing in the wood on the edge of the Peak District in Derbyshire. There were about ten Death Eaters waiting with him for the arrival of Goyle Senior, who would take the reports of the assembled gathering on Death Eater recruitment activities.

Goyle appeared with a 'pop' in the centre of the clearing and the others gathered around.

After the reports had been given, Snape asked a question, "Tell me Goyle, Potter and his friends seem to be able to go wherever they like, and not a finger is being lifted to stop them. Isn't Lucius doing *anything* to keep tabs on them?"

"I wouldn't let him hear you talking like that," said Goyle. "And in any case, things are well in hand to stop Potter."

Snape prodded further, "I haven't seen any evidence of that Goyle. Every time Potter gets back from one of his jaunts, he says that he hasn't seen one Death Eater. It's starting to get a bit humiliating."

Goyle grinned wickedly. "The next time you see Potter, Snape, he'll be dead! There's a crack team of our best people being trained up especially to get him and his friends. Even as we speak, they're out there in the Middle East somewhere, preparing a nice little welcoming committee."

Snape forced a grin. He'd managed to find out what he wanted, but now felt the urge to get back to Hogwarts to warn the team what was in store for them. He had to endure another ten minutes of Goyle singing the praises of the Dark Side before the meeting was over, and then Apparated to Hogsmeade, and rushed back to the school.

He arrived back in the headmaster's office almost out of breath and told Dumbledore, McGonagall and Flitwick what he'd learned.

"It's too late, Severus," said Dumbledore. "They took the Portkey to Eridu ten minutes ago."

They all groaned, each of them hoping and praying that the team would be able to overcome the ordeal that awaited them in the ancient land.

Sirius, Ceri, Oliver and Katie knew there was something wrong as soon as they materialised at the Portkey site at Eridu. It was pitch dark in the ruined site, but something borne of their experience in the field, long hours of training and, in Sirius' case, a second sight from being on the run after his escape from Azkaban, told them of the unseen danger that lurked somewhere in the ruins.

"Press your buttons now!" shouted Oliver.

Everyone in the team heeded Oliver's call - there was something in his voice that spurred them all into instant action. It was well that they did. Just before they pressed their Relocators,

the desert was bathed in magical light from the wands held by five of the waiting Death Eaters.

Alvis couldn't believe his eyes when twenty-five deadly green beams from his elite squad missed their mark. He blinked in astonishment as at one instant he saw twelve figures appearing at the Portkey, which he'd earlier located on a path beside a large mound of sand and rubble, and the next they were all about ten yards away.

"Fire again," he yelled at his team. Again the deadly beams missed their mark, and the enemy were once more ten yards away from their previous positions.

"Lights out!" he yelled, thinking furiously. He called for Hindley Musgrove to join him. "Did I just see right?"

"Something strange is going on here Alvis," said the second in command. "How did they do that? They couldn't have known we were waiting for them."

"No one can Apparate that quickly," said Alvis. "They must have got something new to be able to do that. Get the team to move position - take half of them and go around behind that mound to the left. You should be able to cut them off if they try to get further into the ruins along the path. When you see the light from my wand, we'll try to drive them back towards your position."

He turned to Wormtail and Travis. "You two stay with my group."

Meanwhile, as soon as darkness fell once more, Sirius quietly led the team further along the path into the ruins, where they found shelter behind a low mound of rubble and sand.

"What do you think they'll do next Oliver?" asked Sirius.

"They'll probably split up and try to confuse us into giving away our position," he replied. "We'd better keep our heads down until we see where they are."

They lay close to the ground when, over to their left, several wands again illuminated the scene. Ceri nudged Sirius and Oliver and pointed over towards their right-hand side, where she'd spotted some movement just where the rough path disappeared around behind one of the mounds. "They've managed to get around behind us," she whispered.

"Keep your heads down," Sirius whispered to everyone. "The ones to our left are getting closer."

They held their breath as they clearly heard the crunch of boots on the rough path, and saw the illuminated wands swaying slightly in the air, as the Death Eaters approached their position, no more than about fifty yards away.

Oliver leaned close to Sirius and whispered in his ear, "We've got to do something quick - they're bound to spot us if they get much closer."

Sirius looked all around their precarious hiding place and shook his head, whispering, "If we start sending spells, the ones behind us will have a clear shot at our backs."

Sirius gasped when Harry and Hermione suddenly stood up, held hands, and started walking out from behind their cover. "Get back here!" he hissed.

"It's ok, Sirius," whispered Harry. "We're just going to get rid of them."

The team looked on as the pair lifted their arms and shouted, "*DADEX ZARNPET.*"

The now familiar green protective shield spread out and covered Harry and Hermione, just before a number of beams of light hissed towards them from both sides.

The curses hit the shield and reflected away, dissipating harmlessly up into the dark sky. The pair turned towards the nearest group of Death Eaters and extended their free arms towards them, the shield still holding in place.

"*A'NEN KHEFTEY,*" they shouted.

A white beam of light, tinged with a hint of crimson, shot from each of their hands and met just in front of the Death Eaters, then slowly surrounded them. Alvis, who was in the lead of the group, which included Wormtail and Travis, suddenly stopped, his eyes staring and vacant. Then he and his men turned around and started walking away.

Harry and Hermione turned to face Hindley's group, who were now running towards them and flinging curses, which bounced harmlessly into the night. Again they extended their arms and sent the same curious spell, which covered the Death Eaters and stopped them in their tracks.

The Anima Summas stood to one side as Hindley led his group past, their eyes staring and vacant, and followed Alvis' group out of the ruins into the cold, dark desert.

"What the hell was that?" exclaimed Ron as he ran up alongside his friends, quickly followed by the rest of the group.

The pair raised their arms once more and spoke the spell that dispersed the protective shield, and then grinned at their friends.

"What happened?" asked Katie, looking closely at the pair to make sure they weren't hurt.

"Just one of the ancient spells that suddenly popped into our heads," said Hermione.

"We just told them to turn back," said Harry. "For the next three hours or so, they'll be wandering through the desert. By the time they regain their senses, we should be long gone."

"I really don't know who the protectors are any more," breathed Ceri. "It seems that you two can get along fine on your own."

"That's not true Ceri," said Hermione. "If Oliver hadn't made us use the Relocators, we'd have all been fried back at the Portkey site."

"Hermione's right," said Harry. "We can't do this without you watching our backs."

"We'd better get back to the Portkey site," said Nadine. "We've got three hours to find what we came for and get out of here."

Sirius nodded. "Come on then. We'll take up positions around the bottom of the mound, just in case any Arab Death Eaters saw something and come to investigate."

They walked back along the path, holding their illuminated wands low to the ground, and stopped at the base of the mound where a rough track, worn into the surface of the ruined Ziggurat by the excavation workers more than fifty year ago, wound up into the darkness. Harry and Hermione led the way, followed by Ginny, then Ron and Margot who brought up the rear.

Hermione held her wand into the first excavation tunnel they came to, and saw that it was blocked by fallen rubble and sand. They moved further up the mound, but it wasn't until they came to the fourth opening that they found one that wasn't blocked.

"This is it then," said Harry as he looked doubtfully into the darkness. "I don't see how we're going to find a temple this high up the mound though."

"The Sumerians sometimes built temples into the sides of their Ziggurats Harry," said Hermione. "They built them on the broad platforms that formed part of the stepped pyramids. Let's hope that this is the right tunnel."

Harry led the way into the dusty tunnel, having to bend low to avoid hitting his head on the ceiling. Ron followed closely behind his friend, looking at the sides and ceiling of the excavation. "I'm glad those wooden beams are still in place," he said, "or this one would have caved in as well."

They half walked, half crawled into the mound for about thirty yards before the tunnel opened out into a broader area of about fifty feet long by twenty feet wide, and the ceiling rising so that they could now stand up straight. The floor was criss-crossed with excavation trenches, revealing the mud brick walls of a fairly complex ancient building.

"This looks like it could have been a temple," said Margot. "You can see where the side chambers run to each side of the structure and the large central area leading into a smaller chamber at the back. That could have been the inner sanctuary, or something."

Hermione nodded. "I think you're right, Margot. This must be the Temple of Enki."

"There's not a lot of it left though," said Ginny doubtfully.

"Well it is nearly five thousand years old Ginny," said Hermione. "I just hope we can find something here."

Harry and Ron walked around the left-hand edge of the excavation while Hermione and Margot went to the right. Ginny jumped down into one of the trenches and walked through the middle of the structure towards the central area. She was about half way across when she stopped, staring at the floor intently.

"Come and look at this," she shouted to the others. "There's a hole in the floor."

They all jumped down into the excavations and hurried towards Ginny who was now kneeling on the ground, shining her wand into the hole. "There's a ladder going down," she said. "But I can't see much of what's down below from here."

"I'll go and take a look," said Ron. He put his left foot on the top rung of the ladder and tested its strength, his friends supporting him as he applied more and more of his weight to it. "I think it's ok," he said, putting his full weight on the top rung.

Then he cautiously stepped down to the next rung, before grinning up at Harry. "It's just fine Harry, no problem." He stepped down another rung, his head now level with ground, but suddenly disappeared from sight.

"AARRGggghhh," he shouted, to the accompaniment of breaking wood and a loud thud as he landed on the floor below.

Margot made a mad dive to the edge of the hole and flung herself onto the ground with her wand extended into the space below. "Ron? Ron! Are you all right?" she wailed.

Then Ron illuminated his wand and she could see the red-haired boy slowly getting back to his feet, not more than seven feet below, ruefully rubbing his rear end. "I'm ok Margot," he said.

Hermione shouted down, "What's there Ron? Can you see anything interesting?"

"Me! I'm here Hermione, and the only interesting thing I can see is a bloody big bruise on my arse - or at least I can feel it."

"Sorry Ron," she breathed, smiling as she turned towards Ginny who was trying her best to keep her giggling in check.

"Help me get down there," said Harry. "It's not far by the looks of it."

Harry eased his body into the hole and the three girls caught hold of his arms, easing his drop to the floor below, where he was steadied by Ron. The girls quickly followed, supported by the boys, and they looked around them with wands held high.

"It's almost exactly like the ruins up above," said Ginny.

"I should have realised," said Hermione. "It said in the book on Eridu that several temples were built in the various periods in the city's history, one on top of the other. There's probably another one below this."

They wandered among the excavations and soon came to another hole in the floor. This time, Ron and Harry stretched their wands down as far as they could and saw that the floor was no more than six feet below. They all soon eased through the hole and stood looking at a slightly different configuration of trenches, although it was plain that they showed the outline of yet another temple, but much older than the two above. At one end of the cavern they could see the tunnel running to the outside of the mound, but they knew it was blocked at the far end.

"There should be another temple below this," said Hermione. "The oldest one dating back to when the city was first built. If we're going to find anything, I think it'll be there. Let's see if there's another hole leading down to it."

"Here it is," said Harry, looking towards the far corner of the cavern, where he could see a dark area in the floor. They all walked towards it and held their wands into the hole.

"It's about eight feet to the floor," said Harry. "Help me get down, Ron."

Ron and the girls helped to support Harry's weight as he eased through the hole, and they held onto his wrists as he stretched out with his feet to feel the bottom. "Ok, let me go," he shouted.

Five minutes later, all five stood at the lowest level of the complex of temples. It was immediately apparent that the excavations had only been partially carried out, the trenches only extending about half way into the cavern.

"Spread out and see if you can see anything," said Hermione, walking to the far side of the dig. After about ten minutes, they all stood at the boundary where the trenches met the unexcavated ground. Ginny climbed down and moved to the central trench and held her wand to the place where the digging had stopped. She saw a wall of mud bricks before her, but only the most cursory attempt had been made to remove them, the archaeologists obviously having been interrupted by something, or someone.

"I think there's something here," she shouted, and waited for her friends to join her in the trench. "Look at this wall of bricks - they started to dig their way through, but suddenly stopped. I wonder why?"

"I think I know why," said Margot, leaning close to the wall so that her face was no more than a few inches from it. "I can feel something here. A strange sort of emanation."

Ginny held her hand out and touched the bricks. "I can feel it too, Margot. I wish Nadine was here - she may be able to tell us what it is."

"Does it feel bad to you?" asked Hermione, reaching out to feel the top layer of bricks. Margot and Ginny shook their heads.

"Me neither," said Hermione. "Come on you boys, earn your keep - I think we've got to see what's behind this wall."

Ron groaned, "Why is it that us boys always have to do the hard work? Isn't it enough that I've got a big bruise on my bum?"

"Stop moaning Ron," said Ginny, chuckling. "You wont have to dig using your backside - use your hands!"

"Come on Ron," said Harry. "You should know better than to argue with these three. The sooner we start, the sooner we'll find what's behind the wall."

"Use these," said Margot. "I found them lying on the floor over by the tunnel opening. I think the workers must have dropped them in a hurry when they rushed out of here." She handed the boys two hammers and chisels, and then stood back to watch.

They started with the top row of bricks, easily disintegrating the crumbling mortar that held the bricks together, and after removing three layers, they were soon able to take a peek into the space beyond the wall. "Extinguish your wands for a minute," said Harry. "I think there's something glowing in there."

They all put out their wands and Harry and Ron looked over the top of the brick wall into the place beyond. "What can you see?" hissed Hermione, her voice full of excited impatience.

"I can't quite make it out," said Harry, "but there's something faintly glowing in there. Light your wands again."

The two boys continued to hack at the mortar and after another fifteen minutes and five layers, had made enough room to climb over the remaining brickwork. They put down their tools and held up their wands, which they extended into the space beyond their excavation.

The girls jumped back into the trench and joined the boys as they gazed into an untouched chamber of the original Temple of Enki. The room was almost bare, but at the far end, carved into the bare rock of the chamber, was the image of a man - a man that looked like a younger version of Thoth. The carving showed him wearing a curious hat and he was standing on a stepped floor, his left foot raised to lean on the upper step. Below his raised leg, resting on the floor, was either a lamb or a young deer, and a bird was perched on his right hand. The most curious part of the carving, however, was a stream of water issuing from each of his shoulders.

"It's Enki," breathed Hermione. "I've seen that depiction of him before - it was in one of the books I read back at Hogwarts."

"Look what's underneath the carving Hermione," gasped Ginny.

They all looked and saw the source of what had been glowing in the room. It was a clay tablet, propped up underneath the carving, and it was covered in a strange script. "Let's get in there and take a closer look," said Harry.

They walked up to the tablet and stared at it intently. "That's strange," said Hermione. "Most of that writing is like the Cuneiform script we saw in the books on Sumer, but the top line is in Egyptian Hieroglyphics. Can you make out what it says Harry?"

Harry held his wand close to the top line of writing. "It says 'For The Anima Summas'," he gasped. "It's a message for us, Hermione."

Hermione peered at the tablet closely and nodded. "You're right Harry. But what does it say? I can't read Sumerian Cuneiform script!"

"Well if *you* can't read it Hermione," exclaimed Ron, "how the hell do you expect the rest of us to be able to read it?"

"Time for you to get to work Ginny," said Hermione, ignoring Ron's comment. "Can you copy this onto some parchment - exactly as you see it?"

"No problem Hermione," she said.

"Uh Hermione," said Ron, "why don't we just take the tablet with us? It's not fixed to the wall or floor."

"We can't Ron," she replied. "We've got to leave this here for any future Anima Summas to find. And after Ginny's finished in here, you and Harry can build that wall back up as well."

Ron groaned once more, "Why did I bother to ask!"

Just over two hours later, the five emerged from the fourth tunnel and walked back down to the protectors at the bottom of the mound. They were smiling, bathed in the glow of their success, but their faces fell when they saw the look on Sirius' face.

"What's the matter Sirius?" asked Harry.

"It's been nearly three hours since you walked up there," he said agitatedly. "We've been expecting those Death Eaters to come back at any time. Come on - we'd better get out of here quick!"

They all rushed over to the Portkey, a seemingly discarded piece of wood, and held onto it to be transported back outside the main entrance of Hogwarts.

Chapter 3 - The King of Uruk

"It's a good thing you had your wits about you," said Dumbledore. "Professor Snape arrived back from the Death Eater meeting ten minutes too late to warn you."

The team had just given their report to the headmaster and his close advisors on the events at Eridu. Although it was in the early hours of the morning, no one back at Hogwarts had been able to sleep, and had waited anxiously for news from Iraq.

"Well it looks like our suspicions have been confirmed," said Sirius. "That elite squad has been set up to track us down when we're on the quest."

"But how did they know we were going to Eridu?" asked Oliver. "Do you think there's another spy here at the school?"

"I don't see how," said McGonagall. "There aren't any students here. Indeed the only people at Hogwarts at the moment are us in this room."

Dumbledore stroked his beard. "You five saw no sign of anyone when you were doing your research in the library?"

"No Professor," said Harry. "We made sure there was no one hiding anywhere amongst the rows of books."

"Hang on a minute," said Remus, taking the Marauders' Map from inside his robes. He laid the map on the headmaster's desk, said the spell that would activate it, and then looked at it carefully, shaking his head. "No one. Apart from us, the map isn't picking up anyone else in the school or in the grounds, apart from Hagrid and Fang in the hut."

"It might be a good idea to check the map whenever Harry and the others are about to do more research in the library," said Dumbledore. "Just in case."

"So what's next on the agenda?" asked Professor Flitwick.

"We've got to find out what this message means," said Hermione. Ginny took her parchment from her pocket and placed it on the table.

"I don't suppose any of you can read Sumerian cuneiform?" asked Harry, looking hopefully towards Professors Dumbledore and Denarnaud.

Everyone shook their head. "I'm afraid not, Harry," said the headmaster. "That's an even more obscure and ancient language than Egyptian hieroglyphics."

"Professor Denarnaud?" asked Hermione. "Would it be possible for you to compile a course in cuneiform and teach it to Harry and me using your accelerated learning spell?"

Jules thought for a few moments and shook his head. "I'm not aware of any material on that subject that I could use. Do any of you other professors have any suggestions?"

"I believe that some of the Muggle Universities are running courses in archaic languages," said Remus. "I seem to remember reading that the University of London specialises in languages and cultures of the ancient Middle East."

"Do you have any contacts there Remus?" asked Jules.

"I'm afraid not, but I'm sure that Cornelius Fudge can pull a few strings with his Muggle counterparts in Westminster. What do you think Headmaster?"

"I think some books on learning cuneiform script would make a nice little addition to our library," he replied. "I'll get onto Fudge first thing in the morning."

"Thank you Albus," said Jules. "But it'll take me a week or two to sift through it all and produce a viable accelerated learning course."

"School starts back in a few days," said Dumbledore, "so it'll give these youngsters an opportunity to take some practical classes - Portions, Divination, Dada and so forth."

Ron and Harry groaned, and then glanced sheepishly at Snape, who grinned at them sadistically.

Lord Voldemort sat on his throne in his cave, thinking about the events of the last twenty-four hours. Ahmed and Crabbe were babbling away at the back of the cave and Voldemort closed his eyes, tired of the constant arguments. He let his mind drift back to his successful journey to Egypt...

'How do we get down there Lucius?'

Lucius Malfoy looked at his map of the temple of Seti I and the Osireion and pointed over to the left. 'There's a long corridor over on the left-hand side of the complex that runs down into the Osireion, my Lord.'

Lucius led the way and they soon emerged into the megalithic splendour of the Osireion. Voldemort walked swiftly to the far end of the structure and looked into the dark tunnel that led under the ground to the furthest reaches of the old temple. He lit his wand and stepped into the low and dusty place, followed by Lucius, Crabbe and Ahmed.

They walked slowly for about a hundred yards before coming to a small chamber, which was completely bare, the ancient plaster having long since crumbled and fallen to the floor. Voldemort walked over to the back of the chamber, towards a small semi-circular recess cut into the back wall. He hissed with satisfaction when he saw the small metal column in the recess, but the portrait of Seth had vanished long ago.

He held his wand onto the column and said, 'ALOHOMORA'.

Everyone looked to their left at the sound of stone grinding against stone, and saw part of the left-hand wall slowly lift into some hidden slot in the ceiling to reveal a dark entrance. Voldemort held his illuminated wand in front of him as he stepped through the entrance into

one of a suite of three chambers, one chamber leading to the right and the other straight ahead.

Ahmed squeaked with delight as he saw column upon column of hieroglyphic script adorning all four walls in the first chamber. He quickly moved to the other two chambers to see that every wall was covered in the ancient writing.

'Can you translate this Ahmed?' asked Voldemort.

'Yes my Lord,' said the Arab, pulling a pile of parchments and a quill from his robes. 'I'll start straight away.'

After spending a few minutes scrutinising the writing in each of the chambers, Ahmed decided on the best order in which to start the translation, and settled down for a long and exciting day.

After six hours, Voldemort's patience started to wear a bit thin. Ahmed still hadn't finished translating the columns on the first wall in the first chamber. 'At this rate, we'll be here for a week!' hissed Voldemort.

'Oh no, my Lord,' said Ahmed. 'Once I've finished this wall, I'll have a good idea where to look for the spells we need. I should be finished within about two hours.'

'Tell me what it says so far,' ordered Voldemort.

'It's amazing -it was written by Seth himself! He tells of the conflict between himself and Osiris. Seth was the foremost Dark Wizard of his era, and Osiris and Isis were the Anima Summas. He relates how he recovered the Disc of Gates and the spells, and how they were stolen from him by Osiris and Isis, and also how Seth spied on them when they encrypted the spells that activate the Disc. Before leaving these chambers for the final battle, Seth tells how he worked out how to overcome the encryptions, a difficult and complex process, and wrote them here in case he failed to prevail - left for those of the Dark Side who would follow in his footsteps. This next column should tell me where to find those spells.'

Voldemort grunted and waved his hand at Ahmed to continue with his work. A little later, Ahmed jumped up from the floor and trotted quickly into the right-hand chamber, where he walked along the back wall until he came to two prominent columns of script towards the centre. He wrote down several spells, both in their original hieroglyphics and their translations, and then turned towards Voldemort.

'I'm finished here, my Lord,' he said, 'but I'll need to work out exactly how these spells are to be used back at your cave. There seems to be a strict ritual that needs to be enacted when these spells are to be applied, but it doesn't say exactly what the ritual is - it just hints at the key steps in its formulation.'

'Crabbe is our expert in Dark Arts ritual,' said Voldemort. 'Together with his expertise and my knowledge of the rituals in the Necronomicon, we should be able to solve the problem. Let's get back.'...

Growing tired of the delay, and weary of listening to the constant arguments between Ahmed and Crabbe, Voldemort rose from his throne and strode towards the entrance to the cave.

Before going out, he turned and shouted to the back of the cave, "I'm going out for a little while - be sure to have it worked out by the time I get back!"

He closed his eyes and thought for a few minutes - and then disappeared with a loud 'pop'.

Lord Voldemort stood at the edge of the Forbidden Forest at Hogwarts, looking across the deserted grounds towards the castle, and to the top of Gryffindor tower in particular. His red eyes blazed as he tried to see inside its walls, trying to get a glimpse of Potter and Granger - it would serve to focus his mind on the coming conflict.

Up in the library, Harry and the others were browsing through the books on Sumer. Suddenly, Harry gasped and clasped his hand to his scar as the searing pain shot through it.

"Harry! What's wrong!" shouted Hermione, reaching across the table to grasp his hand.

"It... it's Voldemort," Harry whispered through the pain. "I think he must be very close."

Ron shot up from his seat and ran to the window, looking frantically all around the school grounds. "I can't see him down there!" he exclaimed.

"He's there," gasped Harry. "I can feel him!"

Suddenly, Harry shot to his feet and rushed out through the library door, heading down towards the school Entrance Hall. The others followed, shouting for him to stop.

"Harry! We've got to tell Dumbledore! Don't go out there!" shouted Hermione, her eyes full of anguish as she chased after her boyfriend. But Harry didn't stop - he dashed down the staircases, flung open the main doors and shot out into the grounds, looking around him frantically for any sign of his tormentor.

"You stupid bugger, Harry!" exclaimed Ron as he pulled to a halt beside his friend. "If he's here, what do you think you're going to do? What if he's got the Disc and he's managed to decipher the spells?"

"Ron's right, Harry," gasped Ginny as she and the other two girls arrived.

Hermione stepped up alongside him and clasped his hand in hers, preparing for any attack that might come from some unseen corner of the grounds.

Voldemort's eyes narrowed as he saw first Harry, and then his friends, as they shot out of the main doorway to the school. Then his mouth tightened in an evil grin as he gazed at the two Anima Summas. He closed his eyes and tried to make contact with Harry, seeking the link that he knew was there.

Harry doubled over as a searing pain shot through his scar. Ron, Margot and Ginny rushed to support him as Hermione looked out over the grounds, searching for any sign of the Dark Lord. "We'd better get back inside," she said. "Ginny - get Professor Dumbledore and the others - quick!"

Ginny ran back inside the school as Hermione tried to connect her mind with Harry's. But there was something there - something dark and evil that was intruding, making it difficult for Hermione to reach into the mind of her boyfriend.

'Harry!' she silently wailed, trying to break through the dark mist that had gathered inside his mind.

Harry's mind was numb - he found it almost impossible to concentrate on anything. All he could feel was the searing pain, shot through with a deep-rooted evil. Vaguely, he could hear Hermione calling to him, trying to pull him back out of the mist. He tried to concentrate on her voice, feeling a sense of hope, as her mind grew stronger in his. Then, just as quickly as the crippling pain and confusion had come, it suddenly went. He felt the emotions of love and concern and Hermione's frantic attempts to reach him.

'It... it's all right, Hermione. It's gone now,' he thought. Hermione breathed a sigh of relief and held Harry's hand even tighter. Harry straightened up and stood tall beside Hermione, looking across the grounds to the edge of the Forbidden Forest.

Lord Voldemort hissed as his link with Harry was suddenly broken - he'd felt the Granger girl's mind trying to break through, but what had caused him to break off his mental attack was not the strength of her mind - it was the strength of her love. It was something completely alien to the Dark Lord, something so different to anything that he'd felt before - and he didn't like the experience one little bit.

His eyes blazed with anger as he stepped out from the edge of the forest and stood facing the youngsters in the distance. He knew that the distance was too great, but his anger made him raise his wand and point it in their direction, pausing while he built up his magical strength before releasing it in an awesome burst of power towards the four standing outside the main doorway to the school.

"*AVADA KEDAVRA*," he shouted.

"Quick - step up close," Harry yelled to Ron and Margot as he saw Voldemort raise his wand.

Harry and Hermione raised their hands and said the ancient spell that would cover all four in a protective force field. "*DADEX MER*."

The bright but dark green curse shot towards the four just as the emerald green light wove down and covered them. Voldemort's curse hit the shield and deflected harmlessly away into the sky.

Voldemort hissed once more as he saw what happened, but then stepped back into the forest when he saw Dumbledore and a number of other people run out of the school. He quickly walked back out through the cordon of protective spells which he'd earlier bypassed, and Apparated back to his cave.

"He's gone now," said Harry, feeling the last vestiges of pain disappear from his scar.

"Harry!" shouted Sirius. "What the hell made you run out here when you knew he was around?"

Harry looked at the ground, unable to meet his godfather's eyes. "Sorry Sirius," he whispered. "I... I don't know what came over me back then. I just... just wanted to get at the slimy git."

Sirius let out a frustrated gasp and grabbed his godson, pulling him tightly towards him, his anger giving way to relief when he saw that no damage had been done.

Harry looked over Sirius' shoulder at Hermione and smiled weakly. "If it wasn't for Hermione," he said, "I think he might have got us then."

Sirius released him and grinned gratefully at Hermione. Then Dumbledore strode forward and spoke to Harry, quietly but firmly.

"Harry - don't ever do anything like that again. You don't know... can't know the full extent of Voldemort's vast powers. You and Hermione have to complete the final quest and gain your own full powers before you can tackle him. Do you understand now what I've been trying to tell you these past few years?"

"Yes Professor, I'm sorry," said Harry. "I think I finally understand what you mean now."

Voldemort materialised outside his cave and strode back inside. He hadn't intended to confront the Anima Summas just yet - not without the Disc of Gates - but he couldn't resist the temptation to attack Potter's mind. He hissed as he recalled that feeling generated by the Granger girl - and he knew that he wouldn't risk feeling it again. But she'd pay for it! They'd both pay for it very soon now!

Voldemort strode over to his throne and looked towards the back of the cave when he heard a shout. "That can't be right Ahmed! There's nothing in Dark Arts ritual that allows that to take place - if you try it, we could lose those spells forever!"

"What's the trouble Crabbe?" Voldemort shouted, focussing his mind back on more immediate and important matters.

"I've never come across this type of ritual before, my Lord," he replied. "It's fraught with danger and hidden meanings. One wrong step could render the encryption beyond our ability to recover."

"Something's missing," said Ahmed. "Some archaic ritual ingredient that will bind it all together. What of the Necronomicon, my Lord; could this one archaic factor be resting within its pages?"

"Tell me what it is you're looking for," he replied, "and I'll research the many chapters on ancient ritual for the thing you need."

After Ahmed and Crabbe spent the next half hour giving details of what they required, it was now their turn to kick their heels with impatience as the Dark Lord settled down to read the Necronomicon.

The evening before school started back after the summer holiday, Harry, Hermione, Ron and Margot sat quietly in the common room, gazing out of the window at the darkening sky. Ginny had seemed a little quiet earlier that evening and had gone to bed early, saying that she felt a bit tired.

Harry touched Hermione's shoulder gently and gestured with his eyes towards the portrait hole. Then he turned towards his two friends. "Uh, we're going for a little walk. We'll see you later."

"You're not thinking of going outside are you!" exclaimed Margot. "It's not safe - he might come back for one last try at getting at you before school starts."

Hermione smiled. "No Margot - we're just going up to the Astronomy Tower."

"Oh!" said Ron, a grin slowly creeping over his face.

"And we thought that you two might want to spend a bit of time on your own - you won't get much chance after tonight," said Harry, grinning as he saw the flush creep up Ron's face.

As they walked along the corridors that meandered up to the Astronomy Tower, Harry frowned and glanced at his girlfriend. "Ginny didn't seem to be her usual bubbly self tonight Hermione - do you think she's ok? You don't think she's... ill or anything do you?"

Hermione shook her head sadly. "No Harry - she's not ill. She's just feeling a bit down, I think. After all, she sees us together, and Ron and Margot, and I think she just feels a little bit left out of things. She's thinking about the sixth member of the team, and deep down, I think she hoped it might have been Draco. She hasn't said that to me, but I'm pretty sure that's what's on her mind."

"What! Draco Malfoy! She fancies Draco Malfoy!" exclaimed Harry.

"Well he *has* changed, Harry. You saw how he was and how he spoke before his father took him out of the school. And... the way he looked at Ginny - I think he'd started to have... feelings for her."

"No way!" exclaimed Harry. "You'd better not say anything to Ron about this Hermione - he'll go bonkers!"

Harry stepped forward and pushed open the door that led out onto the observation deck at the top of the Astronomy Tower, and then stepped back to let Hermione walk out into the clear evening air. He quickly followed, shutting the door behind him, and then stepped up behind her, putting his arms around her.

Hermione sighed and leaned back into the comforting warmth of her boyfriend and gazed over to the western horizon, where the last faint tinges of pink were fading from the few clouds low down in the sky.

"Let's get a bit more comfortable," said Harry, sitting down with his back against the stone wall of the tower and then reaching up to help Hermione to settle down beside him.

"We shouldn't be up here you know," whispered Hermione. "We were lucky that Filch and his cat weren't patrolling the corridors, not to mention Peeves."

"They won't be on patrol until tomorrow night, and anyway, I didn't bring you up here to talk about Filch and his cat."

"No? So why did you bring me up here Harry?" she asked, grinning.

"You know why!" he replied, pulling her close and reaching up to cup his hand at the back of her neck.

Harry leaned close until his face was no more than a few inches from Hermione's, gazing into her sparkling hazel brown eyes, once more overcome with the exquisite realisation that they were actually together as a couple. Then he slowly leaned even closer, pressing his lips gently against hers.

Hermione moaned quietly and opened her lips slightly, pressing them harder against Harry's. It was now Harry's turn to moan as he felt the love and passion building inside him.

After a few minutes, they broke apart gasping, each clutching the other tightly. "Harry," Hermione whispered into his ear. "Do you... uh... I mean... the rings... do you think they're still working? I mean... I'm getting those feelings again."

Harry shuddered as he felt the soft sweet breath play over his ear. "I... I don't know Hermione. But if they are, then I know one thing - they're going to have to work overtime tonight."

They pulled apart slightly, laughing quietly, and then their expressions became more serious as they gazed once more into each other's eyes...

Breakfast in the Great Hall on the first day of school turned out to be a frantic affair for the five friends. They were laid siege by most of the students, wanting to know how the final quest was progressing, and especially by Colin Creevey and Clare Bryant, who were now the official self-appointed biographers of the exploits of the Anima Summas and their helpers.

They declared their intention of producing a school update on the quest, and wrote parchment after parchment on the details of the Eridu encounter. Their task was motivated mainly by friendship and respect, although they also had an added monetary incentive in the form of a contract from the Daily Prophet.

Harry and Hermione, however, were a bit reluctant at first but relented when Clare and Colin agreed not to portray the team in too heroic a fashion. But they took some convincing.

"Look," said Harry. "We realise that the magical community needs some sort of icon to hang on to in this conflict, but making us out to be some sort of divine beings is just not on! The real heroes are the people out there who can't do anything but hope and pray. In that sense, it's easier for us because we can get out there and do something about it. We've been placed in a position by the Light Side to carry out their task for them, so if you want to build up a sort of champion of the cause, stress the active support we're getting from the Light. Do you understand what we're getting at?"

"I think so, Harry," said Clare, looking abashed. "But it's you and Hermione everyone wants to read about, not the Light Side."

Harry looked at Hermione helplessly and she sighed. "We agree that everyone should know, within reason of course, what's going on but there are too many false idols out there already, most of whom are more interested in their own self importance than anything else. We don't want you to make us appear like that. We've been chosen to do a job and that's what we're doing - no more, no less. So just tone down the 'folk heroes' bit. Will you do that for us?"

Colin nodded. "Ok. We'll do what you ask, but we can't change what everybody thinks about you - you'll always be heroes to the rest of us."

After most of the students had left for their classes, Ginny looked over to the Slytherin table where she saw Crabbe and Goyle sitting forlornly, glancing every now and again at the Great Hall door.

"I almost feel sorry for those two," said Ginny. "They look lost without Draco. I wonder where he is - I hope he's all right."

The other four frowned and looked at Ginny helplessly. "He's probably at Malfoy Manor," said Hermione, although not really believing it. "His father can afford the best private tutors in the wizarding world."

"I wonder if he'll ever come back to the school," said Ginny. "It would be a pity if he didn't."

"Well come on then," said Ron, trying his best not to think too much about his sister's preoccupation with Draco Malfoy. "We'd better get up to Trelawney's classroom - are you looking forward to this Margot?"

"I'm not sure Ron," she replied. "I've never been taught by a seer before - it should be interesting though."

Harry, Ron and Margot were the last students to climb up into the Divination classroom and took their seats at the back. Professor Trelawney looked up and stared at Margot for a few moments. Then she got up from her desk and walked over to her. "I'm glad you've decided to attend the class Margot. I've heard a lot about you and I'm sure everybody will want to see what you can do."

Margot groaned inwardly as the professor placed a crystal ball in front of her. She'd been afraid that she'd be made the centre of attention in this class and would be expected to perform 'on tap'. She knew that the talent of a true seer was very delicate and could rarely be produced at will - it was more a thing of spontaneity, like the powers of the Anima Summas, than a normal magical spell, and in Margot's case it normally came to the fore during sleep.

"I assume you've used a crystal ball before Margot?" asked Trelawney.

"Very rarely Professor," she replied. "I usually see the future through the fog of sleep."

Professor Trelawney nodded knowingly. "Yes, many seers are only able to access their talents through the subconscious mind. But I'm intrigued to see if you are able to see the future through the crystal ball. Would you mind trying?"

"All right Professor, I'll give it a go."

"Don't feel bad if you can't see anything Margot - just try to relax, look into the crystal, and let the mists of the future reveal themselves."

Trelawney tapped the crystal ball and the fog started swirling about inside. Then she sat along side Margot, who smiled weakly at the worried-looking Ron when he squeezed her hand in support.

The rest of the students gathered around the desk, Parvati and Lavender at the front, and watched closely while Margot stared into the mist. Lavender opened her mouth to ask a question, but Trelawney held up her hand to prevent her breaking the silence and the aura of mysticism that had settled on the classroom. Everyone stood stock still for five minutes, waiting for something to happen.

Then Margot spoke softly, "I... I see something."

Everyone craned their necks to try to see into the mists swirling around inside the crystal, but all they could see were the shifting patterns in the fog.

"I... I see a long dark tunnel. And there are other people with me, walking beside me. Ron's there, and Harry, Ginny and Hermione. It's very cold and dark and there's water dripping onto us from above. There's a faint light coming from up ahead in the distance - we're walking towards it... Getting closer, much closer... Now we're... Oh! It's so beautiful..."

Ron, unable to contain his curiosity, suddenly asked, "What do you see Margot? What's so beautiful?"

Margot's eyes refocused and she sat back in her chair. "It's gone now."

Everyone looked towards Professor Trelawney, waiting for the expected outburst to admonish Ron for his untimely interruption, but looked at each other in confusion as the professor remained silent. She just stared into the crystal ball, seemingly deep in her own trance, obviously seeing a vision of her own.

Then a low moan escaped from her, "Ohhh... there is great danger here. Great danger... you must be very careful... beware the dark crystal... oh my dear god, there is tragedy... there is a death..."

Everyone gasped and looked towards Harry, Ron and Margot, their eyes full of concern and compassion. Then Trelawney let out another gasp as she sat upright in her chair. She turned to the three friends, reached out and held Margot's hand, and smiled a weak smile. "Be very careful my dear."

Then she rose slowly and walked back to the front of the class, followed by the staring eyes of the students. She picked up her notes from her desk and turned towards the door to her room; then, seemingly as an afterthought, she turned back briefly to the students and spoke very quietly, "That will be all for today. Class dismissed."

Margot brushed a tear away from her eye as she followed the two boys out of the classroom. Trelawney's performance had reawakened memories her own dark vision when she'd dreamt back at the Burrow.

The following week, Professor Denarnaud announced that the accelerated learning course for Harry and Hermione was ready. Although the material to be covered wasn't as comprehensive as he would have liked, Jules recognised that time was of the essence and a bare-bones working knowledge of the writing system was all that the pair really needed.

And so, Harry and Hermione arrived at Professor Denarnaud's classroom early on the Tuesday morning to begin their first session.

"How many sessions will it take to learn this stuff Professor?" asked Harry.

"Given your joint powers of concentration, one session today and one the day after tomorrow should be sufficient," he replied, walking towards the pair and initiating the accelerated learning spell.

"While we wait for the spell to take effect," said Jules, "I'll tell you a little about the ancient writing system known as cuneiform. A British soldier, Henry Rawlinson, came across some inscriptions carved high on a cliff at Behistun in Persia - that's modern day Iran. They consisted of identical texts in three languages - Old Persian, Akkadian or Old Babylonian and Elamite. Although none of these scripts could be understood at the time, Rawlinson managed to decipher the simpler Old Persian writings, and published his results.

"While all this was going on, thousands of clay tablets were being excavated throughout Mesopotamia, each bearing cuneiform writing. Rawlinson then managed to decipher the other two scripts, and others soon took up his work, notably one George Smith, an Assyriologist at the British Museum. It was he who first translated the Epic of Gilgamesh tablets, and announced to the world that the story of the Flood was written on the eleventh tablet of the series. This, of course, caused a big stir, since the text predated the bible texts by more than a thousand years."

"But wouldn't the theologians have been pleased?" asked Hermione. "After all, it confirmed what was in the bible."

"At first, yes, they were," replied Jules. "But when it was realised that the Sumerian flood story was almost exactly the same as the one in Genesis, it became obvious that the bible story was copied from the Sumerian version.

"Anyway, I shall be teaching you *two* forms of cuneiform; the original Sumerian and the later Akkadian, or Old Babylonian as it is sometimes called. We shan't bother with the later variants."

"Why don't we stick to just the Sumerian cuneiform Professor?" asked Hermione.

"I thought it best to cover both systems," he replied, "because although the timeline you are dealing with is definitely Sumerian, the vast majority of clay tablets uncovered so far are in

Akkadian cuneiform, so I think it's best that you be forearmed with a knowledge of both systems."

Hermione nodded her understanding. "You've seen Ginny's copy of the clay tablet we found at Eridu Professor. What language was that written in?"

"That was Sumerian, Hermione," he replied. "But you must remember that the temple in which you found it was the oldest one in the complex, so that was only to be expected."

"So how did Egyptian hieroglyphics come to be on it?" asked Harry.

"If I knew that, I would indeed be a very wise man," smiled Jules. "I think that perhaps Enki/Thoth had something to do with it though. Right, you should be ready now, so shall we begin?"

The session continued for the whole day, with all three stopping only briefly to grab a few sandwiches that Margot, Ron and Ginny brought up from the Great Hall after lunch.

At the end of the session, the pair only just managed to stagger up to their dormitories before crashing out on their beds for the next fifteen hours. They went through the same tortuous schedule two days later and slept through until after lunch the following day, by which time they had almost the same huge appetite as Ron. After tucking away the equivalent of two lunches each, Harry and Hermione were ready to resume their research with their three friends.

Remus Lupin walked up to the library with them and checked his Marauders Map to confirm that they had the library, together with Madam Pince, to themselves.

Ginny placed her parchment, bearing the message from the temple in Eridu, onto their usual large table and sat back expectantly with Ron and Margot, waiting for the translation.

Harry and Hermione studied the cuneiform closely. "Professor Denarnaud was right," said Harry. "It's definitely archaic Sumerian."

They continued to pore over the parchment for a few minutes, Hermione making notes periodically, and then they sat up, looking towards their friends with satisfaction. Hermione lifted her notes and read out their translation.

'To the Anima Summas.

Greetings from the one you know as Enki.

Your path lies in the footsteps of the first king of the city of Uruk. Follow his journey to the fabled garden of creation. May the Sanctuary of the heavenly one help you in your quest.'

"Now why aren't I surprised that he didn't just come out with a straightforward name of a place we've got to go to!" exclaimed Ron. "Another bloody puzzle!"

Margot grinned and ruffled his hair. "But it's exciting Ron! I love puzzles."

"When this is all over Margot, I never want to see another puzzle in my life again," he replied.

"So what do you think it means?" asked Ginny. "I know that Uruk was one of the first Sumerian city states, it's about a hundred and fifty miles south of Baghdad, and just north of Eridu on the other side of the Euphrates River."

"And the first king of Uruk was Gilgamesh," said Harry. "I read it in the translation of the Sumerian Kings List tablet."

"And we have to follow in his footsteps to the fabled garden of creation," said Margot. "Where do you think that is?"

Harry smiled. "It must be referring to the Epic of Gilgamesh. I didn't read it, it's about 3000 lines of text, but I know that the tablets talk about several epic journeys that he made."

"So we have to read the Epic of Gilgamesh and especially the bit about his journey to the fabled garden of creation," said Ginny.

"What about the last part of the message?" asked Ron.

"I think that's just Thoth wishing us well in our quest," said Harry.

"Right. So who's going to read it then?" asked Ron, looking pointedly towards Hermione.

"All right," she said, "I'll read it. Pass me the translation Harry."

Hermione started reading the Epic of Gilgamesh and was soon engrossed in the text, captivated by the exploits of the fabled king. An hour later, she looked up and smiled. "Well it doesn't say precisely where the garden is, but it gives some clues."

"Tell us what it's about Hermione," said Margot.

"Well the version we've got is the one written in Akkadian, but it's based on an earlier Sumerian story. It starts off by saying that Gilgamesh built the city of Uruk and the temple complex of Eanna, dedicated to Anu and Ishtar - that's the Sumerian goddess Innana. But he wasn't very nice to start with - when he was young, he oppressed his people - a bit like Saddam Hussein really."

"Hey! Perhaps he read this as well and based his regime on Gilgamesh," grinned Ron.

"May well be," said Hermione. "The name of his country - Iraq - is based on Uruk, after all. Anyway, the people cried out to their main god, Anu, and asked him to help them. He answered their pleas and arranged for a wild man, every bit as strong as Gilgamesh, to be created and to act as his rival, so that the people would be given some peace. The wild man's name was Enkidu, and when he went to Uruk, he and Gilgamesh fought furiously. Gilgamesh won, but the pair became devoted friends afterwards."

"They made plans to go on an epic quest to a mountain covered in forests, to cut down the cedar trees. But the forest was guarded by a great demon called Humbaba. They fought the demon and killed him and then cut down several cedars, the tallest to make the great gates of the city of Uruk, and the others to build a raft to float down the Euphrates back to the city. Enkidu had a vision, in which the god, Enlil, who charged the demon to guard the cedars,

declared that one of the two men who killed the guardian must die. Enkidu fell ill and eventually died.

"Gilgamesh was sick with grief and wandered about in the wild, contemplating his own death. He decided that he must seek immortality, and vowed to find the fabled Utnapishtim - Ziusudra in Sumerian - who was the Sumerian Noah and survived the great flood. In the Sumerian version of the flood story, the god Enki, unhappy that Enlil intended to wipe out humanity, told Ziusudra to build a boat and take into it the seeds of all living things. It survived the flood, of course, and Ziusudra and his wife were made immortal. So Gilgamesh wanted to find out the secret of eternal life from him. Eventually, after an epic journey, he finds Ziusudra, but is denied immortality. Gilgamesh then returned to Uruk, resigned to his mortality.

"But the part that's of most interest to us is Gilgamesh's journey to find Ziusudra, who he says, lived a pious life in the land of the gods. He arrived at the base of a mountain, called Mount Mashu, which had twin peaks and was so high it supported the heavens where fire and lightning abounded at its summit. He met the guardians of the gate of the mountain, two scorpions, and asked them to let him proceed. Eventually they did, and they opened the gate to a very long and dark pathway that goes into the bowels of the mountain. Gilgamesh walked through for a long time and then emerged into bright light and a garden of jewels with carnelian trees in bloom, a lapis lazuli tree, other trees made of precious stone, jewels and coral."

"Wow!" exclaimed Ron. "Treasure!"

"Treasure maybe, Ron," said Hermione. "But I don't believe it's what you think. Enki told us to find the fabled garden of creation, and that's what I think we'll find at the end of the tunnel underneath Mount Mashu. But doesn't it remind you of another garden?"

Margot smiled. "I know what you're thinking Hermione. You think that it's the same as the Garden of Eden, don't you?"

Hermione nodded. "I think that Enki's garden of creation was Dilmun - and Dilmun was the Sumerian Garden of Eden. I think they're one and the same."

"Woah!" exclaimed Ginny. "Just hold on one minute there. The garden of Eden is just a myth isn't it?"

Hermione and Margot merely raised their eyebrows.

"You can't be really serious about this," breathed Ginny. "Can you?"

"Even if they are the same place," said Harry, "we've still got to find it. Any idea where Mount Mashu is?"

Hermione shook her head. "There weren't any specific directions given in the Epic, and I doubt that there's a mountain called Mashu any longer - names tend to change over the years, especially when different languages come to the fore. I think our best bet is to do some research on the Garden of Eden and see if there's anything there that'll point us in the right direction."

"There was something on the Garden of Eden in one of the books I read," said Ron suddenly. "The book was a series of commentaries on alternative history about various subjects - the gods of Sumer was the one I read, but I noticed in the chapter index that there was one about the Garden of Eden. Hey! Margot - what you saw in the crystal ball in Divinations - could that have been the Garden of Eden?"

"I don't know Ron. I only had the briefest glance, but it was certainly very beautiful."

They all looked up at the sound of some of the students walking into the library following the end of afternoon classes. The spy, hidden by the invisibility cloak, sat at the end of their table and waited.

"Let's get an early dinner," said Harry. "We can come back later to do some more research."

"Ok," said Hermione. "But before we go, let's get everything ready. Ron - you and Margot can read that piece on the Garden of Eden; Ginny - see if you can find some maps on the Middle East region; Harry and I can read the Garden of Eden story in the book of Genesis in the Bible."

The spy settled down to wait after the five walked down to the kitchen to grab something to eat.

George Weasley sat in the front room of the Shrieking Shack opening the evening owl post. He picked up an official-looking letter bearing the emblem of the Ministry of Magic and quickly opened it, hoping that it was about the Relocators. He quickly read it and shouted up the stairs for Fred, Lee, Alicia and Angelina to join him.

"It's from Marcus Heatherington-Jones," he said, smiling. "He's had a report from 'Mad Eye' Moody about the Relocators, and Sirius has also written to him about them after their run-in with the Death Eaters in Iraq. He wants as many as we can make - he wants to distribute them among the Aurors out in the field. And he wants us to send some more to Moody at Camp Merlin - he's holding a big war game thing in a few weeks time, and he wants to try out a few things. Oh, and Marcus wants to send some over to his opposite number in America."

"That's great news," said Lee. "But we'll have to make loads of them in a short space of time - how're we going to cope?"

"Fred and I spoke to Marcus about that," said George. "He says in his note that Fudge will be sending five more ministry people to help us - they should be here tomorrow morning. That means that us five can concentrate on getting the Relocators ready while the rest crack on with the Whammos."

"Excellent!" exclaimed Fred. "I really think we're getting somewhere at last! But we'll have to get another room kitted out for production - we can use the spare room at the back, as long as we can find somewhere else to store all the stock."

"We'll just add a storeroom outside the back door," said George. "Oh and there's one other thing - I almost forgot. Marcus has invited two of us to Moody's big war game. As I said,

Moody wants to try out a few things, but he didn't give any more details. That gives us two weeks to get ready as many Relocators as we can."

"Who's going to go?" asked Lee.

"Well either Fred or myself should go," said George. "But I think it might be an idea for one of you three to get a taste of what it's like at the sharp end."

"I'll go," said Fred. "I like old 'Mad Eye' and I want to see what sorts of things he wants to try out. Who wants to come with me then?"

"Alicia," Angelina blurted, glancing solicitously at her friend. "Uh - I just think she should get out a bit more."

"Aw - I'd like to go as well!" exclaimed Lee.

"You can go on the next field trip Lee," said Angelina, glaring at him, while at the same time trying to suppress a moan after Alicia had kicked her under the table. "I really think that Alicia should go."

Fred grinned widely. "What do you say Lissy? Do you want to spend a day out with me?"

Alicia glanced at Angelina and shot her a dark look, and then she answered a bit nervously, "It should be an interesting visit Fred."

"That's settled then," said Fred. "You'd better dress for the conditions, though. It can get a bit cold and damp in the mountains of Mid Wales at this time of year."

The library still had a smattering of students sitting around, some of them frantically writing in an effort to finish their essays to be handed in the following day, when the five once more took their seats and settled down to read. The spy glanced at the clock on the wall, noting that dinner was still about an hour and a half away, and hoped that some information would be gleaned during that time. The spy didn't want to be in the library when the other students left, Crabbe had warned that great care had to be taken to prevent being detected.

For the next half hour, Harry and Hermione read through the book of Genesis, Ron and Margot read the article on the Garden of Eden, and Ginny spent some time trying to find maps of the Middle East in the Geography section of the library. Ron, Margot and Ginny sat patiently waiting for Hermione to finish scribbling a few notes onto a piece of parchment.

"Right," said Hermione. "Let's see what we've got." She looked at the notes she'd made, but before she said anything, Ron interrupted.

"You two took your time reading that," he said, grinning. "There's not much about the Garden of Eden in the bible is there?"

Hermione looked a little affronted as she pierced Ron with one of her withering stares. "Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested Ron."

"That was very profound Hermione," said Ginny, grinning as she saw the confused look on her brother's face.

"Well it wasn't really my quote Ginny," she replied. "Francis Bacon said that."

"Francis who?" asked Ron, laughing. "He must have been a pig of a man!"

"Ignore him, Hermione," said Margot, grinning. "He's in one of his funny moods."

Hermione's dark stare lingered for a few moments before she looked back down at her notes. "I'll read out what Genesis says about the location of the Garden of Eden. It comes from Genesis chapter 2, verses ten to fourteen...

'Now there was a river issuing out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it began to be parted and it became, as it were, four heads. The first one's name is Pishon; it is the one encircling the entire land Havilah, where the gold is. And the gold of the land is good. There also are the bdellium gum and the onyx stone.

And the name of the second river is Gihon; it is the one encircling the entire land of Cush.

And the name of the third river is Hiddekel; it is the one going to the east of Asshur.

And the fourth river is the Euphrates.'

"So it gives the names of four rivers and some place names," she concluded.

"That ties in with what Ron and I've just read," said Margot. "The researcher who wrote the article is convinced that he's identified what the four rivers are called now and he's even narrowed down the approximate position of the land of Eden.

"He says that two of the rivers are easy to locate - there's the Euphrates, of course, and the Hiddekel is the Hebrew name for the river Tigris. He says that the locations of the other two rivers were cracked by a little-known scholar called Reginald Walker, but no one took him seriously. He identifies the Gihon with the present-day river Aras that runs from just north of Lake Urmia into the Caspian Sea, and the Pishon is the river Ouzan that runs from south of Lake Urmia into the Caspian. The Euphrates and Tigris rise around Lake Van, just west of Lake Urmia. So he says that the Garden of Eden is around the area of Lake Urmia."

"Where exactly is Lake Urmia?" asked Harry.

"There was a sketch of the area included in the notes," said Ron, turning to the relevant page and holding it up for the others to see. Ginny looked at the map for a few moments and then back at the maps she'd found on the Middle East.

"Got it," she said, pointing to one of the maps. "Lake Urmia is in the Zagros Mountains in north western Iran, close to the borders of northern Iraq and eastern Turkey."

"Is there anything on that map about Mount Mashu?" asked Ron.

"Nothing I can find Ron," said Ginny.

"Hang on a minute," said Hermione. "Let's just think for a moment. The Epic of Gilgamesh says that Mount Mashu is a very high mountain and has twin peaks. It also says that fire and lightning abound at the summit, so that could be referring to a volcano, or at least one that's probably extinct by now."

"So we want to look for an old volcanic mountain with twin peaks," said Harry. "Look around the Lake Urmia area Ginny, and see if you can find a mountain that fits that description."

Ginny pored over the map for a few minutes, and then exclaimed, "Here's something! There's a very large mountain to the east of the lake that seems to have two summits - it's called Mount Sahand. Hang on a minute, there's a reference section that comes with this map that gives some general descriptions of the more prominent features."

After another few minutes, Ginny exclaimed, "Yes! I think we're on to something here. Listen... Mount Sahand is a volcanic massive in north-western Iran, about twenty-five miles south of the city of Tabriz and just north of the city of Maragheh. It is shrouded in mystery and legend, and is known as 'The Throne of God'. It was revered in ancient times because of a deep well - an abyss of sweet water coming from deep below the volcano's heart. Interestingly, it was called Mount Uash by the Assyrians - that's pretty similar to Mashu isn't it? There's a picture of it here, look!"

Ginny held up the book to show a picture of the summit of the mountain, with two prominent peaks overlooking a massive depression, which was probably the collapsed caldera of the volcano.

"That's a really big mountain," said Harry. "What sort of area does it cover Ginny?"

"The highest parts of the massif cover about seven miles by five," she replied.

"Well I don't think there's any doubt that Mount Sahand is Mount Mashu," said Margot. "But how are we going to find the entrance to the underground tunnel in all that rugged terrain?"

Everyone looked blankly at each other before Hermione had a sudden thought. "Read out Enki's message Ginny - the last part of it."

Ginny picked up the parchment and read, "May the Sanctuary of the heavenly one help you in your quest."

"I don't think that Enki's merely wishing as a fair journey here," said Hermione, thinking hard. "It says 'help us in our quest' - the sanctuary of the heavenly one. The heavenly one - that's another way of referring to the main god Anu isn't it Harry?"

Harry thought for a few moments and then nodded his agreement.

"So," Hermione continued, "Enki's telling us that we'll get some help with this in the Sanctuary of Anu."

"Didn't it say in the Epic of Gilgamesh that the king built a temple to Anu in Uruk?" asked Margot.

"That's right," Hermione replied, picking up the book that contained the epic. "It says that he built the city of Uruk and the temple complex of Eanna, dedicated to Anu and Ishtar. Let's see if we can find out more about it in the books on ancient Sumer."

She looked through the titles of the books stacked in the middle of the table and picked out one about the ancient cities and their excavations, looking in the index for Uruk. She scanned through the pages until she came to a passage, scanning it quickly before she looked up at the others excitedly. Then she read it out, "In the heart of the city are two large temple complexes; the Eanna sanctuary, dedicated to the goddess Innana and the Anu sanctuary, in which stands the ruins of an important structure called the White Temple, dedicated to the chief god, Anu."

"That's it!" exclaimed Margot. "We should find help in the White Temple - perhaps Gilgamesh left some directions to where the tunnel is in Mount Mashu!"

"So that's where we go next then," said Harry. "And if we find the directions, the next stop will be the Garden of Eden."

The five friends smiled as they looked from one to another. "We'd better get as much information, photos and excavation plans about Uruk as we can," said Harry. "Sirius and the others will want to study them before we get there. Perhaps Dumbledore's contact will set up a Portkey for us like he did at Eridu."

They all tramped out of the library, on their way up to the headmaster's office, while the spy smiled smugly, composing a note to Mrs Crabbe under cover of the Invisibility Cloak.

Charlie, Nadine and Ginny walked down the little valley to Demont's cabin on a beautiful Saturday morning. They'd been allowed a few hours for the visit while they waited for the Portkey to be set up in Uruk. Sirius, Ceri and Oliver had given Dumbledore a very precise location for the Portkey, well away from the White Temple structure and in an insignificant part of the huge site, just in case the elite team of Death Eaters had learned of their proposed visit.

"Sirius wants to go tomorrow morning," said Charlie. "He doesn't want to be hampered by darkness this time, he wants to be able to see exactly what we'll come up against if the Death Eaters make an appearance."

"Never mind about Uruk, Charlie," said Ginny, trying to contain her excitement. "Concentrate on Demont and his girlfriend. I'm dying to find out what all this intrigue is about."

Nadine laughed. "So are we Ginny. Now don't forget, Charlie and I'll try to drag Ann-Marie away while you tackle Demont. And if you can't get anything out of him, we'll both try to squeeze something out of Ann-Marie while Charlie keeps Demont preoccupied with something."

"You're assuming, of course, that Anne-Marie will be here," observed Charlie. "If she works at the ministry, maybe she won't get here until later today."

"Don't be so negative Charlie," said Nadine. "She would probably have come up here last night anyway."

Ginny grinned. "Do you think they're still in bed together? It looks very quite."

Charlie stared at his sister and frowned. "You're a bit young to be thinking of such things, aren't you Ginny?"

"Don't be silly Charlie, I'm sixteen now!"

They walked up to the door and Nadine tried to open it, but found it locked. "That's strange," she said. "Demont doesn't normally lock the door."

Ginny held up her hand and listened intently, putting her ear close to the door. She giggled. "Can you hear that? There's a lot of scrambling about in there - I think they must be up to something."

Charlie and Nadine glanced at each other, looking puzzled, and then Nadine rapped sharply on the door.

They waited for several minutes, the sounds of hurried fumbling still coming from inside, before the door slowly opened a few inches and Demont's face appeared through the crack.

"What's all the secrecy about Demont!" exclaimed Nadine as she shoved hard on the door, causing Demont to stagger back inside. "I'm glad to see that you're dressed this time!"

"Hello Anne-Marie," she said as she walked over to the kitchen table, where Demont's girlfriend sat quietly at one end, looking the picture of innocence. In front of her were several thick, closed folders.

"Hello Nadine, Charlie, nice to see you both again," said Anne-Marie, glancing over Nadine's shoulder at the red-haired youngster, who stared with a slight grin, obviously appraising her.

"This is Charlie's sister - Ginny," said Nadine, turning and gesturing to Ginny.

Anne-Marie rose from her seat, walked towards the grinning Ginny and held out her hand. "Hello Ginny, what brings you here?"

Ginny shook the proffered hand, staring into the mesmerising and mysterious eyes of the older woman. "Pleased to meet you," she replied. "Nadine asked me if I wanted to come with her and Charlie to meet Demont's girlfriend, and I couldn't miss out on that now, could I?"

Anne-Marie laughed. "You're the curious type then Ginny?"

"Aren't we all?" Ginny turned to Demont, who looked a little flustered by their sudden appearance, and walked over to loop her arm through his. "Come on Demont, let's go for a little walk - I haven't seen you for ages and I want to catch up on all that's been happening."

She pulled Demont out through the cabin door into the warm sunshine. He looked back over his shoulder and raised his eyebrows in helpless resignation.

"She's a very nice lady," Ginny began. "Where did you meet such a lovely looking witch, Demont?"

"Uh, at the ministry offices in Toulouse," he replied.

"Oh, nice. Is she staying with you at the cabin now? Has she moved in?"

Demont looked at Ginny with some discomfort. "Uh, not exactly. But she gets up here as often as she can - I don't get much opportunity to go to Toulouse - the magical creatures in the forest keep me here for most of the time."

"So - can we expect the sound of wedding bells any time soon?"

"Uh - what makes you think we want to get married?"

"Don't you then? What's to stop you both - if you love each other, that is?"

"Well nothing, I suppose, but we just haven't talked about it."

"Hmmm," Ginny thought quickly, trying to find another angle to get at the core of the mystery. "What was all that scrambling that we heard while we waited for you to unlock the door?"

Demont again looked very uncomfortable. "On nothing - we were just, uh, tidying up a bit to make the place look more presentable for visitors."

"Really? So what were you doing to make the place into such a mess?"

Demont couldn't suppress a grin. "Nothing! Ginny Weasley - you are the most inquisitive girl I have ever met! And don't forget - I'm well aware of your talent for

match-making! But there's no need to practice your wily arts with Anne-Marie and me. We love each other, and we're already together."

"I know Demont, but I want to be sure that you're happy. I'm very fond of you, you know."

"And I'm very fond of you," he replied, squeezing her hand. "Come on - we'd better get back; the others will be wondering where we've got to."

They walked back into the cabin and sat with the others at the kitchen table, while Anne-Marie poured two more mugs of steaming coffee. Ginny glanced at the folders and her hand twitched, dying to see what was inside. She had the feeling that it might shed a bit of light on what was going on.

"Been working have you?" she asked, looking at the folders.

"Just some reports I had to do for the ministry," said Demont, glancing at his girlfriend a bit nervously, and then across to Charlie. "Nothing to do with the dragons, though - just a bit of local infighting among the Hippogriffs."

"Buckbeak wasn't hurt was he?" asked Ginny.

"No - no, he's fine."

"How long have you worked in Demont's department Anne-Marie?" asked Nadine.

"Oh, only a year or so," she replied.

"Funny he never mentioned you before," said Nadine, looking at her brother pointedly.

"There was no need - we got together only recently."

"So didn't you fancy each other before?" asked Ginny, grinning widely. "Or did it take you a while to pluck up the courage to ask her out?"

"Something like that," said Demont.

Nadine frowned as she continued her line of questioning. "You've mentioned Sophie and Lauren in the Care of Magical Creatures office, so why didn't you tell me Anne-Marie worked there as well? From what you said, I understood that there were only two witches working in the office."

"Uh... I... I," Demont looked at his girlfriend, his eyes pleading for some help.

"I... uh... don't normally work in the office Nadine," she said. "It's only very recently that I've taken a desk job - I used to work out in the field before that."

"Where exactly - in the field, I mean?"

"I, uh, used to help the carers of Magical Creatures monitor their activities - I spent most of my time up in the forest on the Belgian border."

"Interesting," said Nadine. "Would that be the Forbidden Forest to the east of Ypres?"

"That's right," she said, looking nervously at Demont, who raised his eyes to the ceiling.

"Hmmm. Is Jacques Flambeau still in charge of the forest? I spent some time there during our field trips from the school."

"I... I think so," she replied.

Charlie glanced at his watch and stood up from the table. "Come on you two - we'd better get back to Hogwarts. We've got that meeting with Sirius and the others in just over an hour."

Ginny and Nadine frowned when they saw the 'no-nonsense' look in Charlie's eyes, and slowly got up from the table and followed him outside the cabin.

"Sorry about all that Demont," Charlie whispered, while the three girls said their goodbyes. "You know what they're like."

"Charlie Weasley!" exclaimed Nadine as the three walked up to the main door at Hogwarts. "That meeting with Sirius isn't until this evening! What are you playing at?"

"Look. I started to get very embarrassed at the way you two were quizzing your brother and his girlfriend. I thought there might have been something strange going on when we first met them, but I'm not so sure now. Their responses to your interrogation seemed quite feasible to me, and I don't think it was very fair of you to put them through something like that."

"Come on, Charlie," said Ginny. "I agree with Nadine - there's something very strange going on - didn't you see how edgy they were?"

"And not only that," said Nadine. "Jacques Flambeau never worked at that forest - in fact there never was a Jacques Flambeau - I just made him up on the spur of the moment."

"See!" exclaimed Ginny, fixing her brother with an aggressive stare.

Alvis Grimwald looked around the ruins of the ancient city of Uruk with frustration. He and his elite team of Death Eaters had scoured the rough ground all around the crumbling ziggurat that housed the White Temple of Anu, but had found nothing that could have been a Portkey.

"This place is just too big," said Hindley Musgrove. "It could have been placed anywhere."

"Let's climb up to the temple and see if there's anything there."

Two hours later, with the sun starting to sink below the horizon, they climbed back down the ruined stone stairway and walked back onto the plain. "Do you think they'll come tonight?" asked Hindley.

Alvis shook his head. "I don't know. The spy couldn't find out when they intended to come. We'll just have to keep watch around the base of the ziggurat - you'd better organise the men into three shifts and spread them all around this thing. We can get some sleep behind some of the ruins."

"How are you going to approach this, Alvis? They'll probably be expecting an attack."

"We've got to make sure we have surprise on our side and strike when they least expect it. And when we *do* strike, we'd better be sure of hitting our targets. I don't want those two kids to have the time to pull a stunt like the one they pulled the last time. I think our best chance will come after they've found what they came for and when they leave the temple to go back to their Portkey site. They may think that we're not here and be more relaxed in their vigilance."

Early the following morning, Sirius waved to the group to keep low to the ground while he, Oliver, Katie and Ceri walked stealthily to each side of the ruins of the Eanna complex and peered in the direction of the White Temple. After ten minutes of careful scrutiny, they could detect no movement amid the sand and rocks that covered the vast majority of the huge site that was once the city of Uruk. The ruined ziggurat, with the equally ruined White Temple at its summit, was about six hundred yards away from their Portkey site, but was very prominent as it rose from the desolation of the mostly sand-covered ruins.

Sirius sent Oliver and Katie ahead of the main group, warning them to take whatever cover they could, but to stay no more than fifty yards ahead in case they needed support. Then he led the rest out from behind the cover of the Eanna sanctuary and walked slowly towards the White Temple, keeping to their usual formation.

Ron, holding onto Margot's hand, grinned as he looked towards Hermione. "No history lesson this morning?"

"You know as much as I do about Uruk Ron," she replied, grinning back at her friend.

Fifteen minutes later they were almost at the bottom of the ziggurat, and Oliver signalled for the main group to stop while he and Katie walked around the base to make sure than no one was hiding there. After another fifteen minutes, the pair appeared from around the other side of the ziggurat and approached their colleagues.

"Nothing," said Oliver. "If they're here, they're well hidden."

"We'll all climb up to the temple together," said Sirius, pointing towards the remains of the stone steps leading up to the top of the ziggurat. "They could be hidden anywhere in amongst all that devastation."

"There may be another way up," said Katie. "Just around the right-hand side, we spotted a bricked opening in the base that could well be a drain that once took water or something from the top of the ziggurat."

"We took a quick look inside to make sure no one was in there," said Oliver, "but it certainly seems to lead up to the top. Do you want to try it?"

"It'll be better than climbing up the outside," Sirius replied. "We'd be too exposed if we go up those steps."

Oliver and Katie led the way around to the right of the ziggurat and walked up to the narrow bricked entrance. "We'll go in front," said Oliver as he and Katie stepped into the dark interior of the tunnel.

They found the going to be very tortuous, the old water-course leading up at an angle of about forty-five degrees, and they all had to proceed in a crab-like fashion, bracing their backs against the side of the brick wall, when the floor became too smooth to provide sufficient purchase for their shoes. They were all quite breathless when they reached the end of the tunnel, and Oliver peered out onto the summit with the ruins of the White Temple to his left.

"Ok," he called back into the tunnel. "It seems to be all clear."

They all walked slowly into the ruins of the temple, most of the ceilings long since collapsed, and the protectors watched closely as the five wandered among the many nooks and crannies that lay within the partially collapsed walls. It was quite a small site, the dimensions of the temple measuring about 75 feet by 60 feet, and they'd checked out most of it before Harry spotted a cone-shaped little room at the far corner.

He called over to the other four and they looked around at the walls of the curious little room while the protectors waited outside. One of the walls held three narrow dome-shaped recesses,

although they were completely empty. They had to watch their footing as they examined the walls, the loose stones on the floor threatening to twist an unsuspecting ankle if proper care weren't taken.

Margot shook her head, frowning. "It feels like there should be something here. I don't know why, but I just get the feeling that if there's anything here at all in the temple, then here it'll be."

"Well there aren't many other likely-looking places up here," said Harry, looking disappointed.

"Be patient," whispered Hermione. "We'll find something - I'm sure we will."

"Bugger!" shouted Ron, as he stumbled on one of the loose stones. He reached out his hand and grabbed hold of the sill of one of the curious recesses to stop himself crashing to the ground. But the stone he grabbed hold of just came away in his hand and he fell, stone in hand, to the hard floor, where he looked ruefully up at his four friends as he rubbed his knee furiously.

"Are you all right Ron?" asked Margot, leaning over her boyfriend to help him back to his feet.

"Well done Ron!" exclaimed Ginny, pointing excitedly to the partially demolished stone recess. "I think you've found something. Look - there seems to be a hole underneath where that stone was."

The five gathered round and looked at the dark opening, none of them wanting to stretch their hands inside in case there was something nasty crawling inside.

"Use your wand Ginny," said Hermione.

Ginny lit her wand and held it just inside the opening, but they couldn't see the bottom of the hole - it just seemed to continue beyond the limits of the illumination from Ginny's wand.

"Let's see if any more of these stones are loose," said Margot. Harry put both hands on the stone next to the hole and tried to move it, but it wouldn't budge. He tried the stone next to it, the last making up the sill, but that, too, was stuck fast.

"You'd better fall again Ron," said Harry ruefully. "Maybe you can dislodge one of those other stones. Come on, give me a hand."

Both Ron and Harry grabbed the stone next to the hole and heaved, and staggered back as the stone finally relented and left the place where it had rested for over five thousand years. The last stone in the sill came away fairly easily, and they could now reach their wands into the gaping hole to see what lay below.

The space stretched down for about four feet, ending in a stone floor at about the same level as the floor outside the recess. "There's something at the bottom," whispered Hermione. "Can you reach down and see what it is?"

"I'm not sticking my hands down there!" exclaimed Ron. "You never know what's crawling around in dark, enclosed places like that."

Harry grinned. "Grab hold of my waist Ron. I'll stretch inside and get it." Harry lifted himself up while Ron grabbed around his waist. He then stretched down inside the hole and felt around with his hands until he located the object at the bottom. It felt like a square stone, about ten inches long, and he caught hold of both ends and shouted for Ron to pull him back up.

When he was back on terra firma, Harry turned the square object over and looked at it in amazement.

"It's a clay tablet!" exclaimed Hermione. "And it's covered in cuneiform script!"

"But it's broken off at the bottom," said Harry, holding it for the others to see the jagged edge at the bottom of the tablet. "The missing piece isn't in the hole, though."

"Can you read what it says?" asked Margot.

Harry placed the tablet on the floor and he and Hermione held their illuminated wands above the rough surface to try to get a better view of the ancient writing. They joined hands and combined their efforts in trying to translate what was on the tablet. After a few minutes, Hermione let out a sigh, "It was written by Gilgamesh himself! I'll read what it says..."

I, Gilgamesh, king of Uruk, record these details of my journey in search of the fabled Ziusudra, the one whom the gods made immortal.

I wandered about in the high country, living on the fruits of the land for many days, before I came to the place below Mount Mashu - the mountain of the gods. I roamed below the twin towers of its summit, seeking entry to the place where dwells Ziusudra. I travelled up alongside the life-giving waters that flow from that awesome place, approaching from the south along the winding torrent, until I came to the place where it issued from the base of the mountain, directly below the twin towers.

There, I was confronted by the guardians who forever bar the way to the path that leads into the mystic garden. My heart was filled with...

That's where it ends. We'll never know what else Gilgamesh had to say."

"What do you make of it?" asked Ron. "He certainly gives some directions, but can you follow them?"

"He talks about a river that flows down from the base of the mountain to the south," said Harry.

"And its source must be within the depths of the mountain," said Hermione, "because he says he found the place where it flows out from the base of the mountain."

"And it was directly beneath the twin peaks," continued Harry. "So we have to try to identify a river whose source is on the south side of the mountain, underneath the peaks. That's where we'll find the entrance into the tunnel that leads to Dilmun - the Garden of Eden."

"Any ideas Ginny?" asked Margot. "You know more about the geography of the place than any of us."

"Not in that sort of detail Margot," she replied. "I'll have to check the maps when we get back to Hogwarts."

"Ok," said Hermione. "I'll copy what this tablet says in case we need to refer to it later, than we'd better replace it and seal this sill back up again."

"Don't you think this was all a bit too much of coincidence?" asked Ron, frowning as Hermione scribbled the translation onto a piece of parchment. "I mean, you don't think that this was planted here by Death Eaters to throw us off the scent?"

Harry shook his head. "No Ron - I doubt if any of them knows how to write cuneiform script - not even Voldemort."

"It was certainly a coincidence though," said Margot. "Ron falling and prising loose the stone like that - but I think it was just meant to be. I think it was the Light again."

A little later, Oliver and Katie led the way back down the old watercourse to the base of the ziggurat, where they paused to look around the immediate area before stepping out onto the plains of Uruk. They all walked alongside the base of the ziggurat and out onto open ground, heading back to the Eanna complex and the Portkey.

Oliver and Katie were a little way ahead of the main group, with Remus and Ceri on one side of the youngsters and Charlie and Nadine on the other, while Sirius brought up the rear. The attack happened so quickly that no one had time to press the buttons on their Relocators.

Oliver and Katie spun round at the sound of curses being flung, and watched in horror as Sirius crumpled to the floor, where he lay quiet and unmoving.

"Nooooo!" shouted Katie as she and Oliver raced back to the group, all of them by now pressing themselves into the ground to get what cover they could. Ceri started to crawl towards Sirius as powerful curses erupted in the sandy ground all around her, while the others gazed among the many hiding places, trying to get a sight of the attackers.

"Over there!" shouted Charlie, pointing to the corner of a large mound of rubble a little way off to their left. He and the others started flinging spells, trying to give Ceri the chance to reach the fallen Sirius, while Oliver dragged Katie to one side, trying to approach the Death Eaters from a different angle. Several curses came their way, but they were able to Relocate out of harms way and gain comparative safety behind a low mound of sand.

Ceri finally reached Sirius and shook his shoulder. "Sirius," she whispered, but then gasped as she looked in horror at her bloodstained hand. She quickly felt for a pulse and was relieved to feel a steady beat, but knew that she had to get him back to Hogwarts for treatment quickly.

Then, inexplicably, everything fell silent. One second the air was filled with spells and curses, the next there was complete and utter silence. Ceri looked around to see what had happened and gasped when she saw Harry and Hermione walking towards the mound where the Death Eaters were hiding, their hands joined and a bright beam of silvery-blue light running from their outstretched hands and surrounding the mound in a silvery haze.

The others were slowly getting to their feet and following on behind them, but Katie made a dash in Ceri's direction, her face running with tears. "Ceri! Is he... still alive?"

Ceri just nodded, she knew that her voice would betray the panic she felt when she saw Sirius fall. She brushed her own tears away and made an effort to pull herself together. "I think he took a powerful Flipendus curse in the shoulder. We need to get him back to the hospital as quick as we can." She turned and looked towards the rest of the group. "He's still alive!" she shouted. "We'll get him over to the Portkey."

Ceri pointed her wand and levitated Sirius above the ground, and Katie helped steady him as they moved quickly towards the Portkey site. Meanwhile, the others looked on with fascination and awe at the scene behind the large mound. Harry and Hermione had by this time dropped their hands to their sides, but the silvery haze still covered the mound and the thirty Death Eaters that were crouched behind it. It was a very odd sight - some of the black-cloaked figures were leaning forward to look around the side of the mound, two of them had their mouths open, in the act of shouting some unheard orders, while others pointed their wands, the curses frozen just inches beyond the tips of their wands.

"What... what did you do to them?" asked Ron.

"We put them in a time warp," said Harry. "For them, the action is still going on, and they'll stay frozen in this moment, unaware that anything odd has happened, until we free them."

"Like the followers of Horus did to Apophis in the Duat?" asked Ginny

Hermione nodded. "Something like that, but I think you'll need to understand the Theory of Relativity to get the gist of how the spell works."

"Well as far as I'm concerned," said Remus vehemently, looking around at the two girls carefully moving Sirius towards the Eanna complex, "they can stay like that forever."

"Leave them there," said Charlie. "At least they won't be able to follow us when we go to the next place on the quest."

Harry nodded. "They'll be safe until after the conflict is over. Then we can release them with a squad of Aurors to take them into custody."

"Unless Saddam and his crowd see them first," said Ron.

"They might get a shock if they do," said Hermione. "They won't be able to do anything even if they did see them, but from what I've read about Uruk, no one comes here since the Iraqis stopped all excavations after the Gulf War."

Everyone stood by Sirius' bedside in the hospital as Madam Pince applied her magic to his damaged shoulder. She glanced up and nodded to the headmaster. "He should be up and around again by the morning."

Ceri and Katie sighed with relief and thanked the nurse. Then they pulled up two chairs, determined to wait until Sirius regained consciousness.

Remus grinned. "Come on then, we'd better get something to eat. I think we can leave Sirius in the capable hands of these two."

A little while later, the four watched as Ginny studied a relief map of Mount Sahand that she'd seen in one of the books on Iran. She looked up and grinned wickedly. "Did you see how Ceri reacted in the hospital?"

"Keep your mind on the map Ginny," said Harry, grinning. "I'm sure that Sirius'll find out soon enough how concerned she was."

Ginny pulled a face and bent her head back down to the map. She put her finger on the middle of the map and slowly traced it towards the bottom. "I've got it, I think. Look at this."

She held up the map for the others to see and pointed to two black dots on an elevated section. "These two dots are the twin peaks of the volcano, and just below them, right in the middle of the two in that deep valley, you can see the line of a river running down to the south - it's called the Murdi Chai, and it runs down to the east of the city of Maragheh."

"Well done Ginny," said Harry, smiling at her. "As soon as Sirius recovers, we can plan the next stage of the quest."

"Haven't you heard from them at all?" asked Lord Voldemort, looking angrily at Lucius and Travis.

"No my Lord," replied Lucius. "They left for Uruk three days ago and they haven't been seen since."

"Crabbe!" Voldemort shouted to the back of the cave where Crabbe and Ahmed were studying the spells that Voldemort had found in the Necronomicon. "Have you heard from the spy? Have Potter and his gang returned from Uruk?"

Crabbe looked up and walked over to the throne. "Yes my Lord, they returned yesterday."

Voldemort hissed with frustration. "Then we have to assume that they've been eliminated. But not to worry, as soon as we reveal those spells, I'll go after the Anima Summas myself. Have you made any sense of those spells yet?"

"Yes my Lord," replied Crabbe. "Ahmed thinks we'll be ready to do the ritual tomorrow afternoon."

"Good," breathed Voldemort. "Then we'll see just how powerful the Anima Summas really are!"

Chapter 4 - The Fabled Garden

Harry, Hermione, Ron, Ginny and Margot stood quietly on the banks of the Murdi Chai, looking down at the raging torrent that the river had become with the arrival of the autumn rains and snow in the Zagros Mountains. Harry turned his head and looked up at the splendour of Mount Sahand, its snow-capped twin peaks clearly visible in the distance.

Ron smiled as he loudly breathed in the early morning mountain air. "This is great, it beats the pants off the deserts we've had to endure lately."

Margot smiled and leaned into him, tapping her hand on his chest. "You're in an exceptionally good mood this morning Ron?"

He glanced at his beautiful girlfriend. "I've got a hearty breakfast inside my stomach and some hearty thoughts in my head. It's not often that you get the chance to walk into a garden of jewels."

Sirius, now fully recovered from his ordeal in Uruk, and the other protectors were completing their survey of the Portkey site to make sure that no Death Eaters were in the vicinity. They were fairly certain that this time there would be no interference from the Dark Side - the elite team were held fast in a bubble of frozen time beneath the ziggurat in Uruk and Remus had been meticulous in his security checks in the library to make sure that there were no unaccounted-for students within ear-shot when the five had determined their next stopping-off point on the final quest.

Remus had also come to the rescue when he'd arranged for the Portkey to be set up. One of his many contacts in the Greece-Turkey vicinity had agreed to make a quick foray across the border into the Azerbaijan province of North-western Iran to place the device in a remote spot, close to the Murdi Chai which ran from the base of Mount Sahand down to the more populated areas along the borders of Iran and Iraq.

Hermione glanced nervously at the pile of broomsticks that lay on the ground behind them, dreading the long flight up the river to find its source - she didn't relish it one little bit. She glanced at Harry, hoping that he'd offer to transform into his eagle Animagus and give her a lift, but she didn't really relish that either, thinking back to the terror and helplessness she'd felt when Harry attacked the Death Eaters in the Egyptian desert.

Harry glanced at his girlfriend and smiled wryly at the expression on her face. He knew what was going through her mind, of course, and reached out to hold her hand. 'I promise I won't act like a meteorite this time,' he sent his thoughts to her, 'and it's a lot more comfortable sitting on feathers than on a piece of wood.'

Hermione grinned feebly at Harry and nodded, sending her acceptance of his offer across the telepathic link.

They all turned when Oliver walked through the trees that lined the riverbank and called to them. "All clear. We can make a start now."

Sirius, Charlie, Remus and Ceri quickly followed behind Oliver and walked over to choose their broomstick. Katie and Nadine lagged behind, whispering furiously to each other.

"Have you spoken to him yet?" asked Nadine.

"I haven't had chance," Katie whispered back. "Have you said anything to Ceri?"

Nadine shook her head. "Not yet. I want you to speak to your father first."

"Why can't they see how they feel about each other?" hissed Katie. "I feel a bit strange having to tell dad that someone's in love with him."

"We've already talked about this, Katie. Your father won't make a move because he thinks you'll be upset, and Ceri won't do anything for the same reason. So it's down to you to make them see sense. You... you're ok with this aren't you? You don't feel any resentment towards Ceri?"

"Of course I don't Nadine. No one will be more pleased than me if they get together."

Nadine breathed a sigh of relief, but then looked up when Sirius called for them to get ready. They walked over to the rest of the group and picked up two of the broomsticks from the four that still lay on the ground.

"We'd better hide those other two," said Harry. "Hermione wants a lift on my back."

Katie frowned, wondering what Harry meant, then she thought back to what her father had said during the summer - she'd forgotten all about asking Harry if he took his Firebolt with him on the quests. She gasped, staring wide-eyed at her cousin as he transformed into his golden eagle form.

"So *that's* what he meant," she breathed, looking at the magnificent eagle before her.

Hermione climbed nervously onto his back and held on tight, hugging her arms around Harry's neck. Harry screeched and turned his head to stare pointedly at his girlfriend.

"Sorry," she whispered as she relaxed her grip slightly.

"Now before we take off," said Sirius, "make sure that you all fly as close to the ground as possible - we don't want to invite any unwanted attention. Remus and Ginny will take the lead - they've studied the relief maps of the area and they'll be able to point the way if we come to any branches in the river."

Ginny held up her map and waved it towards the others.

"And this is not a race," said Ceri, "so take your time - we don't want anyone to become detached from the main group. Ready?"

Remus and Ginny kicked off from the ground and hovered for a few moments while the others became airborne, then they pointed their brooms up river and flew fairly slowly, low above the river bank, heading up stream. "Next stop Dilmun - the Garden of Eden," Ginny shouted, grinning back at the others.

They flew for several miles through the foothills of Mount Sahand before the river swung slightly to the left. The twin peaks were now obscured by the southernmost summit in the

Sahand range, Cham Dagh, and the terrain started to get rougher and steeper. The river raged below them as it fell through a series of rapids and waterfalls and they had to gain height to avoid getting wet from the spray as the river banks gave way to steep-sided ravines.

The river then swung around to the right, skirting the northern flank of Cham Dagh, and they entered a series of long, but quite narrow and steep mountain valleys. For the most part, Remus and Ginny had no difficulty in sticking to the main river, although at one point they had to consult the map before taking the left branch when they came to a fork where the river was joined by a large tributary running down from the eastern flank of the mountain range.

After about twenty-five miles of flying, they rounded a steep-sided spur and paused as they gazed with appreciation at the sight before them. High above were the twin peaks of Mount Sahand, resplendent as the sun reflected from the snow-covered summit.

Harry sent his thoughts to Hermione, 'It's beautiful, isn't it?'

'I'm sure it is Harry,' she thought back. 'But I'm not opening my eyes to look.'

The river still raged below them, but they couldn't yet see where the source of it was. But they knew they were on the right track - the river pointed directly at the base of the mountain, between the twin peaks.

On they flew, more slowly now as they neared their goal, and again had to gain height when the river twisted and turned through some very narrow gullies. Suddenly, Remus stopped and turned back to call to the others, pointing at something up ahead. "There it is! I can see where the river comes out of the bottom of the mountain."

They all flew towards the spot where Remus was pointing and soon they could all see the gaping hole, the river falling in a cascade from the outlet that sat about twenty feet above the surrounding terrain.

Harry hovered close to the opening and gazed inside, sending his thoughts to Hermione, who had finally relented and opened her eyes, and then he flew back to the others, knowing that Hermione wouldn't be heard above the roar of the falls even if she shouted.

"There's a rough sort of platform above the river just inside the opening," she shouted. "But we can't see what lies beyond it. There's only enough room for about four of us on it though."

"Shouldn't we look around the area first?" shouted Katie. "The tablet didn't say that the tunnel started at the exact spot where the river comes out of the mountain, it might be somewhere close by."

Sirius nodded. "You might be right Katie. Let's spread out and check for any other openings."

They flew close to the ground, half of them to the left and half to the right, looking for any other possible places where the tunnel through the mountain could be located, and Charlie dropped to the ground, looking at a cave some fifty yards from the river. He got off his broom and waited for Nadine to join him before they both walked slowly inside, raising their illuminated wands. Ron, Ginny and Ceri hovered above the spot, waiting for the pair to re-emerge.

"Nothing," shouted Charlie. "It's just a cave that doesn't go anywhere."

They resumed the search, flying until they were about two hundred yards from the point where the river came from the mountain, and where the high cliffs swung around leading back down the valley. "Let's go back," shouted Ceri. "There's nothing down this way."

They flew back and joined the rest of the group, who were hovering back at the source of the river. "Nothing up that way," shouted Sirius.

"Well it must be here then," said Ceri. "Four of us had better check it out to make sure that there's enough space to walk inside before the rest follow."

Sirius, Charlie, Oliver and Remus flew slowly down to the opening while the others hovered a little way above. Oliver landed first, being careful to avoid the torrent that boiled out of the cavity, easing his way slowly down until his feet touched the rocky ground. He walked a short way inside to allow Sirius to follow, and they were soon joined by Charlie and Remus. They lit their wands and stepped cautiously into the tunnel, wincing at the thunderous roar of the water that flowed swiftly under the ledge on which they found themselves.

They walked in for about fifty yards before they came to a branch in the tunnel, the river issuing from the right-hand branch and the dry tunnel leading to the left. They peered inside and saw that it was roughly circular in shape, with jagged pieces of larval rock jutting from both sides and ceiling. It was about six feet wide and eight feet high.

"This is the way to go, I think," said Sirius. "At least there's enough of a gap to avoid getting brained by those jutting rocks. Can you call for the others to join us Charlie?"

Charlie walked back to the opening and waved for the rest of the group to land. Harry had a bit of difficulty fitting his wingspan inside the cavity while keeping his legs on the small platform, and had to extend his claws to grip the rocky floor to prevent both himself and Hermione falling into the river. Hermione shrieked as she tottered sideways on the eagle's back but Charlie leaned forward and grabbed her around the waist to pull her to the safety of the platform.

Harry transformed and breathed deeply. "That was a bit scary. Are you ok, Hermione?"

Hermione nodded, and looked gratefully up at Charlie.

When the group was gathered together at the start of the tunnel, Sirius held up his hand to attract everyone's attention, and he had to shout above the roar of the water to make himself heard. "This tunnel must have been formed millions of years ago. It looks as if it was shaped by the flow of molten larva back when the volcano was active. There's no way these five kids are going in on their own, so we'll keep to our usual formation. You come with me at the front, Remus, while Ceri, Nadine and Charlie take the rear. Oliver, will you and Katie scout on ahead? Not that I think there'll be any Death Eaters waiting for us, but you never know what we'll come up against in this sort of environment. We'd better leave our brooms here."

Oliver and Katie nodded, and then gazed at Ron, who voiced the concern he'd been feeling ever since they came to the source of the river. "Watch out for scorpions," he shouted. "Gilgamesh said that scorpions guarded the route into Eden."

"Bugger off Ron," said Charlie, a bit nervously. "You find scorpions in the desert, not in these cold mountains."

"I didn't say they were normal scorpions Charlie," he replied. "Just... just keep an eye out for anything unusual."

They all pulled their robes close around themselves, feeling the cold breeze for the first time as it blew gently from the tunnel ahead. In the excitement of the precarious landing and the discovery of the route, they hadn't really noticed how cold it was, but Ron's warning sent a chill through them, not all of it attributable to the cold mountain air.

Oliver and Katie walked into the tunnel, gazing around at the jagged walls and ceiling as they went. The floor had, thankfully, been worn smooth by the passage of the larva all those years ago, but there were still some rocks and rough spots on its dark surface to catch the unwary walker. The rest of the group followed about fifty yards behind.

Ron could see the wand-light from Oliver and Katie as they walked ahead, reflecting eerily from the minerals and quartz deposits that studded the tunnel walls. At Margot's warning, he glanced at the floor and stepped around a large rock pool formed by rainwater dripping from the ceiling, but stopped suddenly when he saw something glittering in the shallow depths. He bent down and reached into the water to retrieve four small shining spherical objects. He held them in the palm of his hand and brought his wand close to study them.

He gasped, "Pearls! I've just found four pearls - I'm rich!"

Everyone gathered round and looked at Ron's find, but Remus, grinning sadly, caught hold of his shoulder and uttered the dreaded words, "They're just cave pearls Ron. They're formed by calcite deposits in the water percolating down through the mountain - they're not worth anything, I'm afraid."

Ron stared at Remus and then sadly back at the pearls. "Oh well, I was rich for a couple of minutes, anyway."

"Never mind Ron, you've got me," whispered Margot. "And I'm worth more than a few old pearls aren't I?"

Ron let the pearls drop back into the pool and wiped his hand on his robes, gazing fondly into Margot's sparkling eyes. "Course you are, Margot."

On they walked into the bowels of the mountain, following the light from the wands that shone dimly up ahead. The tunnel was fairly straight, although it bent first to the left and then to the right in various places, and became narrower and then wider, but it followed the same general direction.

"Which way are we going?" asked Ginny.

Harry placed his wand on the palm of his hand and said the spell that set the wand up as a compass. "The general direction seems to be slightly north of west," he said.

Ginny thought for a few moments. "That's more or less towards Lake Urmia then."

"I think it's getting warmer," said Hermione, looking in front of her as she puffed out a breath of air. "My breath isn't condensing in the cold air any more."

"I think you're right," said Harry. None of them had noticed the gradual increase in temperature up to now.

Sirius looked intently ahead and held up his arm to halt everyone. "Stay here, Oliver and Katie have stopped. I'll go to see what the problem is."

A few minutes later he shouted back down the tunnel, his voice echoing eerily in the gloom. "Come on - it's ok. There's a branch in the tunnel up here."

They all walked forward and joined the three, who were staring at the spot where the tunnel split into two different directions, one running off to the right and the other going more or less straight on.

"Any ideas?" asked Sirius. "What do you think Remus - you've done a bit of caving in your time."

Remus walked into both branches and studied the rock walls closely, and then he nodded and walked back to the rest of the group. "I think we go straight on - down the left-hand tunnel. The one to the right starts to rise up into the mountain a little way in, and it's obviously the same larval tunnel we've followed from the start, but the other one is definitely an old watercourse. What's happened here, I think, is that when the volcano erupted, the flow of larva came this way and dammed up what was once a river flowing to the other side of the mountain. Over time, the river found it's new course and flowed out to the other end of the mountain, joining up with the larva tunnel just before it came out of the base of the mountain."

"So why do you think the old river bed is the right way and not the larva tunnel?" asked Hermione.

"Because if we follow the larva flow back to its source we'll probably come to the seat of the ancient eruption, which is now quite likely high up in the middle of the mountain somewhere, and I doubt if we'll find a lush garden up there."

"Ok then," said Harry. "We take the left-hand branch."

"We're likely to find the going a lot tougher from here on in," said Remus. "There'll be a lot of loose rocks and gravel covering the old river bed, and we might come across a few tight squeezes."

Sirius nodded for Oliver and Katie to lead the way and then waited for a minute or two before leading the rest of the team into the new tunnel. The new environment soon became apparent as the temperature began to drop, but it still wasn't as cold as when they started their trek into the mountain. And the tunnel started to gradually descend, although not to any alarming extent. Progress was now a lot slower as they had to take a lot more care to find a secure footing among the many loose rocks and rubble that covered the floor.

"This reminds me of the labyrinth under the church in Rennes-le-Chateau," said Ron. "This is just like some of those tunnels we went through."

His friends nodded as they gazed at the strange rock formations. Ginny suddenly shrieked and jumped back to cling onto Charlie, staring fixedly at a spot high up to her right-hand side.

"What's the matter Ginny?" shouted Charlie, catching hold of his sister and holding his wand at the ready.

"Sorry Charlie," she whispered, giggling nervously as she stared at the wall. "It was a trick of the light reflecting off the rock wall. I was sure there was a horrible-looking devil up there poised to pounce on us."

They all laughed nervously - most of them had noticed how the light from their wands cast some weird shapes and shadows on the walls and ceiling of the tunnel.

"I nearly did what you just did, Ginny," said Nadine. "I could have sworn I saw Snape's face staring down at me a few yards back."

"That's worse than a hideous-looking devil, Nadine," quipped Ron.

The tunnel widened out into a beautiful gallery after another few hundred yards, the cave packed with columns formed by stalagmites and stalactites merging to form continuous formations from floor to ceiling. Then it narrowed once more, and in places it became so narrow that they had to ease their way sideways through the cramped space, breathing in sharply to force their way through the narrowest spots.

They had to scramble over several breakdown areas - places where the tunnel ceiling had partially collapsed to form an impenetrable mound of rubble on the floor, and in other areas they had to improvise to climb down several small chimneys - vertical tunnels only about two or three feet wide, where they had to wedge themselves into the space, their back against one wall and their knees against the opposite one, and ease themselves slowly down to where the old river bed once more sloped down at a more leisurely angle.

Ron suddenly shouted and jumped behind Margot, pointing his hand at the tunnel wall. "What the hell's that!"

Ceri rushed up and held her wand close to the spot, and then she laughed. "Ron! It's only a spider - look, it's a troglodyte!"

"A troglo what?" squeaked Ron.

"A troglodyte - it's a cave dweller. It's become adapted to living in the dark - look, it hasn't got any eyes; so don't worry - it can't see you."

"It might not be able to see me Ceri," he said, "but it knows I'm here - I'm sure it does. Its head is pointing right in my direction!"

They all laughed and Harry grabbed hold of his friend's arm and dragged him on down the tunnel, Ron still muttering, "What the hell does it find down here to eat anyway!"

Another hour and another two miles later, Ron came to another sudden stop.

"Another spider Ron?" grinned Ginny.

"No - it's about time we had a break for something to eat. I'm starving!"

Sirius grinned and called ahead for Oliver and Katie to join them, while Ceri and Nadine eased the rucksacks from their backs and started to hand out the packs of sandwiches and pasties.

They'd just finished eating and were sipping hot cups of tea when it was Nadine's turn to yell and jump up from the rock she was sitting on.

They looked to see movement at the base of the rock, and Oliver held his wand close.

"There you are - I told you, didn't I!" exclaimed Ron. Two rather large and milky-white scorpions were crawling slowly over the ground towards a few crumbs that Nadine had dropped.

"Troglydtes again," said Ceri. "They haven't got any eyes."

"Eyes or no eyes," breathed Nadine, "I still don't like them. And anyway, if they haven't got any eyes, how do they know those crumbs are there?"

"They either heard them dropping or they can smell them," said Remus.

"Have they got a poisonous sting like normal scorpions?" asked Ginny.

"I really don't know," said Remus.

"Well come on then, let's get going," said Nadine. "I don't want to hang about here to prove that one way or the other."

Over the next mile, the riverbed started to dip down more steeply and walking became even more difficult. "How much longer do you think this goes on for?" asked Ron, a pained expression on his face.

"Well I'd guess we've covered about ten miles in total," said Sirius. "And since the ground's starting to angle down a bit more, I'd say we aren't that far from coming out at the other end of the mountain. What do you think Remus?"

Remus nodded. "I agree. Underground rivers often dip down at an angle just before they emerge into the open - something to do with the rock being a bit softer towards the outside of the mountains I think."

After another mile, Sirius again held up his hand to signal a stop. "Oliver and Katie are coming back - and they're not hanging about either! You'd all better take cover just in case!"

Sirius walked on a few paces to meet the pair as they came, panting with the effort, towards his position. "There's something very strange back there," said Oliver.

Katie continued, "We could see a glow from up ahead and we thought it was the tunnel emerging into the open, but when we went around the left-hand bend it wasn't that at all."

Oliver took up the story, giving Katie a chance to get her breath. "Well, it was and it wasn't. We could see the light where the tunnel ends, but there was something else there that gave off the glow. We couldn't quite make out what it was, but when it started to move towards us we didn't hang about - we hot-footed it back here."

"One thing is certain though," said Katie. "It was no Death Eater, and it wasn't any sort of animal either - at least none that I'm aware of."

"Did it look like a big scorpion Katie?" asked Ron, thinking it might be the guardians of Eden.

Katie shook her head. "No - and it was only one of them."

They all looked into the darkness ahead but whatever had been at the tunnel exit certainly hadn't followed them back into the tunnel.

"What are we going to do?" asked Nadine.

"We go on," said Harry, reaching out to hold Hermione's hand as he gazed into her hazel-brown eyes. "We haven't come this far just to give up. Whatever it is, we'll meet it face on."

"Hang about Harry," said Sirius. "Whatever it is might be too dangerous to face head on - even with your powers."

Hermione smiled at Sirius. "Don't worry, we've got a feeling about this - I don't think there's any danger."

Sirius stared quizzically at the pair but didn't stop them when they got up and started walking down the tunnel. "Come on," he said to the others. "We'd better stay with them in case they need some help."

They all walked slowly down the rough riverbed, which had levelled off over the last few hundred yards, and stared intently ahead as the first few signs of light came into view around a left-hand bend. Harry and Hermione didn't stop when they came to the bend - they walked around it, keeping to the centre of the tunnel, and then stopped.

Ron, Ginny and Margot made to follow them but Oliver and Sirius held them back. "Not yet," said Sirius. "Let's see what happens first."

They all stretched their necks around the corner to see what their two friends were staring at and gasped - there, at the very exit of the tunnel, was an object that glowed with such brilliance they had to shield their eyes. Harry and Hermione, however, wore expressions of awe and smiled slightly, exchanging their thoughts and feelings at an incredible rate as they watched the object approach them. The way it approached, however, didn't give the impression of it being aggressive in any way.

As it came to within five yards of the pair, it stopped, moving from side to side as if it were assessing their intentions.

Harry and Hermione lifted their free arms and held their palms towards the flaming sword, which just hung suspended in the air before them. They sent their joint thoughts towards the sword, choosing a form of words that they thought the guardian would best understand.

'Greetings, great protector of Eden. We are the Anima Summas and have been guided here by mighty Enki in the hope of gaining great knowledge to help us in the conflict with the Dark Side. We request that you grant us and our helpers passage into the Garden so that we may seek enlightenment.'

The sword continued to hover in front of them, and then they heard its reply, the thoughts appearing as clear as crystal in their joint consciousness. 'It has been long since anyone came this way. You are the first since the Anima Summas of more than fifteen hundred years ago. They too came with their helpers, and like you will soon find, they saw that the ancient Nibiru have long departed this place. But what they sought they must have found, for I still shine. It is only when the battle with the Dark is lost that I will lose my lustre and fade from the memories of man. Then, I fear, what I guard will be lost. The myth that still burns bright in the annals of the progeny of the Nibiru will then be no more. All hope for a return to the great times will be forfeit and another, much darker place will rise to fill the minds of the remaining ones. So yes, you have my blessing to proceed into the Garden.'

'If the Nibiru have gone, why do you still guard this place?'

'Because it is filled with magic. The great works that were conceived here live on in the very rock, the very earth and clay. It has great powers still, and exerts an aura that enhances the Light body. You will experience this, and you will know what you must do.'

The glowing sword moved back towards the tunnel exit and stood to one side, inviting the passage of the Anima Summas and their helpers. Still holding hands, Harry and Hermione turned and gestured for the others to join them as they started down the tunnel, and towards the entrance into the Garden of Eden.

Lord Voldemort stood at the back of his cave, facing Crabbe and Ahmed at the opposite end of the table. At the centre of the table was the parchment that bore the encrypted spells that would, once decoded, activate the Disc of Gates. At each of the four corners of the parchment lay a ritual object, brought from Ahmed's home by Travis a few hours ago.

After much debate, Voldemort, Crabbe and Ahmed had agreed on the best way to enact the ritual depicted on the walls in the secret chamber of Seth, using the hints given in the Necronomicon.

Voldemort nodded for Crabbe and Ahmed to begin the chanting phase of the ritual, building the Dark forces that would act on the cipher cloaking the spells on the parchment. Voldemort used the time to breath deeply and slowly build his power. He grinned as he felt his mind fill with energy.

When it was time, he extended his arms over the table and pointed his wand at the parchment.

"PETEKH NAHET." A dark light flowed from his wand and covered the parchment causing it to glow with a silvery light.

"PETEKH TANEJ." The beam of light turned darker, causing the silvery glow to dance about above the writing on the parchment.

"*SHAJ DAREF*". The glow slowly descended onto the parchment and mingled with the script.

Voldemort and the other two stood back from the table and watched anxiously as the battle to unscramble the spells was engaged. For ten minutes the battle raged, the glow rising from the parchment as if repelled by a hidden force and then descending once more to resume the battle.

Then, the strange words rose slowly into the air, shimmered as the encryption spell fought to retain its hold, and then started to move, changing their shapes as they rearranged themselves. Then they slowly settled back onto the page, merged with the parchment, and the glow faded.

Voldemort walked back to the table and saw that the script was now different, but he still couldn't read it. He gestured for Ahmed to look at the results of their ritual and stood back as the Arab peered at the page and started to clap his hands with glee.

"It's Egyptian hieroglyphics, my Lord," he cackled. "I can read this!"

Voldemort sighed with relief and waited for Ahmed to transcribe the hieroglyphics onto a separate piece of parchment.

"Well?" hissed Voldemort impatiently. "What does it say?"

"There are basically two types of spells here, my Lord," said Ahmed. "The first one stands on its own, and is clearly used to activate the Disk of Gates ready for use to open the gate to the Dark Realm. Then there is another set of spells - about six of them. These seem to activate the Disc ready for spells of destruction."

"How do I use them?" asked Voldemort. "Do I have to say the spells using the Egyptian words?"

Ahmed nodded. "Yes my Lord. I'll write down the spells in English and how they should be spoken using the hieroglyphics. Then I'll tell you how to pronounce the words."

"Excellent," breathed Voldemort. "Let's get started!"

An hour later, Voldemort breathed deeply, savouring the moment when he'd activate the Disc. He tried to decide where he would strike first - would it be in this country or America? He thought long and hard and then decided that he'd give a little demonstration to his homeland first. Then, after he'd shown his power to the people in America, he'd embark on his primary task - eliminating the Anima Summas. He looked once more at the final spell on the parchment, having already decided to reserve it for Potter and Granger. He visualised how the spell might look as it hit the pair - but he could only speculate. He knew the result of it, however - it would slowly suck out their souls and transport them back to the Dark Realm, where the denizens of that place would feast on their agony. He chuckled as he realised that he could now do that without having to summon the she devil, and would be able to stay to observe the expressions on their faces as they realised the horror to which they were being consigned.

"Lucius," he shouted to the front of the cave. "Summon the inner circle. I want them here first thing in the morning to help me plan my first strike."

Harry and Hermione led the way past the shining sword and stood at the exit from the tunnel under the mountain, looking with awe at the beauty below. There, in a broad valley basin surrounded by high peaks, was fabled Dilmun - the Garden of Eden. It stretched for about a mile and a half from end to end, and was about a mile wide, measuring from where the bases of the surrounding mountains met the ground.

The sun was still just visible above the mountains and it bathed the far end of the Garden to their right-hand side in a yellow glow, contrasting with the shadows that had fallen on the rest of it. They watched as the line that marked the edge of the shadows crept slowly over the ground, squeezing the brightly lit segment ever smaller.

The floor of the valley was covered in lush vegetation. There were luxurious green meadows covered in brightly coloured flowers, areas where trees were still covered in green foliage of various hues, channels that carried water from several points higher up the slopes to irrigate the reddish-coloured earth and right at the centre, surrounded by green meadow, stood two exceptionally large trees, their regal branches spreading out over a large area. They stood majestically in the centre of the valley looking over the rest of the garden as if they were the focus of it all.

"Wow!" breathed Ginny as she looked over Harry's shoulder. "It's beautiful."

"It's exactly as I saw it in the crystal ball," whispered Margot.

"Can you see any jewels yet?" asked Ron, craning his neck to look down at the ground below.

"No Ron," said Hermione. "Except for the jewel that is the Garden itself."

Everyone stood and looked for a few minutes, savouring the realisation that they were looking at a place that only a few days ago they had thought was pure myth.

"Mon Dieu," breathed Nadine. "I never thought that it was a real place. The bible says that the Archangel Michael, holding a fiery sword, guards the Garden of Eden. Do you think that this sword is him?"

"Who knows," whispered Charlie. "It doesn't seem to need anybody to wield it though, so you could be right."

"It's probably been enchanted by the ancient ones who lived here to carry out its guardian duties," said Hermione.

"But how long ago was that?" asked Remus. "The power needed to keep the enchantment active for this length of time must have been immense!"

Ceri suddenly let out a loud exclamation as she gazed at the beautiful place, "That's it!"

"What!" said Sirius, looking at her quizzically.

"For the last few minutes, ever since we saw this place, something's been niggling at the back of my mind. And now it's just struck me what it is. This place, those gardens and fields,

they're... they're all so beautiful and perfect - too perfect. If no one's been here for thousands and thousands of years, why isn't it completely overgrown like a jungle? Who's here to keep it in such a perfect state?"

Everyone stared at Ceri and then looked back down into the valley. There was no sign of any movement, no sign of anyone down below at all.

"Well that beats me," said Ron. "Maybe whoever's doing this is in another part of the valley having his tea or something."

Nadine had a strange look on her face. "I don't think so Ron. I... I can feel something incredible. The longer I stand here, the more that feeling is growing - I... I think it's coming from the garden itself, a feeling of incredible psychic power, as if the plants themselves are exuding a magical aura. I think, perhaps, that the Garden is tending to itself."

Hermione nodded. "That makes sense Nadine. First the sword, able to move under some magical charm set eons ago, and now the wonderfully tended gardens. I think that whoever lived here must have had incredible powers."

"Can you see a way down from here Harry?" asked Ceri.

"There's a path running alongside the dry river bed that goes down to the middle of the valley," he replied. "And there's a few stone steps from here leading down to the path - it starts only about ten feet below us."

"Come on then," said Sirius brightly. "Let's sample the delights of the Garden of Eden."

He led the way down the steps and stood on the path, gazing up at the surrounding mountains. "No wonder this place hasn't been found before. Anyone standing outside this valley would have no idea that such a place existed within the heart of the mountains."

As they moved further down the gentle slope towards the centre of the garden, Katie suddenly exclaimed, "Look up there!"

They all followed the line of her pointing arm and saw a flat area towards the top end of the valley, a plateau raised about fifty feet above it, on which stood a number of structures.

"I've never seen buildings like that before," said Remus, shaking his head with wonder. "I can't think of anywhere else in the world that has that sort of architecture. I wonder who built them?"

"We can go there later," said Hermione. "I want to take a closer look at those two trees first - I've got a funny feeling about what they may be."

Hermione held onto Harry's hand as she led the way along the path, which soon joined one of the streams that bubbled down from the mountain and irrigated the land. They followed the path with the stream running alongside as it entered one of the beautiful meadows and they gasped as the heady fragrance from the many flowers filled their senses. Hermione closed her eyes as she was filled with a wonderful sense of well-being. She felt as if she were part of this place - at one with nature.

Margot, who was walking alongside Harry and Hermione, turned to the pair and whispered, "The ambiance of this place is incredible."

"It's the magic of Eden," breathed Hermione. The sound of the water gurgling over the stones at the bottom of the stream sounded like laughter, as if it was feeling the excitement of flowing into such a wondrous place.

Everyone stopped and turned when they heard laughter coming from behind them - but it wasn't the stream laughing - it was Ron. He was kneeling on the edge of the stream, gazing down into the water and pointing. "Look! Come and see what I've found!"

They all gathered around the excited Ron as he pulled the sleeves of his robes further up his arm and stretched his hand into the water. He pulled his closed hand back out and slowly opened it, smiling widely as he gazed at the four small gold nuggets he held.

"See!" he exclaimed. "I knew there'd be treasure in this place."

They all looked at the nuggets and then peered intently into the stream. "There's a lot more of them here," said Remus.

"And here," said Charlie. "The bed of the stream is absolutely covered with them. There's a fortune here!"

"I think you should put them back Ron," said Hermione quietly, looking sadly at her excited friend. "I've got a feeling that nothing should be taken from the Garden. It should be left exactly as it is in case the balance is disturbed."

Ron looked from Hermione to the others, and saw that most of them were nodding solemnly. "I agree with Hermione," said Nadine. "To take something from this land would be to desecrate it."

Margot walked up to Ron and bent down beside him, placing her hand on his arm. "They're right Ron - can't you feel it too?"

Ron looked sadly down at the gold in his hand and slowly nodded. Then he held his hand over the water and let the nuggets drop back into the flow. He stood back up and managed to put a stoical expression on his face. "That's twice I was nearly rich. At least I'll have a few good stories to tell Dad when I see him next."

Margot leaned close and kissed him softly on the lips, then caught his hand and pulled him to the front of the group to walk beside Harry, Hermione and Ginny. They walked on towards the centre of the valley as the sun sank ever lower in the sky. The brightly-lit segment of light had now reached the furthest end of the valley and was starting to climb up the mountain. Suddenly, a bright burst of light sprung from the mountain slope, lighting up the whole garden as it was bathed in the reflected radiance.

"The sun's rays must be hitting some sort of quartz deposit in the wall of the mountain," said Sirius. "The sun is so low now that it must be hitting it at just the right angle to cause this effect."

"What's that?" asked Ginny, turning her head to the side, listening intently.

They could all hear it now - very faint music. But not ordinary music - it was exhilarating and uplifting and it sounded like nothing they'd heard before. No known musical instrument could have produced such delicate tones.

"Where's it coming from?" asked Ceri, turning her head from side to side to try to pick up a direction where it was loudest.

"I wonder if this is what sustains the plants in the Garden," said Margot. "You know - a bit like talking to a house plant to encourage it to grow strong and healthy."

They walked further towards the two large trees at the centre of the valley, and the music became more distinct. They approached the first tree and looked up at the strange, bulbous milky-white fruit hanging from its branches. The fruit shimmered in the reflected light and was vibrating almost imperceptibly.

"I think that white fruit is making the music," said Nadine.

Hermione was staring wide-eyed at the tree and the vibrating fruit, her mouth slightly open.

"What is it Hermione?" asked Harry.

"These two trees," she replied softly. "I think they're the ones spoken about in the bible. I think that this one is the Tree of Life and the other one is the Tree of Knowledge."

"What makes you think that?" asked Remus, intrigued.

"I thought that's what they were when I first spotted them from the tunnel," she replied. "But now I'm sure. I think Margot's right - the music from this tree is bringing life to the plants in the whole Garden."

"I wonder if it's these fruits they use to make that white powdery stuff," said Ron. "You know - that Shewbread."

"Maybe Ron," said Hermione. "Perhaps we'll find out more when we look in those buildings at the other end of the valley."

"The ground below the tree is littered with the fallen fruit," said Ginny, pointing. "You can see that some of it fell a while ago - it seems as if it's being re-absorbed into the ground."

They walked past the first tree and approached the second. It was slightly taller and wider than its companion, and the fruit it bore was also different. The fruit was smaller and rounder - much like apples.

"What makes you think this is the Tree of Knowledge?" asked Remus.

Hermione shook her head slowly. "I don't know how - but I just know that's what it is."

"If you think this is the Tree of Knowledge," said Ron, grinning slyly, "shouldn't you eat some of that fruit? Just think what you might learn!"

Hermione grinned and turned to look at Ron. "Stop playing the snake Ron! My name's not Eve."

Ron stared at his friend blankly for a few moments, then it dawned on him what she was getting at. "Oh yeah! Sorry Hermione."

"Let's take a look at those buildings," said Harry. "Don't forget that we came here to find ancient wizarding knowledge and the one last spell that will help us - and we might find it up on that plateau. This may be the end of the final quest."

Hermione stared at Harry. "Up there might be the source of magic - where wizard-kind first started."

"I don't think it's there," said Ginny.

"Why not?" asked Ron, as the others turned to stare at Ginny.

"Because there's still only five of us," she replied quietly. "Thoth said there had to be six to complete the quest."

"If that's the case," said Margot, "we'll have to search back further in time than the Garden of Eden! I didn't think there was a time before that!"

"Well whatever it is," said Harry, "we'll probably find some answers in those buildings. Come on, let's go before it gets too dark to see where we're going."

Sirius looked up at the darkening sky and frowned. "It's getting dark already," he said. "We'd better get a move on."

They turned and started walking quickly to the left-hand end of the valley and the plateau on which the buildings stood. By the time they reached the base of the plateau, the reflected light had disappeared and the music had stopped. The valley was shrouded in deep twilight as they climbed the gentle slope and stood at the top, looking at five buildings standing side by side along the length of the plateau. The building at the centre was the largest of the five - it was three storeys high and five windows stretched to either end of the large, ornate doorway.

"Let's try this one first," said Hermione, walking towards the door.

"Just one minute," said Ron. "Do any of you realise how long ago we last ate? I'm not exploring any of these buildings until I get something inside me."

They all suddenly realised how hungry they were - the excitement of being in the Garden of Eden had banished all thoughts of food from their minds.

By the time they'd finished eating, night had fallen and it was quite dark. "I don't think it's a good idea to poke about in those buildings in the dark," said Ceri. "Perhaps we should set up camp for the night and look around in the morning."

"That might be a good..." started Sirius, and then looked up as the valley was once more bathed in light.

"What!" gasped Remus.

"It's the moon and stars!" exclaimed Oliver. "Look - the quartz deposits all around the mountains are glowing. It's almost like daylight!"

The valley was now bathed in a silvery radiance, similar to one of those cold, crisp winter nights back at Hogwarts when the full moon was at its height, causing the frosty landscape to sparkle.

"Well we might as well carry on then," said Sirius. "You may have to light our wands inside some of the more enclosed rooms though."

"Let's make a quick survey first," said Ginny. "We can just have a quick look to find out what's inside each of the buildings before we decide which is the best one to examine more closely first."

"Sounds like a good idea," said Harry. "Let's start with the one on the left."

"We'd better let you five do this alone," said Sirius. "Just shout if you need help with anything - and be careful - you don't know how old these structures are and they may be a bit the worse for wear."

Ron led the way to the first building, which turned out to be some sort of general workshop. Three large rooms filled the single-story structure, each containing a number of very large tables. Storage cupboards were ranged around the walls of each of the rooms. They could see nothing that may be of any help with the quest, however.

The second two-storey building was somewhat larger. There were ten fair-sized rooms on each floor, the top floor appearing to be scientific laboratories judging by the types of desk and storage cabinets. The rooms on the ground floor were clearly alchemical in nature. There was a large laboratory, two large workshops with kilns built into the back walls, and two large storage rooms, in which were a number of stone bins, similar to those they'd found on Mount Olympus. Ron couldn't resist taking a peek inside some of them, but they were empty.

They decided to leave the larger central building until last, and walked to the fourth one - another two-storey building - but they had no idea what it had been used for. It was completely empty.

The last structure turned out to be far bigger than it had first appeared. Unlike the others, it stretched back almost to the walls of the mountain behind, and was obviously the living quarters for whoever had inhabited the valley. There was enough room for several hundred people.

"Oh well, it's back to the middle one then," said Ron, leading the way.

He tried the door, which opened effortlessly and without any sort of creaking, and stepped into what must once have been a very grand entrance hall. Twin spiral staircases looped around each side of the hall, leading up to the first floor, and open archways led off into four very large ground floor chambers.

"This must have been the meeting chamber," said Ginny as she looked inside the first room on the left. Several rows of ornate benches faced a raised podium with four large chairs, thrones almost, facing them.

"Look at these," breathed Ginny, walking up to the far wall and lighting her wand to examine several large paintings. "They're landscapes - showing some very beautiful scenes, but they're obviously not from the Garden. These places are a lot bigger."

"Look in here," shouted Ron from the first right-hand room. "There're a few portraits hanging on the walls."

They all gazed up at the portraits, one showing a very old man in blue robes, sitting on what looked like one of the large chairs in the meeting chamber. A younger man stared out of the second portrait, again clothed in blue robes, but with a sterner expression on his face than the older man.

They all gasped when they looked at the final portrait.

"It's Thoth!" exclaimed Ron. "What's he doing here?"

"It's Enki," said Hermione. "This is where he must have lived before he became Thoth. At least we know we're on the right track now - he told us to find his previous existences, and this is obviously one of them."

"But what've we got to find?" asked Harry, looking puzzled. "Everywhere we've checked so far seems to be completely empty. Thoth and his mates certainly didn't leave much behind when they left."

"Whatever we've got to find must be here somewhere," said Margot. "We've just got to keep looking."

"Ron! Supper's ready!" shouted Nadine from outside.

"We can't have spent as much time as that exploring," gasped Hermione.

"Time flies when you're having fun," said Ron, grinning as he walked quickly out of the room.

"We might as well pack it in for the night," said Harry. "We can start again tomorrow."

The four followed Ron over to the tents that had been erected outside the central building, and sat around the magical flame that was heating a large pot of baked beans. Nadine and Ceri were toasting several slices of bread on the flames. "We didn't build a campfire like we normally do," said Ceri. "We didn't want to burn anything that's here."

Ron pulled a face. "Toast doesn't taste as nice when it's done on magical flames."

"Tough!" exclaimed Ginny. "If you don't want it, I'll have it!"

Ron scowled at his sister as he placed three pieces of toast onto his plate and started spooning beans all over them.

Everyone had a great night's sleep that night, helped by the special magical quality of the place where they slept. The magic of the place did, however, inspire Harry and Hermione to have another joint dream, and as before, Margot joined in with their subconscious meanderings.

"We saw Thoth reading his book again last night," Harry told everyone the following morning. "I think more of what's in the book is going to be revealed."

"Come on then," said Ginny, "make it appear."

Everyone sat expectantly on the ground outside the tents as Hermione reached out her hand to Harry. He caught it and they both closed their eyes, concentrating on materialising the book of Thoth. The surface of the grass in front of them started to shimmer, then the book appeared - but this time it wasn't in the form of a scroll, it was a dark red leather-bound book.

Hermione stared at it for a moment, then reached out and opened the cover to the first page to reveal the familiar hieroglyphic writing. She leafed through the rest of the pages and saw that all of them were covered in writing - apart from a few pages at the very back of the book.

"It's almost complete," she whispered, "apart from three or four pages at the end."

"Read it out," said Margot. "I'm dying to find out what it's all about."

"You read it Hermione," said Harry, smiling. "You always manage to create a sense of the drama when you read something new and mysterious."

"The title on the cover simply says 'The Book of Thoth'," she said, turning to the first page. "It's in three sections - the first gives his history, the second his wisdom and knowledge, but the last section is still hidden and it doesn't say here what it's about. I'll read the history section first..."

'This is the History of Thoth, also known as Enki of Nibiru...

'I was born in an ancient land that is no more. My life was happy and pleasant during my formative years, when magic was just a myth and the ways of the Dark unknown. There were no gods in those times - our only deity was the never-ending quest for knowledge and enlightenment. The pursuit of knowledge and wisdom became my aim, and I soon stood among the ranks of the learned at the Council of Science.

'I was part of the investigative team that made the great discovery. In pursuit of an ancient legend about a long-gone age, which spoke of great and mystical works, and following the directions that we were able to decode on an ancient map, we chanced upon a previously unknown city, hidden deep within the jungles of the land of Hintu.

'We entered a ruined temple of science that stood in the centre of that city and we made the discovery of the age - a treasure trove of alchemical knowledge and artefacts that would bring enlightenment to those who delved into its ancient depths. From the records of those long forgotten scientists, translated by the linguist in our team, it was clear that they were on the verge of a great breakthrough with their experiments into the very fabric of life itself.

'But they were halted right at the very edge of success. The misguided people of the city feared that a great evil would be let loose on the land should their scientists complete what they started, and rose up against them. The ruling body of the city sided with their people and imprisoned the scientists, and decreed that their work would be consigned to a forbidden corpus of occult knowledge. They determined that such works would never again be started and went to great lengths to ensure that aim. The city was abandoned and the population moved to a new one built on the site of what was to become the city of Hindabba, the capitol of Hintu. All records of the old city were purged from their history, but as is always the case with such things, legends were born and clues to the old location preserved on the map upon which we chanced.

'I was honoured to be placed at the head of the team which carried out the investigations into the works of those ancient scientists, and we soon came to understand their knowledge. They had fashioned a strange white powder from the fruit of a tree that abounded in their jungles. The bulbous milky-white fruit contained properties that seemed to defy the laws of atomic physics.'

"The tree of life!" exclaimed Remus. "The fruit he's describing is the same as we saw yesterday! Sorry, Hermione, please continue."

'But the white powder was inert and their efforts were directed at finding a way to activate the substance. They saw that if they could break down the structure of the powder into a monatomic form, they would produce a derivative that possessed wondrous properties, able to affect the ends of certain strands of the spiral of life, the building blocks of humanity that would later become known as DNA. Those strands controlled the aging process, and by subjecting them to the effects of the powder, they could extend life. But that was as far as they got with their research.

'The Council of Science charged me to continue with the research and for the next twenty years it became my life's work. With the help of my team - the best chemists and atomic scholars in the land - we came ever closer to solving the problem of activating the Shem-anna, for that is what it is properly called although we call it Ma-na for short. We retrieved the trees from around the ancient city and planted them in Nibiru, but it took a while to learn how to sustain them. We found that the basis of the powder was gold, made clear by our analysis of the fruit, so we had to plant the trees in soil that was impregnated with gold dust.

'The breakthrough came when we found that a certain type of quartz, when agitated by sunlight striking it at a particular angle, would emit a radiance at a frequency that would, in theory, make gold react to it. The quartz crystals grew in only a very few places in Nibiru, but we were able to obtain sufficient quantities to carry out the experiment. And it worked! When subjected to the radiance, the white powder started to react in a very peculiar way. At first it shimmered, then disappeared altogether for a few minutes, before once more materialising. When we analysed the results, we saw that the powder was now in a monatomic state - a state that was on the very boundary of matter and anti-matter.

'The next step, of course, was to work out how the powder could be applied. To that end, I and several volunteers from my team began to ingest very small quantities, daily over a period of time. After three months, the results were wonderful but unexpected. Our DNA had, indeed, been altered and the aging process had slowed gradually until it stopped altogether. But the unexpected side effects were amazing.

'We found that we were able to do certain things, things that were beyond normal humans. We were able to influence matter by the power of thought alone, and it was soon apparent that the stronger the mind, the stronger the effects. We also found that we could channel this energy far better by use of a wooden tool - a wand - and better still if the wand had the properties and dimensions tailored to the mind that wielded it.'

"The start of magic," breathed Margot. "The start of wizard-kind. That's how it all began."

Everyone looked at Margot and shared her sense of wonder. They were all awe-struck by the revelations contained in the Book of Thoth. "Carry on please, Hermione," whispered Nadine.

'But the third unexpected effect was perhaps the greatest. We soon found that we had become enhanced in a spiritual sense. We were able to see and understand things that had been hidden to us before. What we called our 'Light Bodies' became far more powerful to give us great spiritual awareness, and an urge to strive for improving the lot of humankind so that they too would experience the one-ness with the cosmic forces that abound beyond the perception of the normal human mind.'

'The High Council listened to our report and agreed that we should start a limited experiment, which would remain a secret from the population until the tested and proven results were confirmed. They called for volunteers from the most trusted members of the scientific community, and the trials began with a group of one hundred men and women.'

For six months, everything went well and our initial findings were being confirmed. But then something went wrong. Fifteen of the one hundred test subjects started to show some disturbing trends. They became secretive and formed their own little sub community within the larger group. They started to make demands that the experiment should be widened to include others of their own choosing. When we refused, they broke away and left the test site, taking with them enough refined ma-na and crystals to set up their own operation.

The High Council was outraged, and issued orders for the faction to be detained. But this proved to be an impossible task - the group was able to easily repel the best efforts of the law-enforcement services to capture them, using their magical powers, and they soon withdrew from sight. They set up an enclave in the remotest part of Nibiru and remained hidden, not to surface for another twenty years.

The focus of our experiment now shifted to a new goal. We were charged with finding out what caused one person to become a Light wizard but another a Dark wizard. More people were drawn into the experiment, with greater controls put in place to detect the first signs of darkness. But we were never to conclude why the effects were so different from one person to the next - we didn't have the time.

It is my personal belief that in all of us lie the seeds of Light and Dark. Deep within our very essence lies good and evil, and most of us are able to suppress the darkness, bringing our light side to the fore. But in some individuals the darkness is stronger, and is enhanced by the effects of ma-na.

There ensued a great debate among the ruling body on whether to continue the experiments. They feared what the Dark Wizards would do, yet could see that the benefits were also great for the majority of the people. It raged on for twenty years, but the debate was never resolved - they didn't have the time.

'For a time, we stopped taking the ma-na to see if the effects could be reversed and we soon started to age once more, but our magical powers remained with us. Many of the original test group left and married, some among their number and some with people in the larger 'normal' community. It became clear that the magical powers were passed on to their progeny, even when the genes were diluted with non-magical partners, and so we knew that what we had started would continue.

'Some of our number, myself included, resumed taking the ma-na, hoping that we could carry our knowledge for the benefit of future generations, but then things took a new turn.

'The attacks started. Devastating attacks that wiped out whole sections of the population. From the testimonies of the few survivors, it became apparent that the Dark Wizards were responsible, but they were being led by something very strange. Survivors spoke of giants with strange heads and faces, while others, their minds broken, raged about demons let loose on the land.

'From the few Dark Wizards we managed to capture, we learned that the original break-away group had carried out genetic experiments among themselves, hoping to create an elite of the Dark Side. But their experiments went horribly wrong - a mutant strain was produced that grew very quickly in both mind and body and the Darkness was uppermost in their makeup - they called them Nephilim. They soon took control of the Dark community, and embarked on a campaign of terror, feeding on the minds and souls of anyone who opposed them.

'The Land was in turmoil and the terror lasted for ten terrible years. In that time, I and the other wizards of Light worked closely with some of the foremost cosmic scientists who themselves had been working on a theory of alternate realities - realms that existed alongside ours. Between us, we were able to fashion a device that was capable of opening a portal between our reality and one in parallel. We found that the other realm was a dark and barren place, devoid of human and animal life. We determined to lure the Nephilim into a trap where we could open the gate and send them into that other realm. But our plan turned out to be a disaster.

'We underestimated the intelligence of the Nephilim. They may have looked like ogres with limited brain capacity, but they were far from that. They captured the device - the Disc of Gates we called it - and enhanced its capabilities to give it destructive powers. Then the terror increased tenfold. Led by their chief, whom they called Satani, the Nephilim laid waste to whole swathes of Nibiru, using the awful destructive power of the Disc of Gates.

'Then the Light side took a hand in the conflict. There arose the Anima Summas, servants of the Light charged with fighting the Dark Side and restoring order to the Earthly realm. It fell to my beloved wife, Ninhursag, and I to be the first Anima Summas and it was an awesome task that we undertook. Using a diversion created by our four trusted helpers we regained the Disc of Gates and in a terrible battle, we were able to banish the Nephilim to the parallel reality. But the price we paid was high.

'Ninhursag fell during that battle and moved from the Earthly realm to the realm of Light. With heavy heart, I strove to destroy the Disc of Gates, sealing the Nephilim in their Dark realm for the rest of time. But it could not be destroyed - the wicked ones had used their Dark Arts to sustain it against all efforts to remove it from the face of the Earth. I therefore hid it in the desert region of a far off place but, as I was later to find, a Dark Wizard followed my

movements and noted the hiding place. This knowledge was preserved for future generations of Dark Wizards.

'Then disaster struck the land, but not before it was foreseen by those of our kind who were adept at divining the future. Our warnings were ignored by the High Council, who regarded the visions of the seers as the ravings of twisted minds, brought about by their long exposure to ma-na. So it fell to the surviving magical community of Nibiru to seek out a place that would escape the worst of the destruction. We found that place in a remote mountainous land, in an enclosed valley, within the confines of Mount Mashu, which we called Dilmun and was later to become known as the Garden of Creation.

'There, we set up our community under the leadership of our chief scientist, Anu, with Enlil and I as his deputies. Enlil was charged with building cities to house the remnants of the surviving population, and I was charged with easing their torment and bringing civilisation once more to the land. There we awaited the dread time when the destruction would be upon us.

'The Earth heaved and our beloved Nibiru sank below the great ocean, leaving only the summits of the highest mountains dry. A great flood encompassed the whole Earth and continents shifted, but we remained safe in our valley, waiting for the time when we could begin our search for survivors. During that time, we fused the quartz crystals into the surrounding mountains where they would reflect the rays of the sinking sun onto the Garden, and we planted the Tree of Life and the means to sustain it for all time, together with the production processes to manufacture ma-na, for we knew that our task in raising humanity from the edge of extinction to a new civilisation would be long in the making. At that time, we were unaware of what fate befell the Dark Wizards that survived the conflict, but later events were to prove that some of them prevailed.

'The first civilisation we nurtured lay between the two great rivers, and we called it Ki-engir, later to be known as Sumer. From there, we moved to Egypt and once more raised that great land to the greatness it had achieved before the destruction. And so it went on, but we became fewer and fewer, most choosing to end their long lives and move into the Light, until the remnants of Nibiru moved out from the valley to join the new world order to give help and guidance. Some of them married and bore offspring, thus maintaining the magical seed that later spread throughout the world.

'At first, the magical ones were revered and welcomed, but fear and ignorance by some of the non-magical communities soon resulted in persecution of the magical ones and caused them to form their own communities away from the growing centres of population. It was my great hope that both communities would once more be reconciled, but that dream seems far away.

'Now, none of the original people of Nibiru remain in the land; just a very few who remain as spirits to guide the wise and just in times of strife. For the Darkness still abounds in the land. Such a time arose when the Dark Wizard Seth was able to retrieve the Disc of Gates and summon the Nephilim back to this realm. Under my guidance the Anima Summas, Osiris and Isis, prevailed at the great battle of Irem in the desert region. The Nephilim were banished once more and the city of pillars sunk below the desert sands. Again, the Anima Summas paid a great price - both were mortally wounded and were forced to depart the physical realm, but their spirits remained to help the Light, for they knew the time would come when the Dark once more raised its head to sniff at the Earth.

'Thus it came to pass that our great experiment had the unexpected, but welcome, outcome of sustaining civilisation. This history bears testimony for those that follow, so that their path is known.'

Everyone remained silent as Hermione finished reading the history of Thoth and slowly closed the book. They remained silent for several minutes, trying to absorb the information contained in the book. They were the first, since the original remnants of Nibiru, to know the true history of the world since those times, the first to discover how wizard-kind came into being - the source of magic.

Eventually, Charlie looked across at his friends. "Well if that doesn't beat everything! Who would have guessed?"

"So some of those new-age historians were right," said Hermione. "There was an elder civilisation that infused their ideas into the known world. And if the establishment would only open their eyes and take note of the discoveries that don't fit into their cushy little paradigm, they'd realise the truth too."

Harry smiled and reached out to hold her hand, squeezing it gently.

"Thoth was a great man," said Ginny. "He had incredible vision and tenacity to see this whole thing through."

"And he was the original Anima Summa," said Harry. "I wonder why he didn't tell us that in his secret chamber?"

"Perhaps the memory of losing his wife is still very painful to him, even after all this time," said Ceri, wiping a small tear from the side of her eye.

"I hate to bring this up," said Ron, his face suddenly going pale, "but being an Anima Summa seems to be a very dangerous occupation. First Thoth's wife, then Osiris and Isis. Does anyone know what happened to Merlin and Morgana after their stint at the job?"

Everyone shook their heads except Margot, who frowned as she looked towards Harry and Hermione and then back at her boyfriend. "You can be so tactless Ron!"

But Ron had only voiced what the rest of them were thinking - one or both of the Anima Summas had lost their lives in the final battle with the Dark Side, and they all feared for the safety of Harry and Hermione.

"The other thing that sent a shudder through me was the name of the leader of the Nephilim - Satani," said Ron. "That's Satan, isn't it? The devil himself!"

Remus nodded. "I'm afraid so. Once more, myth is shown to have a basis in reality."

"And the other myth that's been exposed as reality is the great flood!" exclaimed Nadine.

"Of course it was real," said Hermione. "There are too many flood myths from all over the world for it not to have been. But the thing that hits me is the symbolism of it. Instead of an ark there's this valley - the Garden of Eden - this is the true ark that preserved civilisation. And the stories of sending a raven and a dove out from the ark to see if the waters had receded

- they must have been the wizards and witches that scoured the land on their broomsticks looking for survivors. Then there's the bit about the ark coming to rest on a mountaintop, from where the Earth was re-populated - that's the Garden of Eden again! It seems that the religious writings of the world are just a tad fanciful in relating what has turned out to be reality - they just got the myths scrambled a bit - the Garden of Eden didn't come before the Ark - it was the Ark."

"I can't fault your reasoning Hermione," said Remus, grinning. "When this is all over, perhaps you should write the true history of the world."

"And be ridiculed for the rest of my life?" she replied, looking aghast. "I think not!"

"So what's next?" asked Ginny. "What about the rest of the book?"

Hermione glanced at the second section. "It seems to be a load of technical stuff - I think it mostly relates to the manufacturing process for ma-na - Shewbread."

"I don't think we'll find anything more in the Garden of Eden," said Harry. "I think we've found out what we need to know from Thoth's book."

"So why were we directed here?" asked Margot. "Thoth could have made that history available to us without bringing us here."

"I really have no idea," said Hermione. "Perhaps he thought we wouldn't believe unless we saw the Garden with our own eyes. But I know one thing - Thoth doesn't do anything without having a very good reason. I just wish I knew what it was."

"So we've got to find Nibiru," said Ginny. "It's where Thoth, Enki, first lived - his first existence. Has anybody heard of that place before?"

"Yes, I have," said Ron. "It was in one of those books about alternative Sumerian theology. The author said that Nibiru is the mysterious tenth planet in the solar system."

"What made him say that?" asked Margot.

"Mainly because the Sumerians knew so much about the solar system, and the texts saying that the gods 'came down to the Garden of Creation from above'."

"Well we know what that could mean," said Harry. "The Nibiru probably arrived in the valley on their broomsticks, and Nibiru is probably an ancient and forgotten land on the Earth."

"Of course it is Harry," said Hermione. "And it's obvious where we've got to go next."

Everyone looked at her and said in concert, "Where?"

"Thoth told us about a great civilisation that was destroyed when it sank beneath the ocean. There's only one place that I know of that fits the bill - Nibiru is Atlantis. We've got to find Atlantis next."

Chapter 5 - The Disc of Gates

The five youngsters relaxed in their usual seats by the fireside in Gryffindor common room. The weather had taken a turn for the worse at Hogwarts, and the sleet beat loudly against the window. They all felt pleasantly drowsy following the sumptuous dinner in the Great Hall that evening. They'd arrived back at the school that afternoon after their mind-bending experiences in the Garden of Eden, and had spent time before the meal relating to Dumbledore and the rest of his close advisors what had happened.

Snape had been suitably impressed - he even managed a few stunned exclamations, and little Professor Flitwick had been beside himself with excitement, jumping up from his seat more than once to pace around the room, muttering to himself while he absorbed the revelations.

The headmaster had been astounded, as had Professor McGonagall, and before they knew it, they began to re-evaluate the events throughout history, fitting them into the new discoveries and chronology as if they were pieces of a complicated jigsaw puzzle. Dumbledore had then ordered that they all take a well-earned break for the rest of the day, and the following day, to recharge their batteries before carrying on their research to find the location of fabled Atlantis.

But the five couldn't resist discussing what they'd learned as they lounged in front of the fire. "How do Adam and Eve fit into all this?" asked Ron.

"It's purely allegorical, Ron," replied Hermione. "It's just a metaphor for the re-creation, rather than the creation, of the human race. It's just symbolism for a new dawn and the rise of civilisation once more."

"I don't think the theologians see it in quite those terms," remarked Margot. "A lot of people actually believe, quite literally, what was written in the religious texts."

"Perhaps so," replied Hermione. "But don't forget that most of the creation stories from the great religions were based on the original Sumerian writings, and I'm sure that the original scribes wrote it symbolically so that the emerging culture could better understand what had happened. The Sumerians wrote about genetic experiments and seeding humanity with the powers of the 'gods'. Does that ring a bell to you?"

"Well yes," said Ginny, "but that's because we know what happened. But the bible didn't say anything about genetic experiments and seeding."

"No," replied Hermione, "but the Hebrews obviously adapted the Sumerian version for their own ends, and remember that most of the Old Testament was written around 600 to 500 BC after the Hebrews had been taken into captivity to Babylon. And they must have had sight of the Sumerian religious texts during that period. But Genesis does say that man was created in God's image - that could mean that they were seeded with magical powers."

"The bible does speak about the Nephilim though," said Harry. "We saw it when we read Genesis earlier in the year."

"That's right," said Hermione. "It called them 'the fallen ones'. I read in a commentary somewhere that the apocryphal book of Enoch says a lot more about the fallen angels."

"What does that mean?" asked Ron. "I don't remember there being a book of Enoch in the bible."

"That's because it wasn't included Ron," said Hermione. "What it contained didn't fit in with current theological thinking back then, even though it was a much revered religious tract around the time of Jesus. You see, back in the time of the Roman Emperor Constantine, the Christian church was divided between the teachings of the Jerusalem Church, that's the one that was headed by Jesus' brother, James, and the Pauline Church - those who followed the teachings of Saint Paul. That was back in about 325 AD, and Constantine wanted to bring an end to the divisions. The Pauline view won the day and the Gnostic part of the church was declared to be heretical. That was the time that they decided which of the religious tracts would be included in the bible. Enoch wasn't included because he spoke of angels who were not very... well, angelic. You see he spoke of angels marrying humans - ring a bell? That offended the current way of thinking, of course, so the book was omitted."

"So they had censorship even in those days!" said Ron.

"We're going to have to get a lot of books on Atlantis," said Harry. "There's probably hundreds and hundreds of them."

"And all giving a different location for Atlantis, no doubt," said Ginny.

"And you won't find anything written by the establishment on it," said Hermione. "They look on anyone who even mentions the word 'Atlantis' as a crank. That's why it's been left to the enlightened few to write about it, those brave souls who don't give a monkeys if they're shunned by the establishment."

"And we think that times have changed since the Synod of Nicene?" said Margot, reflectively.

"There's quite a bit about Atlantis in those new-age books I read," said Ron. "Perhaps we should start with those."

"This is probably going to be the most difficult part of the quest," said Ginny. "How are we going to find a land that disappeared below the ocean ages and ages ago?"

"I don't know, Ginny," answered Hermione. "But don't forget that the last few pages of the Book of Thoth are still blank. Perhaps we'll get directions when the book is complete."

"And all we can do until that happens is to try to find out as much as we can about where the researchers think Atlantis is," said Margot.

"I wonder when the sixth helper will contact us?" asked Ginny. "If finding Nibiru is the last leg of the quest, and it must be - remember that Thoth told us we had to go back to the start of wizard-kind - Nibiru - then he, or she, should make an appearance fairly soon, don't you think?"

"I can't understand why we haven't been contacted before now," said Harry. "But Thoth obviously knows what he's talking about, so we'll just have to wait."

"Do you think that when she, or he, eventually appears we'll know that it's the sixth helper?" asked Ron. "I mean; the person probably won't even know herself that she has to be part of the team."

"Or himself," said Ginny, frowning at her brother.

"Come on, we'd better get some sleep," said Hermione. "I know that Dumbledore told us to take the day off tomorrow, but I, for one, am going to start reading Ron's books first thing in the morning."

The following morning, Katie walked beside her father as they patrolled the edge of the Forbidden Forest. She kept glancing at him, trying to decide if this was a good time to talk to him about Ceri, and she felt nervous about broaching the subject.

"Uh Dad," she began. "What do you think of Ceri? She's a very nice lady isn't she?"

Sirius looked at his daughter long and hard, wondering why she seemed so nervous, and speculating that she may have picked up on his obvious attraction to the beautiful American. "Yes, she is," he said. "Why do you ask?"

"Well, you've both been living in each other's pockets for quite a while now, so I thought that you might be... well, sort of attached in other ways."

"Other ways? What do you mean, Katie?"

Katie groaned silently, well aware that this wasn't going to be easy. She stopped and turned towards him, deciding that attack was the best way forward. "Well, it's obvious how you feel about her, Dad. So when are you two going to see the light and get together?"

Sirius stood stunned for a few moments. "Is it that obvious? You... you don't mind?"

"Of course I don't mind," she replied, catching under his arm. "Mum died a long time ago, and it's about time you got a life."

Sirius looked across to the far end of the school grounds, where Ceri and Nadine were patrolling, and stared wistfully towards the subject of their conversation. Earlier that morning, Katie, Nadine, Charlie, Oliver and Remus had discussed the situation, and had decided that things had gone on long enough, and it was well overdue that Sirius and Ceri gave in to their feelings. Katie and Nadine had agreed that they would tackle each of them separately during the morning patrol.

"I... I've spoken to Katie about you and her father," said Nadine, glancing at Ceri.

"You've what?" she replied, looking panicky.

"I told her how you feel about him and... how he feels about you."

"What did she say?" asked Ceri, hurriedly, looking concerned as she stared at Sirius and his daughter walking at the far end of the grounds.

Nadine smiled. "She thought it was cute."

"Cute? What do you mean? She wasn't... upset at all?"

"Of course she wasn't. I told you, Katie's a very sensible girl, and there's nothing she'd like more than to see her father happy. She's talking to him about you right now."

"What?" The panic was now plain to see in her face.

"Oh, I think she's finished talking to him. Here he comes! I think I'd better see how she got on."

"No - don't go!" shouted Ceri. Her mind was in turmoil as she watched Nadine walk across the grass in the direction of Sirius, who was still striding purposefully towards her. She was caught in the depths of indecision, not knowing whether to run and hide somewhere, or stay where she stood to find out what Sirius really thought about her. She remained rooted to the spot.

As they passed, Nadine whispered to Sirius, seeing the determined look on his rugged features, "Be gentle with her - she's in a bit of a panic."

"She's not the only one," he whispered in reply.

As he got ever closer, Sirius' earlier determination started to wane. His stride faltered at the realisation that he had absolutely no idea what he was going to say. But all thoughts of composing a flowery speech were driven from his head when he got within five yards of her and saw the look in her eyes. He melted when he saw how vulnerable she looked, a vulnerability mixed with a tinge of panic and fear.

He slowly approached and reached out to her, drawing her close to him and gazing deep into her lovely eyes. "Ceri, I... I love you, you know. I think I always have."

Ceri couldn't suppress the sob that escaped from her lips, and it was her turn to reach up and pull Sirius tightly to her, the tears flowing freely as she rested her head on his shoulder and whispered, "Me too, Sirius."

"I can't believe this," said Sirius. "Why has it taken us so long?"

"Fear Sirius," breathed Ceri. "Fear of the unknown."

Sirius cupped the back of her head with his right hand and leaned forward to crush his lips against hers. All his pent-up emotion went into that kiss, and Ceri responded in kind.

Ginny let out a yell of delight as she saw the scene unfold before her as she watched from the window of Gryffindor common room. Nadine had earlier given her the wheeze that something was likely to happen at the edge of the Forbidden Forest that morning and Ginny had ignored all attempts by her friends to make her join in their research of Ron's books, waiting for the beautiful moment to arrive.

"Quick," she shouted, "you'd better come and see this."

"At last!" exclaimed Harry as he saw what was happening across the school grounds.

"Do you think they'll ever come up for breath?" grinned Ron, leaning over his sister.

"It's so sweet," said Margot, catching Ron's hand.

"I'm so happy for them," breathed Hermione, wiping a small tear from the corner of her eye. "I thought it would never happen."

"Do you think we should go down to speak to them?" asked Harry.

Ginny shook her head. "No, not yet. They've got a lot to catch up on."

Katie and Nadine hugged each other when they saw what was happening. A little earlier, they'd stood frozen to the spot, fearful that their plan would somehow backfire, but now they knew that it had worked.

"No regrets?" asked Nadine.

"None at all," Katie replied. "Look at them - how can I regret what they just found."

When Sirius and Ceri walked up to the school some time later, they were mobbed by all their friends. They grinned self-consciously as they accepted their congratulations, and felt a great relief that the people who were closest to them were genuinely happy for them.

Lord Voldemort gazed along the double row of Death Eaters standing before him outside his cave. They were the Dark Guard, now the elite in Voldemort's army following the disappearance of Alvis Grimwald and his men, and at their front stood his inner circle. He held the Disc of Gates up in front of them so that all could see it. "The time has come. The spells have been revealed and the ancient talisman is now under my control."

The Death Eaters roared their approval.

"In two days, we show the world what we are capable of. I plan to demonstrate my power both here and in America. And when they have seen, they will capitulate. You, my Dark Guard, will stand by my side and witness the destruction, which will herald the start of a new era. They will quake with fear when they hear of what will be unleashed on them unless they submit to my rule."

He looked from one end of the line to the other, and then at his inner circle. "Lucius - I want you to contact my chief lieutenants in the U.S. I want them to select for me a high profile target that will send shock waves through the land. Tell them that I want to attack at first light the day after tomorrow."

Lucius nodded and hurriedly left the scene to carry out the Dark Lord's orders.

"When we return, we will strike at the spiritual heart of the magical community in this country. There will be no doubting my intent, and the Ministry will quickly fall.

"Then I will seek out the Anima Summas and wipe them from the face of the Earth."

"I'm glad to hear that Sirius and Ceri are together at last," said Demont as he and Anne-Marie sat at the kitchen table across from Charlie and Nadine in the cabin. They'd decided to visit Nadine's brother once more, using the good news as cover for one more try to get to the bottom of the mystery.

Charlie had been very reluctant at first, now almost convinced that the mystery was confined to Nadine's head, but he'd relented to accompany her following his girlfriend's initial gentle persuasion, later anger, and final tantrums. And he now thought that perhaps she'd been right all along.

Demont and Anne-Marie were obviously very agitated, glancing at their watches frequently and fidgeting in their seats as the early afternoon wore on.

"We're not keeping you from anything important are we?" asked Charlie.

"No... no, nothing," replied Demont, glancing at his girlfriend. "Well, we just want to check out a few of the hippogriffs up at the forest, and we know where they'll be at this time of the day. We don't want to miss them."

"We'd better get going then," said Nadine. "We have to be back at Hogwarts before long, in any case."

Demont looked slightly relieved and quickly rose from his chair. "Well it's been great seeing you again, but I know how busy you all are back at Hogwarts."

After saying their goodbyes, the pair walked up the small valley towards their Portkey. Charlie frowned at Nadine. "What are you up to? Why did you tell them we had to get back to the school so quickly?"

"We're not going Charlie," she said with a wry smile. "That was just a ruse to get them off their guard. Did you see how nervous they both were? I'm sure that something's going to happen very soon, and they obviously didn't want us around when it does."

"What've you got in mind?"

"We'll keep a watch from these trees, and if they come back out of the cabin, we'll follow them."

Charlie looked at Nadine a bit doubtfully, but didn't raise any objections. They entered the line of trees towards the top of the valley and settled down to wait, looking down at the cabin for any sign of movement.

About ten minutes later, four cloaked figures approached the cabin from the bottom end of the valley - two witches and two wizards. They looked about them nervously as if to make sure that they weren't being observed, and knocked the cabin door and stood impatiently for it to be opened.

The door opened a crack and then opened fully. Anne-Marie quickly ushered the new arrivals inside and then stood for a few moments, looking around the valley to make sure that no one was watching.

"Who the devil were they?" exclaimed Charlie.

Nadine shook her head. "I've got no idea. I didn't recognise any of them."

"Does this fit in with your suspicions?" he asked.

Again Nadine shook her head. "No. I didn't expect this. I suppose I was wrong. But there's something odd going on, all the same."

"So what did you think it was - I mean, your first suspicion?"

Nadine coloured up slightly. "Never you mind - the least said about that the better. But we've got something else to chew on now."

"I wonder who those people are?"

"So do I Charlie, so do I."

Professor Snape walked between the rows of seats, looking at the seventh-year students chop their potions ingredients. He grinned evilly as he watched Neville make a mess of the dandelion roots, and looked forward to the time when he'd demonstrate the effects of one of the more difficult potions of their final year.

"Come on," he yelled. "This has to be done quickly if you're to get it right. It's about time you were adding the liquid ingredients now!"

Ron scowled as he tipped the chopped roots into his cauldron and reached for the can of caterpillars to extract their greasy innards.

Ten minutes later, most of the students had started to apply the variable heat techniques they'd learned the previous year, and sat back to wait for the bubbling concoctions to simmer down to form a gelatinous paste.

Hermione glanced at Margot's potion and grinned when she saw that it was roughly the same colour and consistency as her own, but she gasped when she looked at poor old Neville's. His potion was far too runny and was a bile-green colour instead of the sickly-yellow of the rest. She feared the worst as she saw the smug look on Snape's face as he glanced towards Neville.

"Right," he said suddenly. "They should all be nearly ready now. I want you all to stir the potion until it gets to the soft-peak stage, then take the piece of cloth in front of you and smear it with the potion."

A few minutes later, they all sat looking at their small pieces of cloth in front of them, staring at the wisps of steam that rose into the air, filling the room with the faint smell of rotten eggs.

"Longbottom," said Snape in oily tones, "come to the front of the class and show everyone your piece of cloth."

Neville slowly got up from his seat and glanced nervously at Snape as he approached, holding his piece of cloth gingerly by the corner.

"Now I'd like you to place the cloth against your forehead, the side smeared with your potion next to your skin."

Neville glanced around the room fearfully, looking at the malevolent grins of the Slytherins and the worried frowns of the Gryffindors, as he slowly reached up and placed the cloth onto the front of his head.

"How long do I have to hold it there Professor?" he squeaked.

"Until something happens," answered Snape, looking at his watch. He waited for a few moments and then turned to the rest of the class.

"If Longbottom has done this correctly," he grinned at some of the Slytherins as they sniggered, "then in one minute's time, his face will glow with a healthy sheen as the potion infuses the skin with the most wonderful of tonics. But if he hasn't," he turned and grinned evilly at Neville, "his face will erupt with hundreds and hundreds of dark-coloured warts."

He glanced once more at his watch and then back up at the hapless Neville, who squeaked fearfully as he felt things start to happen. Hermione and Margot gasped as they saw Neville's face start to become covered in vile warts. After a few more minutes, the poor boy's face was completely covered.

Hermione shouted at Snape, "How long will they stay on his face, Professor?"

"Only for the rest of the day Granger. Right - the rest of you try it."

Everyone was just a little nervous as each applied their cloth to their forehead, but the vast majority walked out at the end of the class with healthy, shining faces. Neville and Goyle were the only exceptions.

That night, Margot had a dream - or more correctly, a nightmare. The following morning, she sat at the headmaster's desk telling everyone what it was about.

"I saw someone walk out of a dark cave," she said. "It was 'You Know Who'. And he was holding the Disc above his head."

She shuddered as she recalled the vivid images of her dream. "He said some strange words and the black crystal at the centre of the Disc started to glow with a strange light. Then he walked further out from the cave and held the Disc higher, the crystal getting brighter, yet darker, at the same time. It's difficult to describe - I could never have envisaged something getting brighter and darker all at the same time."

Her grandfather reached out and stroked her hair. "It's all right Margot. But carry on - we need to know what you saw."

"Everything happened so quickly," she said. "A bright black light shot from the crystal at the centre of the Disc, but when I looked at where it was aimed, there was nothing - just nothing. Whatever had been there, was completely gone - all that was left was just an eerie emptiness."

Margot gasped and covered her face with her hands as she tried to shut out the dreadful images, and Ron leaned close and held her tightly, trying to banish the agony of her vision.

"Do you think that 'You Know Who' has..." started McGonagall.

Dumbledore nodded grimly. "I'm afraid so, Minerva. It looks like he's got at the spells at last. Margot," he said gently, "did you get a sense of when this might happen? Where it will happen?"

She shook her head. "No, I'm sorry Professor, I told you everything I felt and saw."

Dumbledore nodded. "It's all right Margot." He turned and spoke to the rest of the people in his office. "I think we can expect this to happen fairly soon, and we've got a lot of thinking to do. Once he's activated the Disc, he'll feel that nothing can stand in his way. We'd better start to make some contingency plans, I feel."

Alicia shivered as she walked with Fred up to the ramshackle headquarters building in Camp Merlin. It was early morning and she pulled her robes tightly around her as she looked up at the leaden sky, which promised something nasty in the not too distant future.

They started up the steps to the main entrance, but the door suddenly burst open and 'Mad Eye' Moody limped out, grinning at the pair. Alicia suppressed a shudder as she looked at Moody's magical eye revolving crazily in its socket.

"Welcome to Camp Merlin," bellowed the old wizard, catching around their shoulders and leading them back down the steps. "Glad you could both make it - I want to try out a few things with your Relocator gadgets. We've already started a little exercise - there's a squad of trainees from Camp Morgana hiding out in the rough country just outside these woods, and a team from this camp is going to try to track them down - and try to avoid a few ambushes of course. I'd like you both to join them."

"What sort of things do you want to try out?" asked Fred.

"Well one of the most difficult things to defend against is the unexpected attack - a well planned ambush can be devastating, so I want to try out some tactical formations as the team walk through the more exposed places. I know you can't make the Relocators react automatically when a curse is being thrown, but I'd like to try and improve reaction times by the team members - I'm hoping that if you observe what goes on, it might give you some ideas that'll help with that."

"So you'd like us to follow close behind them?" asked Fred.

"That's right laddie, they'll be leaving in about five minutes. The team leader, Gerwyn, has issued Relocators to his team and he knows what I'm looking for."

"How long is the exercise likely to last?" asked Alicia, glancing once more at the dark clouds above.

"Oh that depends," replied 'Mad Eye'. "It may be over in an hour or it could go on all day - it only finishes when every member of one team is captured. You're not afraid of getting a bit wet are you?"

"Well hypothermia and pneumonia did spring to mind," said Alicia.

"Oh don't worry lassie," said 'Mad Eye' in an off-hand manner. "Gerwyn's got plenty of magical flasks of hot soup, and in any case, the nurse here is almost as good as Madame Pomfrey."

Alicia glanced at Fred darkly as they walked across the compound towards a group of ten young witches and wizards. Moody introduced the pair, and then turned on his heel and limped quickly back to his headquarters building, the loud clicks from his walking stick diminishing and then disappearing all together as he went inside.

"I hope you two are up for a bit of roughing it?" smiled Gerwyn as he appraised Fred and Alicia. "It can get a bit wild on these mountains this late in autumn."

Fred groaned as he felt the negative vibes coming from Alicia, and he made a point of not looking at her as he replied, "It gets just as inhospitable up in Scotland, Gerwyn. We're both used to a bit of cold and rain."

"Good. We'll head out along the path for a mile or so before we come to the open ground. We don't know where the enemy is, only that they're out there somewhere. Once we get out of the cover of the woods, I suggest that you follow us about twenty yards back - you don't want to get hit by a full body bind if you can help it, do you!"

"Lead on," said Fred, gesturing to the path that led into the dark forest.

The pair hung back a little to let the trainees get well ahead, and then followed. Fred screwed up his eyes, waiting for the explosion.

"Fred Weasley!" exclaimed Alicia, turning to face him and jabbing a finger into his chest. "Why on earth did I agree to come on this... this... this ridiculous jaunt with you! I bet that Angelina is sitting in a nice warm room back at the Shrieking Shack, sipping a nice hot cup of tea, and look at us! If we get out of this in one piece, you can look out!"

Fred smiled weakly, but didn't dare reply. He thought of saying something amusing, but he didn't think it would go down very well with the angry girl at this particular moment. He looked up as the first few drops of sleet started to fall from the sky, and thought that he'd better not tell Alicia that once they emerged from the protection of the forest, the conditions would only get worse.

Alicia stormed ahead, making Fred increase his stride to catch up with her, but for the next fifteen minutes or so she maintained a stony silence. Again, Fred groaned silently. He'd hoped

that he'd be able to get a bit closer to her on this exercise, hoped that perhaps she'd start to feel for him what he felt for her, but he resigned himself to being consigned to the doghouse for the remainder of the day.

Gerwyn was waiting for the pair at the edge of the forest, and tossed them several tiny flasks. "I think you'll need these as the day wears on - I don't think this weather's going to get any better."

Fred looked out from the cover of the trees and saw the sleet driving across the landscape, driven by quite a stiff breeze. The high tussock grass swayed in the icy wind, bending over to reveal the muddy water-filled channels that meandered beneath it. Gerwyn pointed to a rocky knoll about half a mile away to their right. "We'll head towards that hill and see if we can pick up any sign of the enemy. Oh, you'd better watch your footing on this stretch of the moor - you can easily break an ankle if you're not careful."

Alicia pulled the hood of her robes over her head and walked out onto the moor. She shuddered as she felt the full force of the wind and the icy sleet and staggered slightly as she stepped across the hummocks of grass. Fred held out a hand and caught her elbow, trying to steady her, but she pulled her arm away angrily.

"I was only trying to help," said Fred, staring forlornly at the angry girl.

"Well don't!" she blurted, and staggered on in the wake of the trainees.

Fifteen minutes later, they all stood on the firmer ground of the little rocky hillock that rose above the treacherous grass and looked around the terrain. Behind them was the wood and to either side was the rough featureless moorland, stretching for several miles in both directions.

Gerwyn pointed to the middle distance ahead of them, where the tussock grass became dotted with rocky outcrops, marking the start of an area that led into the rocky terrain of limestone country.

"That's where they're likely to be," said Gerwyn. "In amongst those rocks and ravines. Now when we get there, form up into the pattern we talked about at the briefing, and yell out if you spot anything. And as soon as you hear a yell, press your Relocator button. Are you two ok?"

"We'll follow on behind and keep a close look out," said Fred, then turning to Alicia, said, "I don't know what, exactly, we'll be able to spot; just keep an open mind and see if you can come up with something."

Alicia nodded and followed Fred slowly down the knoll and across the horrible clumps of grass towards the rocky area. The team arranged themselves into an odd-shaped formation, two in the lead, three on each side, the middle ones walking side-ways while keeping a close watch on their flanks, and two at the rear, again walking in a crab-like fashion as they scrutinised the likely hiding places to the sides and rear.

Fred whispered to Alicia, "If anything's going to happen, I think it'll be over there." He pointed to some raised ground to the right, about a hundred yards ahead of them, where several little ravines led through some hillocks towards some low cliffs.

Alicia nodded. "I think you're right. That's a classic place to hold an ambush."

Fred grinned. Those were the first civil words Alicia had said to him since they'd arrived at Camp Merlin, and he hoped that her dark mood was slipping away at last. Alicia mentally kicked herself. She hadn't intended to appear friendly so soon. Her evil mood had started before they'd left the Shrieking Shack that morning, but the cause wasn't anything that Fred had said or done. She just felt put out, mainly with Angelina, at being manipulated into coming on this trip. She'd started to melt when she'd seen the stricken look on Fred's face after she'd rebuffed his offer of help a few minutes ago, and she thought, perhaps, that this whole thing might just turn out to be fun if she let it - despite the atrocious weather.

She was dragged from her thoughts when she spotted movement towards the top of one of the hillocks, just where Fred had pointed to a few moments ago. Their team was now directly below, and obviously hadn't seen anything yet. She held out a hand and placed it on Fred's arm, silently pointing to the hillock with the other. They both stopped and waited for the action to begin.

The trainee that Alicia had spotted flung the first spell, hitting one of the wizards on the right of the formation and placing him in a full body bind. The trainee behind the one who was hit yelled, and the rest of the team were relocated to positions ten yards away, but not before another of the group was hit. They took up defensive positions behind several rocks opposite the hillock and traded spells with the ambushers for the next half hour. Then the attackers fell silent. After another ten minutes of inaction, Gerwyn sent two of his team around the flanks of the hillock to find out what was going on, and a few minutes later they walked back, reporting that the area was now clear.

"They've gone on to look for their next place to ambush us," said Gerwyn, shaking his head in resignation. "They can do this all day until they get all of us."

He released his two colleagues from their body binds, and sent them back to Camp Merlin, their part in the exercise now over.

The team arranged themselves into a slightly different formation and walked on through the rocky terrain.

Over the next few hours, they endured three surprise attacks, and four more of their number returned to camp, leaving just four to resume the exercise. Before they did, however, Gerwyn called a halt for lunch, and led the way into an old ruined farmhouse. Although it no longer had a ceiling, some of the walls still stood and provided some shelter from the persistent sleet and wind. Gerwyn talked tactics to his remaining three team-members over lunch, while Fred and Alicia sat together on a cold, hard flagstone in a corner of one of the rooms to eat their sandwiches.

"Have you spotted anything yet Lissy?" asked Fred.

Alicia thought for a few moments before replying. "Each one of those ambushes was sudden and very efficient. The people who were hit had absolutely no warning it was coming, and stood no chance of Relocating in time to avoid it. There must be something that can be done to give them some sort of early warning of an attack."

Fred nodded in agreement. "There're two things that may be possible. One - we can attach a sort of strap on the Relocator so that it can be strapped onto the wrist and sit at the base of the

palm. That way, an Auror need only close his hand to activate it - it would save several precious fractions of a second."

Alicia grinned and nodded. "That should be easy to do - it's just one extra step in the production process. And the second one?"

"That's more difficult," said Fred. "And it means making an entirely new device. I was thinking that perhaps we could build a small detector, which the Auror can wear somewhere on the outside of his robes. It should be possible to make something that will pick up the magical vibrations as soon as a spell is thrown, and warn the Auror in some way - say a bleep or something. What do you think?"

"I suppose so..." she answered, then her eyes opened wide as she thought of something. "We can do better than that," she said excitedly. "What if we attach the device - we can make it very small - to the other end of the strap holding the Relocator, and when it detects a spell being thrown, it could send a signal into the wrist muscles, causing the Auror's hand to clasp shut and press the button. It's the closest we'll come to making the Relocator work automatically."

Fred thought for a few moments and then gasped, "Yes. I think I can see how we can do that - I'll have to run it past George, but I don't think there'll be a problem. That's brilliant Lissy."

In his excitement, Fred leaned forward and grasped Alicia by the shoulders, pulling her close and planting a big kiss on her cheek. Then, as he drew back, his eyes grew wide, realising what he'd done. Alicia stared at Fred through shaded eyes, a pink tinge running up her cheeks.

"Uh... sorry Alicia," said Fred shakily. "I... I'd better go and tell Gerwyn about our ideas - see what he thinks."

As Fred got up and walked across to the four trainees, Alicia slowly grinned as she placed her hand on the spot where Fred had kissed her. She looked at her boss' back with narrowed eyes and breathed quietly to herself, "I don't think he was joking - he was genuinely shy when he realised what he'd done. I think Angelina was right about him - and about me, if it comes to that!"

A few minutes later, Fred walked back over, grinning. "They like it," he said. "And now that our job is done, fancy a bit of fun? I told Gerwyn that we'll help him out - I've volunteered our services. What do you say?"

Alicia grinned at his infectious enthusiasm. "Why not? It might be a bit warmer that standing around watching the action anyway."

Half an hour later, the six walked slowly down a narrow ravine, well aware that this place was a likely spot for an ambush. Alicia yelled when she heard the scrape of a careless boot against some loose stones and pressed her Relocator button. The rest of the team reacted quickly and avoided the first volley of spells sent from the rocks above.

Later, Fred swore blind that he hadn't put a special charm on Alicia's Relocator. He was adamant that it was purely coincidental that they both relocated behind a large rock, facing each other with their lips just inches apart. They stared deeply into each other's eyes and then

leaned forward, both feeling a tingling elation as their lips met. They both reached up and pulled themselves into closer contact as the battle raged around them.

Gerwyn and his team, now reduced to four effective members, were quickly immobilised by the attackers, as were Fred and Alicia. The attackers took five minutes to recover from their hilarity at seeing two of the enemy, their romantic pose frozen by the full body bind, still locked in an embrace, and they insisted on keeping the spell in place while they levitated them and took them back to Camp Merlin to be put on display in front of the whole camp - the unlikely trophies of their victory.

'Mad Eye' Moody had a wide grin on his face as he released the pair from the spell. "I thought you came here to work, not play," he said.

Fred and Alicia's faces were now crimson from the embarrassment of it all. "Uh, Mr. Moody - sir - you won't say anything about this to George when you see him next will you?" asked Fred pleadingly.

Moody turned to the laughing trainees gathered around the couple. "What do you say? Should I keep quiet about this?"

"I'll reserve judgement on that response," he said, grinning at Fred as he listened to the opposing choruses of 'Yes!' and 'No!'

That evening, Fred and Alicia arrived back at the Shrieking Shack just in time for dinner, Fred sitting alongside George and Alicia taking the spare seat beside Angelina.

"Well?" whispered Angelina.

"Well what?" Alicia replied.

"Something's happened hasn't it? I can see it in your face."

Alicia coloured up slightly and glanced across the table at Fred, who was ignoring the various dishes of food in front of him and grinning at her dreamily. Angelina glanced at Fred and a wide smile lit up her face. She gasped, "I knew it!"

"You knew what?" said George, looking across the table.

"Those two," she said. "I knew that if they were left on their own they'd finally connect."

Lee and the ministry employees grinned, looking at the red but happy faces of the pair, but George just sat stunned. "Good god!" he exclaimed.

The happy news spread quickly throughout Hogwarts when Ginny read the message delivered by George's owl the following morning. She ran down to the Great Hall and told Ron and the others, who passed the news along the length of the Gryffindor table.

Nadine smiled happily when Ron rushed up to the top table and spoke to them, but frowned slightly when she looked down towards Ginny, who sat staring into the distance with a sad

expression on her face. "What's the matter with Ginny?" she asked Ron. "Wasn't she glad to hear the news?"

Ron looked quizzically at Nadine and then towards Ginny, shaking his head. "She was the first to hear about it, and she was as excited as I've ever seen her. I don't know why she's looking like that."

Nadine turned to Ceri and prised her away from Sirius for a few moments, pointing down at the red-haired girl. "Can you pick up any emotions from Ginny? I think there's something wrong."

Ceri stared at Ginny and concentrated. "Sadness," she breathed, frowning, "All I can pick up is sadness."

As the students started to file out of the Great Hall, Nadine waved for Hermione and Margot to join her. "There's something the matter with Ginny," she told them. "Ceri's just picked up feelings of sadness coming from her. Has anything happened to cause this?"

"No nothing," said Hermione, looking worried as she glanced towards her friend still sitting at the table.

"She hasn't said anything's wrong," said Margot. "Only a few minutes ago she was full of excitement when she told us about Fred and Alicia."

"Perhaps it might be a good idea for you both to have a quiet word with her," said Ceri. "She's more likely to open up to you two than us."

Hermione and Margot nodded and walked slowly down towards the table where they sat, one on either side of Ginny, who jumped slightly when she saw that she was no longer alone.

"What's the matter Ginny?" asked Hermione. "You were looking so sad a few moments ago."

Ginny grinned weakly, but then her face dropped into a sad expression once more. "It's not that I'm unhappy about Fred and Alicia - I'm really, really excited for them both, but it... it just brought it home to me that everybody seems to be getting together except me. There's you two, Fred, Charlie and Nadine, Sirius and Ceri - and I'm really pleased for you all. But when is it going to be my turn? Will it ever be my turn?"

"Oh Ginny," breathed Hermione, rubbing her friend's shoulder. "We've spoken about this before, haven't we? I'm sure you'll find the right one soon."

"Maybe it'll be the sixth team member," said Margot. "He might be out there now, just waiting for you to come into his life."

Ginny smiled weakly, knowing full well that her friends were just trying to buck her up - she knew that they didn't know - no one knew - whether the sixth team member would be the one, or even if it would be a boy."

"I'm sorry," she told them. "I'm just being silly, aren't I?"

The sun was just pushing its first rays of light over the horizon, lighting up the pretty little town in a remote part of New England. To the untrained eye, there was nothing remarkable about the town. But to those who knew about such things, it was a very remarkable place. Most of the inhabitants were made up of witches and wizards, most of whom worked in the Congress of Magic offices in Washington.

As he'd done on his last visit to the country, Lord Voldemort stood on a hill looking down at the town. He hissed with anticipation, eager to activate and use the fabled powers of the Disc of Gates for the first time. He'd spent days learning the correct pronunciations of the spells from Ahmed, and he'd rewarded the Arab with a brief look at some of the writings in the Necronomicon - after all, that was his wish. Voldemort hadn't really known if Ahmed was mentally strong enough to survive the experience, but survive he did. But he returned to his home in Jordan just a little bit unhinged.

Voldemort glanced at the two struggling figures, a witch and a wizard, who were held firmly by four beefy American Death Eaters. "Watch what happens here this morning," he told them. "Note every detail of what will happen to your miserable town, for that is the price of your survival. That is why you won't join your fellow citizens in what is to come."

He turned to look down on the town once more, then raised the Disc of Gates from its resting place on his chest and held it above his head, making sure that the dark crystal at the centre pointed towards the middle of the town. He breathed deeply, feeling the power build, then he roared the spells that sent destruction onto the unsuspecting folk below.

"NEGELTU BABU ETUTU." The dark crystal at the centre of the Disc started to glow, sending vibrations through the Dark Lord's arms as he felt the power, telling him that it was primed for use.

"ABATU MARE ALLI."

A dark light crept slowly from the crystal, picking up speed as it neared its target. The light spread out to cover the whole town and then faded, the dark light coming from the crystal slowly waning until it was as it had been before. Nothing seemed to have been destroyed, though. The town still stood and not a building had fallen. But Voldemort and his Death Eaters knew what had happened, and the two prisoners would soon know as well.

"Release them," said Voldemort. The two stopped struggling when they were free once more, and just stared grimly at the Dark Lord, wondering what had happened in the town.

"Go back to your homes below," said Voldemort, "and when you have seen, tell those in power that Lord Voldemort has started his campaign of terror. Tell them that I will wait for one week for their surrender. And if I don't receive it, then I will give another demonstration of my power, and then another and another until they finally see sense. Tell them to publish their answer in the wizarding press. One week - no longer. Now go."

Voldemort and his minions disappeared from the hill overlooking the town, Apparating back to the Portkey, which they would use to return to the U.K. for the next demonstration of power later that afternoon.

The witch and wizard walked quickly to the town and rushed into their little house, and then upstairs to where their two children were sleeping. They both gasped when they found the two

little beds unoccupied, and rushed through the rest of the house, trying to find where they'd hidden themselves following the attack by the four large Death Eaters. But they found nothing.

They ran quickly to the house next door, hoping that the kids had gone to their elderly neighbours for help, but there was no answer to their pounding on the front door. They ran to the next house, with the same result, and so it went until they came to a house where they knew that an elderly Muggle was bedridden, looked after by her son and his wife. This time, they found that the front door was open and they rushed inside and upstairs to the bedrooms. But no one was there - the house was completely empty.

They ran, panic-stricken, to the little newsagents at the bottom of their street where they knew the wizard opened his shop at the crack of dawn, but although the shop was open, no one stood behind the counter. For the next hour, they went from house to house, shop to shop, but not a person could be found - it was as if the inhabitants had been wiped from the face of the Earth.

Finally, they gave up the fruitless search and Apparated to the buildings of the Magical Congress to raise the alarm.

It was just after lunch at Hogwarts and the cold rain swilled down heavily, soaking the school grounds and the many people who milled about. When Dumbledore received the urgent message from Fudge just under half an hour previously, telling him of the attack in New England, he hadn't wasted a minute putting into action the contingency plan he'd previously worked out with his closest advisors. He knew that Voldemort had started his terror campaign using the Disc of Gates and he also knew that nowhere in the country was safe any longer, not even Hogwarts - especially not Hogwarts.

Dumbledore was only too aware that the Anima Summas would be right towards the top of Voldemort's list of targets, and Hogwarts would be one of the first places he'd come looking for them. It had been an agonising decision to close the school, but one that was necessary for the safety of the students, and the Anima Summas in particular.

Most of the professors were organising the horseless carriages to take the students to Hogsmeade railway station - the Hogwarts express had been on standby there for several days, and it would soon be leaving for the comparative safety of the Capitol.

Five of the students, however, would not be on it. Harry, Hermione, Ron, Ginny and Margot would be leaving Hogwarts shortly for a secret site, accompanied by the protectors, Dumbledore, McGonagall, Snape, Flitwick, Jules, Dobby, Winky and Hagrid - and Fang, of course.

They'd agreed on a remote site, one that was very rarely visited, but was also known to the five friends and their protectors. Ever since it had been chosen, everyone had been warned not to breath a word of it for fear that the spy, who still hadn't been detected, would get wind of it.

The elves, with the exception of Winky and Dobby of course, would be dispersed among the families of the most trusted students. But now they were helping to move the contents of the school library down to the Portkey site, just outside the main entranceway. Dumbledore had

also insisted that his own collection of volumes should be taken - he didn't want Voldemort getting his hands on some of the more valuable ones. Winky, Dobby, Flitwick and McGonagall were kept busy ferrying the books and several other valuable items, including the sorting hat, via the Portkey to their new destination.

The last of the students left for the station, the four horseless carriages moving swiftly down the drive. The spy in the last carriage stuck her head out of the window and looked back in frustration - she hadn't been able to find out where the secret site was, and she knew that her spying days were over - she hoped that the Dark Lord wouldn't take out his frustration on her.

The activity in the school grounds became less frantic after they'd left - but only marginally so. It was a curious sight - Fang was barking at Hedwig and Pigwidgeon, who were hooting at Fawkes, who was disdainful in his complete lack of interest in what was going on around him.

"Are we about ready to leave, Headmaster?" asked an anxious Sirius.

"Not yet," he said. "Fred, George and the others are still to arrive, and I've asked George to make sure the train leaves safely before he comes."

"Here they come now, Headmaster," said Snape. Fred and Alicia led the group from the Shrieking Shack into the school grounds, levitating a huge mound of boxes before them - they'd destroyed the stocks that they couldn't manage to take with them, but made sure that they had all the Relocators and the raw materials needed to continue their production - and the prototypes of the Relocators that Fred and Alicia had dreamt up. The twins had readily agreed to move their operation to the secret site once Dumbledore had told them about an imminent attack on the school.

"George should be here shortly," shouted Fred. "I heard the train leaving before we came into the school grounds."

Harry stood slightly apart from everybody, looking sadly up at Gryffindor Tower. He hated to leave the place that had been his home for almost seven years, but he knew that Dumbledore's decision was the correct one. It was even more important, now that they were so close to completing the final quest, that they avoid a confrontation with Voldemort. He knew that they'd stand little chance against the Disc of Gates unless they got hold of the final spell.

Hermione walked up to stand beside him. "Let's hope we won't be away for too long, Harry."

Harry glanced at her, frowning. "I only hope that when we come back it'll still be standing."

Dumbledore walked up to stand beside the pair, looking equally sad. "I've got a feeling that Voldemort won't destroy the school. This used to be his home too, a long time ago, as you know, and he loved the place back then."

He seemed to pull himself taller and a determined look came into his eyes. "But even though Hogwarts has had to be abandoned, I absolutely refuse to abandon what it represents. Apart from the professors who will accompany us, the others will be carrying on with the teaching process - even though it will be a lot more difficult. They'll be Owling the students with lessons each day and receiving regular assessment tests from them so that they can keep tabs on their progress. It's far from ideal, of course, but it's the best we can do under the

circumstances and it might just help to keep their minds off the horror that will surely come over the next few weeks and months."

Hermione smiled at the headmaster. "I think it's absolutely amazing that you've been able to set this up in so short a time, Professor."

"It's thanks to all the professors that this has been possible," he replied. "They'll have their work cut out to keep up with all the owls that they'll get each day."

"Here's George," shouted Ron.

Dumbledore sighed, "It's time to go. Come on you two."

Fifteen minutes later, Hogwarts School and grounds were completely empty - deserted for the first time since it was built so long ago. At the same time, a surprisingly fine afternoon greeted the new arrivals at the secret site. It wasn't often, just at the start of winter, that it was fine deep in the mountains of the Central Beacons, and Harry and the others were relieved as they looked up at the surrounding cliffs in the hanging valley of Craig Cerrig-Gleisiad - the secret resting place of Pontius Aurigula.

Less than one hour later, Voldemort and his elite guard stood on the mountainside overlooking Hogsmeade. He frowned at the lack of movement in the village, and looked beyond towards the school, where there appeared to be an equal lack of activity.

He turned to Lucius. "What's this, Lucius? Everything seems to be deserted!"

Lucius shook his head. "Everything seemed normal just a few hours ago, my Lord. Perhaps they've heard of the events in America and decided to leave, fearing that you'd target them next."

Voldemort hissed and shouted to his guard. "Get down there and search the place - bring anyone you find up here to me."

Half an hour later, Travis walked up to his master. "The place is deserted, my Lord. We found just these two old people hiding in one of the houses."

Voldemort walked up to the old witch and wizard, who were struggling in the grasp of some of his guards. "Where is everybody? Where have they gone?"

The old wizard's chin jutted out in defiance. "Gone - away from here. Dumbledore told them you'd come."

"Why didn't you join them?" he hissed.

"We've lived here all our lives, and neither you nor anyone else will drive us from our home."

"Brave words, old man," said Voldemort darkly. He turned to Travis. "Take them further up the mountain and make sure they watch the power of the Disc."

Voldemort raised the Disc of Gates above his head and felt the power build. He aimed it at the far end of the village and shouted the ancient spell that activated the Disc. Then, when he felt the raw power surge through the Disc, he shouted the spell of destruction.

"DUG ABATU."

A dark crimson beam shot from the Disc and destroyed a small cottage towards the middle of the village. Then Voldemort slightly raised his aim and the beam wove a trail of destruction through the houses at the far end of the village, finally coming to rest on the Shrieking Shack, which exploded in a cloud of crushed bricks and wood.

Voldemort turned to the two defiant people. "Tell Cornelius Fudge what you have seen. I could easily have destroyed the whole village, but it looks more impressive to show how selective my power can be, don't you think? Tell him that I demand his complete capitulation to my rule. If I have not read his answer in the Daily Prophet by one week from today, I will start destroying all the wizarding communities in the country - and then it will be the turn of the Muggles. Do you understand?"

The wizard nodded his head briefly. Voldemort then signalled to his men and strode down the mountainside, leaving the two old people to stare after him. He led his men through the outskirts of Hogsmeade and through the rubble where once stood half the village. He stopped when he came to the school gates and lifted his wand to diminish the wards that were still in place, then he walked onto the hallowed turf and up towards the school.

He stood outside the main entrance while he signalled his men to search the buildings, and hissed with frustration when they reported that no one was left inside.

He resisted the temptation to destroy the school, and raised his head into the driving rain, shouting to the wind to give vent to his anger, "You can't hide from me Anima Summas. I will track you down - make no mistake about that!"

Cornelius Fudge was in a panic as he sat at his desk in his office at the Ministry of Magic. Facing him looking equally unsettled was his counterpart from the American Magical Congress - Jack Branson - who'd made an impromptu visit to London that morning to deliver the news of Voldemort's attack.

Fudge looked up as Marcus popped his head around the door and beckoned to him. Fudge walked over and listened to what he had to say for a few minutes, then sighed and sat back down at his desk.

"Well it's happened here," he told the American. "He's destroyed half of Hogsmeade - thank god you gave us sufficient warning to evacuate the place. And we've had the same message that you had - we've got one week to give him an answer."

Branson thumped his fist down hard on Fudge's desk. "We can't give in to these sorts of threats - it's inconceivable to hand over power to that madman."

"I agree," said Fudge, "but there's no doubting the power of that device he has - and he's perfectly capable of carrying out his threats. I'd better speak to the Prime Minister - warn him about what we're up against."

Branson nodded. "I'll speak to the President this evening when I get back. But he'll want to know what's happening with the Anima Summas - how close they are to completing the final quest, and when they can take this guy on."

"I spoke to Professor Dumbledore earlier," Fudge replied, "and he says that they're very close now - it seems that they've got one more ancient place to find, then they'll be ready. They've moved to a secret location to carry on with their research, and they've got full protection there."

"Will he be able to find them?" asked Branson.

"It's unlikely - not even I know where they've gone. But Dumbledore has promised to keep me informed of progress, and as soon as I hear something, I'll let you know straight away."

Branson nodded. "We'll have to use the week's grace to think up what we're going to publish in the magical press - we don't want to give in, but I'm sure we can come up with a form of words that will stall him a bit longer."

Fudge frowned. "It had better be good - he's no fool, and he's not the most patient of people."

Charlie, Ceri, Remus and Oliver all rubbed their hands vigorously together and stamped their feet on the frozen ground in an attempt to generate a bit of heat - they'd drawn the short straws to place Whammos and various magical wards on the tops of the cliffs surrounding the hanging valley. Sirius, Katie and Nadine were doing the same on the terrain down below at the entrance into the valley.

The day had been fine - not a cloud in the sky - but that inevitably meant a hard frost at night at this time of year - especially in the mountains. The afternoon had been spent erecting the buildings and tents to house everyone and the large library of books, and setting up wards in the immediate vicinity, and it wasn't until darkness had fallen that they'd had the time to set up their wider defences.

They made their way around the top of the cliffs, using their wands to light the way, and placed Whammos at regular intervals both close to the cliff and further back on the grassy terrain. Finally, they dropped down towards the valley entrance and met up with Sirius and the others before walking up into the newly erected community for a well-earned hot supper.

Ceri greeted Sirius with a brief peck on the cheek, and caught under his arm as they walked along. The rest hung back slightly and grinned at the couple - they knew that they'd had precious little time to get fully comfortable with their new situation, and hoped that they'd be able to spend some time together at this remote place, before going on what they hoped would be the last leg of the quest.

Their thoughts inevitable turned to the quest, and the research that the five kids would be doing. On the morning of the evacuation, Hermione had received several books from her

parents, following her urgent request, and she'd seemed confident that they had everything they needed to make a judgment on the likely location of Nibiru - Atlantis.

Earlier that evening, Dumbledore had called a brief meeting with the protectors and had told them about Voldemort's ultimatum, but he'd made it clear that they weren't to say anything about it to the five youngsters - he didn't want to put any undue pressure on them that might interfere with the quality of their research. He rightly surmised that rather than spurring them on to greater efforts, it would most likely be counter-productive and may cause them to come to hasty and ill-conceived decisions.

"It's a far cry from the Great Hall," said Katie as she walked into the dining tent, where most of the others were already sitting around the circular table.

"What's for supper?" asked Oliver as he took the seat next to Harry.

"Something called Welsh Rarebit," he replied. "Don't ask me what it is, but Dobby seems to think that we'll like it."

"Hey Ceri," shouted Ron when she and Sirius sat down opposite them, "what's this Welsh Rarebit then?"

"Oh you'll love it Ron," she said. "It's called 'Caws Pobi' in Welsh, and it's a savoury dish. It's a hot, thick cheesy sauce on toast, using one-year-old Cheddar cheese mixed with eggs, butter, flour, beer, mustard, pepper and Worcestershire sauce. Just the job for a cold night like this."

Ron smiled and stuck his nose in the air as Winky and Dobby 'popped' into the dining tent carrying trays of the steaming traditional dish. Fifteen minutes later he was calling for more, while everyone else just leaned back in their seats, patting their full stomachs.

The next morning, the five sat in the library tent with a pile of books about fabled Atlantis on the large table. The freezing temperatures of the night before had disappeared, but the first flurries of snow had started early with the arrival of the dark clouds that threatened to block out the sun for some time to come.

"It's amazing," said Ginny. "Nobody knows where Atlantis is, yet there's all these books about it."

"That's just human nature Ginny," said Hermione. "Always striving to find something - even if they don't quite believe themselves that it actually exists."

"But *we* know it exists," said Harry. "But how are we going to sort out the facts from all this speculation?"

"I think we should start at the beginning," said Margot.

"I agree," said Hermione.

"So where's the beginning?" asked Ron.

"That's Plato," replied Hermione. "All these books are as a result of his two dialogues - the Timaeus and the Critias. Most of the critics point out that all the information about Atlantis is confined to these two books, with no corroborating evidence from any other source. But, of course, we know that's not strictly true, because the demise of Atlantis was as a result of the Great Flood - and whatever was the cause of it - and there's plenty of legends concerning the Flood from virtually every ancient culture in the world."

"So shall we stick with Plato first then?" asked Ginny.

Hermione nodded. "I've already done some reading on that. The two books were written in the fourth century BC, and Atlantis is given only a brief mention in the first one - The Timaeus. The second book - The Critias, which Plato never completed - goes on to give a lot more detail about the ancient civilisation. Plato quotes Solon - the Archon of Athens - who was the first person to bring the story of Atlantis to the attention of the ancient Greeks. Solon heard about it during his travels throughout Egypt, when he visited a temple priest in the city of Sais in the Egyptian Delta region. The priest told him that the history of the lost civilisation was written on the pillars of the ancient temple by none other than Thoth, and that Atlantis was destroyed some 9,000 years before Solon's visit. That dates the destruction to about 9,500 to 10,000 BC!"

"What's an Archon, Hermione?" interrupted Ron.

"It's a chief Magistrate in ancient Greece," she replied, before continuing, "The Critias gives a lot of the physical details of Atlantis, their religions, legislature and so forth, but since it doesn't exist as it was described any more I think we can ignore all that."

"So where does Solon say that Atlantis actually was?" asked Harry.

"The only thing he says is that it lay beyond the pillars of Hercules - that's the Straights of Gibraltar - the narrow straights that form the boundary between the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean."

"And how big did he say it was?" asked Margot.

"Huge - he said that it was as big as Libya - that's what the Greeks called Africa by the way - and Asia combined."

"That's crazy!" exclaimed Ginny. "That would make it bigger than the North Atlantic Ocean itself!"

"Don't forget, Ginny," answered Hermione, "the full extent of Libya and Asia wasn't known to the Greeks back then, so it was probably a lot smaller than it at first might seem."

"Ok then," said Ron. "So where does that leave us?"

"We read," said Harry. "We've got to find out what all these researchers have come up with, and then try to decide where the most likely location for Atlantis is."

"Aaaarrggghhh," yelled Lee Jordan as he looked angrily at Fred and George. "I think you two should be the guinea pigs for trying this out and let me fire the wand!"

Alicia, Angelina and most of the Ministry employees giggled, but looked quickly back down at the things they were working on when Lee shot them all a dark look. The twins looked sheepishly at Lee, who was shaking his left hand after the little detection device had sent a pulse of energy into his wrist, causing his hand to extend rather than contract.

"Sorry Lee," said George. "Too much power, I think. Hang on a minute while we make some adjustments."

Fred released the strap holding the little square-shaped box from Lee's wrist and set it on the little table at the far end of their production tent. They opened the box and spoke in muted tones as they made some adjustments with their wands and then walked back to Lee.

"I want a big bonus for doing this!" Lee exclaimed as he allowed Fred to strap the device back on his wrist.

"Don't worry Lee," said Fred. "If this works out, we'll all have a nice big bonus. Ready?"

Lee closed his eyes and waited for George to fire off an unforgivable curse from the far end of the tent, his wand aimed at the ground. Before they left Hogsmeade, the twins had obtained special permission to use unforgivable curses in the interests of research and development of the new device.

"*CRUCIO*," yelled George, and Lee collapsed to the floor, rubbing his wrist and laughing uncontrollably.

"Uh, too little power this time," said Fred as George approached.

Lee got up from the floor and again speared the pair with an evil look. "I don't know what was worse, the pain or the itch!"

Again, Fred and George made adjustments to the little box and strapped it back on Lee's wrist.

"*CRUCIO*," yelled George, and this time it was smiles all round as Lee relocated ten yards to the left of his earlier position. The energy pulse had been of the right magnitude and caused his fingers to clench into his palm, activating the Relocator button.

"Excellent," shouted Alicia, feeling very pleased that her suggestion had been put into practice and that it appeared to work properly at last.

"We've still got a lot of tests to do," said Fred, "but I think we've cracked it."

One of the most difficult things with the project had been to get the device to detect only unforgivable curses - as George had pointed out quite early in its development, it would be of no use just to detect ordinary magical spells, because in the thick of a fight with Death Eaters, Aurors would be Relocating right, left and centre, and would cause too much disruption to any tactics employed.

"We'll make about fifty initially, I think," said George. "And we can test out each one to make sure the adjustments are right. Then we can give some to Sirius to try out on their next jaunt, and Moody can have the others."

"Don't expect to use *me* to test them all out," said Lee.

"Don't worry Lee," replied Fred, "we'll all test them. After all, we don't know yet whether the pulse strength will suit everybody. Some people may need less power and some more, so between the fifteen of us here we should be able to find that out."

"We can ask Sirius and the others to help with the tests as well," said Angelina. "And thinking about it, it may be better if we use *them*. At least we'd be sure that they'd work for them out in the field."

"Good thinking Ang," said George. "We can ask them at lunch."

The five youngsters sat in the library tent that evening, determined to get in one more session before going to bed. They were all engrossed in the books they were reading, but Ron suddenly slammed his shut and flung it onto the table.

"This is so bloody repetitive," he said, shaking his head. "Most of these researchers write about the same things, and apart from just a few, they all home in on no more than about six general locations."

"I'm finding the same thing too," said Hermione. The others nodded in agreement.

"Let's recap what we've found so far then," said Harry. "I've come across some weird and wonderful propositions, but most of the books I've read seem to concentrate on three main sites - the island of Santorini in the Mediterranean, the islands of the Caribbean and the Bahamas, and the small island groups on the Eastern side of the North Atlantic."

"That's what I'm getting too," said Ginny, a sentiment echoed by the others.

"So what do you think?" asked Ron. "Should we count up the votes for each place and go with the most popular?"

"That's hardly the most logical way to go about it Ron," admonished Margot. "I'm sure we can come up with something better than that."

"Why don't we discuss the pros and cons for each place," said Ginny, "and come to a consensus on the most likely place?"

They all nodded and looked at Hermione. "You want me to start it off, I suppose!"

"Come on Hermione," said Ron. "You know how much you like to talk about various theories, and don't worry, if you start on one of your rants, I'll put a silencing spell on you."

She shot a warning look at Ron, and then glanced down at the notes she'd made. "Well I think we can forget about the Santorini option. To start with, it's *inside* the Pillars of Hercules and

not *outside* them like Plato said. And in any case, that's the place where the academic establishment - or at least those who've dared to write about it - think where it is. And only because it fits in with a known event - the huge volcanic explosion that destroyed the island of Thera - that's what Santorini was called in ancient times."

"And god forbid that you'd agree with anything the establishment think," breathed Ron under his breath.

"I heard that Ron!" she exclaimed. "But they're way off the mark in any case. They think that Atlantis was part of the Minoan civilisation, but everyone knows that they continued to flourish on Crete for several hundred years after the explosion - they weren't destroyed by a single cataclysm!"

"If you say so," grinned Harry.

"Don't tease her!" exclaimed Margot. "She's perfectly correct in what she says.

Hermione shot Margot a look of gratitude and continued, "Now the other two regions are more difficult to assess. Some of these authors have made a very strong case for Atlantis being in the Caribbean and surrounding islands, with their seat of power centred on the Greater Antilles - that's Cuba, Hispaniola and Puerto Rico. It seems to tie in with the legends of the ancient cultures of South and Central America - like the Olmecs, the Toltecs and the Maya - that talk about strange white-skinned people with blue eyes coming to their lands from the East and bringing civilisation to their people."

"That ties in well with what we know from the Book of Thoth," said Ginny.

Hermione nodded. "But the names of the leaders of the strange people don't ring any bells - Quetzalcoatl in Mexico and Viracocha further south - there are other equally unfamiliar and unpronounceable names put forward as well, depending on the culture."

"I read about the strange structures they've found under the sea off the Bahamas," said Margot. "Do you think there's a link?"

Hermione nodded. "Almost certainly so. If they're right, the Antilles and Bahamas were part of the same great island chain of Atlantis. Some of the researchers have proposed that the area was devastated by a huge falling asteroid or comet, and I suppose that when you look at the islands on a map, they do seem to form the outer rim of a massive crater."

"What about the other side of the Atlantic?" asked Ginny. "Do you think that some of the island groups there have an equally strong claim to be Atlantis?"

"Yes, I think so," she replied. "The Azores are right on Dolphin ridge - that's the mid-Atlantic ridge running from Iceland to the Bahamas - and the nine islands of the group could well be the tops of the highest mountains of Atlantis, left stranded there after the great destruction and flood. Some authors say that the Canary Islands are part of the same island chain, as well. In many ways, it makes more sense for Atlantis to be situated close to the Pillars of Hercules, because that would explain how the Egyptians came to know about the place. The Carthaginians and Phoenicians - the great seafaring peoples of ancient times - also knew about the Azores, and they could have brought back the tales of a great civilisation that once

lived there. Then, there's the mysterious statue, now lost, that the first modern seafarers found on one of the islands. It was of a man sitting on a horse and his arm was pointing to the west."

"So which is it?" asked Harry. "The Caribbean or the Azores?"

Hermione shrugged her shoulders. "Your guess is as good as mine. But I read somewhere that there's no secret so hidden that it cannot be found. We'll just have to read the rest of the books and hope that one of us stumbles across something that'll point the way to one or the other as the most likely place."

Chapter 6 - Hot and Cold

Ron shivered as he poked his head out of the tent. "Hey Harry," he called back inside. "It's snowing! It looks like we'll have a white Christmas this year."

It was the morning of Christmas Eve, but this year it would be unlike any Christmas that had gone before. No one had had any time to buy presents and Dumbledore had made it clear that he didn't want anyone leaving the valley in case any lurking Death Eaters recognised one of their number. Harry crawled over to his friend and peered out at the white landscape - grinning as he saw how the snow, driven into the cliff face by the strong wind, clung to the many cracks and ledges from top to bottom.

"It's a lot more rugged than Hogwarts," he said. "But just as beautiful in a wild sort of way."

"Bugger that!" exclaimed Ron. "I just hope that we've got a nice hot breakfast this morning."

"What've we got later this morning?" asked Harry. "Learning with Professor Denard or more reading?"

"More reading, I think," Ron replied, frowning as he pulled his sweater over his head. "But I don't know how we'll be able to decide where to go next - The Azores and the Caribbean seem to be equally likely for the site of Atlantis."

"We've just got to trust Hermione on this," said Harry, tying his shoelaces. "She seems to think that we'll find something to tip the balance, and she's usually right about things like that."

Try as they might, however, the five were unable to find anything decisive that day, although they all had their heads buried in books for most of the time. So they had no idea that Dumbledore and the others were conspiring to make Christmas day one to remember. They hadn't been able to buy the kids any presents, but they *were* planning a big surprise for them.

Hermione, Ginny and Margot sank wearily into their beds that night and barely managed to whisper 'goodnight' before falling to sleep. They were still sleeping, as were Harry and Ron, at nine o'clock on Christmas morning but by then, 'Santa' Dumbledore and his little helpers had everything in place.

At nine thirty, Ginny opened one eye and looked towards the tent flap that was blowing crazily in the wind. She wondered whether that was the noise that woke her, but then she heard something else, and she grinned when she recognised the discordant tones that only her brother George could generate - and they were getting closer. She quickly leaned across and shook Hermione and Margot awake, then sat back, a big smile on her face, to see what was going to happen.

'I saw three ships come sailing by, on Christmas Day, on Christmas Day,' sang George, getting ever closer to the girls' tent.

"Ho, ho, ho - merry Christmas," he shouted, flinging back the tent flap and poking his head inside to see three grinning faces looking at him. He was dressed in a 'Santa' costume and carried a sack over his back.

"Merry Christmas George," they echoed, as George walked inside.

"What've you got in that sack?" asked Ginny.

"Uh, nothing," he replied. "But every self-respecting 'Santa' has to carry a sack, hasn't he?"

The girls giggled. "So why are you dressed like that?" asked Hermione.

"Well it *is* Christmas Day," he said. "So hurry up and get dressed - there's something in the big tent I want to show you."

George walked back outside and waited, grinning as he heard the frenzied sounds of the girls donning their clothes. He looked across at Fred, who was similarly attired, waiting outside the boys' tent, as Harry and Ron quickly got dressed.

The girls were the first to appear and George led them over to stand beside Fred while they waited for the boys. Then the twins led them all over to the main tent, trudging slowly through the one-foot deep snow.

"What do you think is going on?" Margot whispered.

"Beats me," answered Ron.

As they got closer, they began to hear the sounds of singing coming from inside. But the number of voices singing 'Oh Come All Ye Faithful' seemed to be far greater than the twenty-six inhabitants, including Winky and Dobby, of Craig Cerrig-Gleisiad. The five youngsters glanced at each other curiously, wondering who else could be there.

Fred and George held open the tent flap and gestured them inside. The five walked in and suddenly stopped, staring in awe at the scene before them. The inside of the tent was straight from a Christmas postcard - most of it magically created. Twelve large Christmas trees, adorned with lights and baubles, stood around the walls of the tent and balloons, streamers, and all manner of decorations hung down from the ceiling, or otherwise floated around the tent. At the back of the tent was a huge log fire, crackling away merrily, but the fire wasn't the only thing that induced the warm glow felt by the five friends. At one side of the fire stood Dumbledore, the other professors, the protectors, Hagrid, Winky and Dobby, and the thirteen staff of Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes and on the other side stood Arthur and Molly, Bill and Percy, Millie and Arbuthnot Granger, Margot's parents and grandfather, Ifor, Bethan and the two kids, Demont and Anne-Marie, Colin Creevey and Clare Bryant and their parents.

The three girls had tears in their eyes as they flung themselves at their families, hugging them tightly. Ron followed his sister to greet his parents and brothers, while Harry walked over to stand beside Sirius, Ceri, Katie, Oliver and Dumbledore. Katie and Ceri planted big kisses on Harry's cheeks and wished him a merry Christmas, but Harry was a bit too overcome with emotion to respond in kind - he just held their hands and smiled.

He leaned over and whispered to Dumbledore, "How did you manage this? I thought you wanted to keep the place a secret? Not that I'm complaining, Professor, I think it's great that everybody's family is here."

"They don't know where they are, Harry," he replied. "No-one has told them where this place is, and they won't ask - it was a condition of them coming, but they were all only too glad to join you five for Christmas Day. We set up special Portkeys to bring them here, and that's how they'll all return home this evening."

Ron looked over to see Margot beckoning him over. His face fell slightly when he realised she wanted him to meet her parents, but he walked nervously over towards them, hoping that he wouldn't make a fool of himself. But he needn't have worried.

Margot's parents both grinned at him. "So this is the boy that has swept my little girl off her feet," said Margot's father, Jacques.

"I must say you are so very tall and handsome," said his wife, Candice.

Ron blushed and stuttered, "P... pleased to meet you both." He held out his hand, but his eyes flew wide open, staring at the grinning Margot and Jules, as Jacques and Candice ignored his hand and crushed him in a strong but affectionate hug. When he was set free, Ron grinned sheepishly as he was led over to sit at the very large dining table between Margot's parents.

"Be careful with him," said Margot. "He can be very shy at times."

"Don't worry Margot," said her mother. "We just want to get to know him a bit better."

Ginny, meanwhile, had strolled over to Nadine and Charlie. "Has Demont said anything yet?" she asked.

Nadine shook her head. "Nothing. I tried to bring up the subject earlier, but they just clammed up."

"We'll see about that," said Ginny, looking slyly over to the pair. "We've got all day to prise it out of them."

Charlie raised his eyes to the tent ceiling. "Count me out of this," he said. "I'll keep Bill company."

Rhian, Ifor's pretty little seven-year-old, couldn't take her eyes off Fred and George. She leaned close to her brother and stood on tiptoe to whisper in his ear, "How can there be two Santas Iolo?"

Iolo thought quickly, then answered, "Neither of them are really Santa, Rhian. Because this is a very secret place, not even Santa can find it, so Ron's two brothers have dressed up so that Harry and his friends won't be disappointed."

"Ohhh," she said, turning back to stare at Fred and George, who were walking across the floor towards their parents.

George spotted Rhian staring at them and nudged Fred. "Look over there - that's Ceri's cousin's little girl - let's go over and say hello."

"Now who's this pretty little girl?" said Fred, kneeling down in front of Rhian.

Rhian glanced at her brother and then grinned at Fred. "You're not really Santa - Iolo told me. You've dressed up to make Harry and his friends think that Santa hasn't forgotten them."

Fred and George suppressed a chuckle. "Well we can't fool her, George - we've been rumbled."

"Are you a wizard?" she asked.

"Yes, I am," Fred replied. "Would you like to see a little bit of magic?" Rhian nodded.

Fred put his hand into his pocket and pulled out a red-coloured wine gum. He placed it in the palm of his left hand, tapped it with his wand and muttered a few words. Rhian's eyes grew wide as she saw the wine gum start to grow larger and larger, until it filled Fred's palm. Then it floated slowly up towards the tent ceiling where it hovered for a few seconds, before exploding and showering Rhian and Iolo with loads of multi-coloured wine gums. The little girl jumped up and down, laughing and clapping her hands in delight while her brother picked up several of the sweets.

"Is it ok to eat these?" he asked, staring at Fred suspiciously.

Fred laughed. "Yes - you can eat those."

"Can you show me some more magic please?" asked Rhian.

"Your turn George," said Fred, getting up from his knees.

George stroked his false beard for a few moments, then pulled his wand from his red robes and pointed it at a little wooden stool sitting underneath one of the Christmas trees. The stool wobbled, and then started walking towards Rhian and Iolo with a most curious gait. It stopped in front of the girl, waiting.

"Go on, sit on it," said George.

Rhian stared at George and then tentatively sat on the stool. She screeched with delight as the stool once more started walking, carrying her towards Ceri and Sirius, who were talking to Rhian's parents. Ifor and Bethan stared in fascination as their daughter was transported towards them, but grinned when they saw how much Rhian was enjoying the experience. The stool stopped in front of Ceri, who reached down to lift the little girl into her arms and gave her a big hug.

Rhian put her mouth close to Ceri's ear and whispered, "Auntie Ceri, can I ask you something?"

Ceri placed Rhian back onto the floor and smiled. "Of course you can."

"Can... can I be a witch?"

Sirius grinned and whispered, "Get out of that one, Auntie Ceri."

Ceri looked pleadingly towards Ifor and Bethan, then knelt down and held Rhian by the shoulders. "You'd really like to be a witch?"

Rhian nodded her head vigorously.

Ceri smiled and smoothed the little girl's hair. "Being a witch is something... that you're born with. You see, no one can choose to be a witch - it all depends if you have magic inside you when you're born, and most girls haven't got that. But it doesn't really matter if you're a witch or not - you'll still be loved by all your family and friends and you'll still grow up to be a beautiful young lady."

"So does that mean I can't be a witch?" The corners of Rhian's lips took a downward turn.

"No - you may still be a witch, but you're still too young for anybody to know whether you are or not. All I'm saying is that if it turns out that you're not, you mustn't be sad or disappointed. Everybody has their own special magic inside them - but it may not be the sort of magic that you saw Uncle Fred and Uncle George do just a few minutes ago."

Rhian brightened once more. "Ok. I think I understand, Auntie Ceri." Then she turned and ran back over to Iolo, who was deep in conversation with Fred and George.

"Phew," said Ceri. "I hope I didn't make things worse Bethan."

"Of course not," she replied. "All she's talked about since you visited last year is whether she can be a witch, and I've told her much the same as you did."

Ceri smiled with relief and excused herself when she saw Bill beckoning to her. Bill had been the last of the surprise guests to arrive that morning and Ceri hadn't had much chance to talk to him up till now.

He wore a broad grin as she approached. "Well there's no mistaking that radiant look! I'm right in thinking that Sirius has done the right thing at last?"

Ceri grinned and hugged him. "Yes - and I think I've got you to thank for that. Oh, it was a bit dodgy for a while when neither of us could decide if it would upset Katie or not, but we needn't have worried."

"I'm glad - really glad for you both. You deserve each other."

"And how about you Bill? Are there any signs that you'll settle down any time soon?"

Bill grinned, but there was a slightly forlorn look in his eyes. "Oh, you know me Ceri. I suppose it must be difficult for girls to take me seriously, especially with my track record."

Ceri frowned and stared at him intently. "Now you listen to me, Bill Weasley. I *do* know you, and what I see is a very special and sensitive man. Don't put yourself down - I'm sure that there're lots of girls that would take you seriously if only you'd give them a chance - and I'm absolutely certain that there'll be that one special person who'll see you for who you really are."

"Well thanks for the vote of confidence," he replied. "You wouldn't like to be my PR secretary would you?"

"Bill!" she exclaimed, laughing. "Just don't give up on yourself."

"Since when did my brother ever give up on himself?" said Charlie, joining the pair.

"Where's Nadine?" asked Bill.

Charlie looked over and nodded towards a corner of the tent, where Nadine and Ginny were deep in conversation with Demont and Anne-Marie. "My inquisitive girlfriend and even more inquisitive sister are indulging in a bit of foreign intrigue."

"So who were those strange people who went to the cabin just after we left?" asked Nadine.

Anne-Marie glanced worriedly at Demont, who put on a confused look. "What strange people?"

"Come on Demont!" exclaimed Nadine. "You can't fool me. Charlie and I saw two witches and two wizards go into the cabin, and they were looking very shifty. And don't deny it - you couldn't wait to get rid of us. You must have been expecting them."

It was Demont's turn to look worriedly at Anne-Marie, but neither of them said anything.

"You're not in any sort of... trouble are you?" asked Nadine, anxiously.

"You can tell us - whatever it is," Ginny weighed in. "If you want to keep it secret, then it's safe with us."

Demont looked at Anne-Marie and lifted his eyebrows questioningly. The beautiful French woman's shoulders slumped in resignation and nodded.

"Look," said Demont. "What we're about to tell you must remain between us four. You can't tell anyone else about it. And the only reason we're telling you is to stop you prying - it might be... well, a bit dangerous if you're caught snooping around near the cabin."

Ginny gasped, "Dangerous?"

"I knew it!" exclaimed Nadine. "You're involved in something dodgy aren't you!"

Demont shook his head in exasperation. "No, of course not. Now, do you both agree to keep this strictly to yourselves?"

"Yes!" they both yelled and leaned closer, staring at the pair fixedly with impatient anticipation.

Harry and Hermione looked up and stared, but then went back to talking to Colin and Clare.

Demont took a deep breath and reached out to hold Anne-Marie's hand. "Anne-Marie and I... well... we're not supposed to be... together."

Ginny stared and her mouth gaped slightly open. Nadine pursed her lips and waited.

Anne-Marie took up the conversation. "You see, I'm... well I'm the head of the French Auror Defence Force. The mysterious people you saw the other day were four of my planning staff. They came to the cabin to discuss the new location for our headquarters - that's how I met

Demont, you see. We - the Minister of Magic and myself - anticipate that after Britain and America, France will be 'You Know Who's' next target, and we wanted to move our base of Auror operations to a secret place that the Dark Forces couldn't find."

"Anne-Marie was given my name by the minister," Demont continued. "He thought that I'd be able to suggest a remote location for the headquarters close to the Forbidden Forest. When she poked her head into the Magical Creatures office - that was just about the time I was giving my report on the Magical Creature disturbances - and we saw each other..."

"We fell instantly in love," whispered Anne-Marie.

Demont stared longingly into his girlfriend's eyes. "Anne-Marie spent a lot of time up at the cabin - under the pretext of evaluating the site I'd suggested - well let's just say we combined a bit of business with pleasure. So within the next few days, there'll be a lot of activity up at the Forbidden Forest - there'll be lots of ministry people constructing the new headquarters, setting up wards and that sort of thing."

"So security is going to be tight," said Anne-Marie. "And we wouldn't want any of you to walk into something that could be... dangerous for you. The security Aurors will be taking a very dim view of any unauthorised person snooping around up there."

Ginny's brow creased in a frown. "I understand all that, but what I don't understand is why you're not supposed to be together."

"Ginny," said Anne-Marie gently. "If it got out that Demont and I were an item, I'd lose my job - and so would Demont."

"But why?" cried Nadine.

"Because," said Demont, "since 'You Know Who' came back on the scene, the French Ministry of Magic decreed that any witch or wizard holding a sensitive position - one that that relates to the security of the nation - must be completely free of any romantic attachments. They think - rightly or wrongly - that the person could become compromised and subject to coercion if the Dark Forces managed to kidnap or threaten his or her lover. Anne-Marie, obviously, holds one of the most security-sensitive positions in Magical France, and since I've become involved in finding the site for the new base of Auror operations, so have I."

"At the time I got the job," said Anne-Marie, "I had no attachments and no family - both my parents are dead. For a long time, I tried to resist the attraction I felt for Demont, but it was like trying to hold back the tide."

Demont grinned. "And I just washed all over her."

"Awww," breathed Ginny, her eyes clouding with mistiness.

"So what are you both going to do?" asked Nadine. "You won't be able to keep how you feel about each other a secret for very long, not with a load of your colleagues being around the cabin area."

Demont and Marie both frowned and glanced sheepishly at each other. "We don't know," said Demont. "We've discussed it, of course, and if the worst comes to the worst we'll both have to resign. But we still have one last hope."

"You and your friends," said Anne-Marie, staring intently at Ginny. "If the Anima Summas can defeat the Dark Side soon, this silly ban will be lifted and we can come out into the open."

"Don't worry," said Ginny solemnly. "Just hang in there - we think we've got one more place to find before the final quest is completed. It won't be long now - I hope."

"So do I Ginny," whispered Demont, as he reached out and squeezed her hand affectionately. "So do I..."

The four of them turned and looked toward Harry and Hermione, who were still chatting with Colin and Clare.

"So are you sorry you had to give up being our press secretaries?" asked Harry.

"Well... yes and no," said Colin.

"We loved being involved - we really did," added Clare. "But it got a bit scary towards the end."

"A lot of people were becoming very anxious, especially after all those raids started," said Colin, "and their anxiety came through in the letters they sent - some of them weren't very nice." He glanced at Clare. "So I think it was best that Professor Dumbledore took us off it."

Hermione looked at the pair, her eyes full of sympathy. "We're sorry about that - it must have been hard for you."

Clare grinned. "Don't worry - it wasn't your fault. And when this is all over, maybe we can get involved again - I'm absolutely sure that everybody will be writing to you when you get rid of 'You Know Who'."

Harry glanced at Hermione, his face tinged with a trace of worry. "I hope so Clare."

The rest of Christmas Day was a great success; it provided just the right sort of relief and distraction for the five friends and everyone else involved with the quest.

Lord Voldemort paced slowly backwards and forwards in front of his throne. He was not in a good mood - his original deadline to the American and British magical communities had long since expired, but he'd agreed to an extension so that the Muggles in the highest position of authority could be consulted and persuaded to submit to his rule.

He had the feeling that he was being stalled, but he decided to hold off for a little while longer before resuming his personal demonstrations of power.

"Lucius!" he roared, bringing the fair-haired man running into the cave from his meeting with the rest of the inner circle outside.

"Yes, my Lord," he panted.

"I don't like all this delay - it can only be to give Potter more time to finalise his quest. Have you had any reports about their whereabouts yet?"

"No, my Lord. They just seem to have disappeared from the face of the Earth."

Voldemort grunted. "I want you and the others to contact the Dark Forces in every country in the world. I want them to be on high alert in case the Anima Summas come poking about in their patch. I want them to cover every ancient site - every old ruin or place that may be linked to an ancient civilisation. And I want them to report to me immediately they are spotted. The sooner I can get them out of the way, the sooner we can take full control."

"Yes, my Lord," said Lucius, turning to walk back out of the cave.

"Oh and Lucius." Malfoy hesitated and turned to face his master.

"Arrange a few raids, just to let them know we're still here."

"Yes, my Lord." Lucius walked out and called the inner circle to him.

"We'll divide the continents up between us," he said. "Make sure you don't miss any place - if he finds out that Potter and his friends have visited somewhere and he's not been told about it, we'll be the first in the firing line!"

They all groaned, but departed with a strong sense of purpose - and self-preservation.

"There's loads and loads of islands in the Caribbean area," said an exasperated Ginny, "but there's only nine in the Azores."

"What's your point Ginny?" asked Harry.

"Just that... oh, I don't know!"

They only had a few more books to read now, and their patience was wearing a bit thin. Nothing, so far, had pointed them in the right direction.

Ron, who'd been very quietly reading his book, suddenly looked up. "Remember Edgar Cayce?"

"The American 'sleeping prophet' - the one who had a psychic reading that the Hall of Records was below the Giza Plateau?" asked Hermione.

"One and the same," said Ron. "Well it seems he's had a few things to say about Atlantis as well."

The other four sat up, waiting for Ron to continue.

"Come on Ron," said Harry. "He was right about the Hall of Records, so maybe he's right about this as well!"

Ron grinned, pausing for a few moments to let the tension build. "In fact, he's had quite a few things to say about Atlantis. But the bit that just struck me in this book was his prediction - in 1936 he predicted that the first signs of Atlantis rising would be in the Bahamas, near the island of Bimini, and he also predicted that they would be found in either 1967 or 1968."

Again Ron paused. Margot let out an exasperated sigh and slapped his arm. "And? Come on Ron, don't tease!"

"Well they did find something in 1968 - what's become known as the Bimini Roads. Less than fifteen feet under the sea, under a mile off the shore of North Bimini, they found a series of rectangular stones, laid out in two parallel rows. They turned out to be part of a much larger structure that can only be seen from the air - it was spotted by a pilot flying from the island back to America. They extend for about three quarters of a mile and then disappear under the sand."

"So they think that this is part of Atlantis?" asked Ginny.

"Well that's the problem," said Ron. "A lot of archaeologists have examined the stones, but they can't agree whether they were put there by an ancient civilisation or whether it's just a natural rock formation."

"What does the author of that book think?" asked Harry.

"He thinks it's part of Atlantis. He backs his claim by pointing out that the Bahamas were once a large single island that became inundated following a disaster that occurred to the north of the island. And there's plenty of evidence for a strike by a comet or asteroid around that area in about nine or ten thousand BC."

"That puts it in the time frame of Plato's story," said Hermione.

"And there's a map in the book that shows the Grand Bahama Bank and the extent of the land boundary in ancient times," added Ron.

"This is all very well," said Margot, "but there's no point going there unless we have something to focus on. I mean, the structures are under the sea, albeit in shallow waters, but I can't see that we'll find an entrance into a buried city or something similar under the sea!"

"Margot's right," said Hermione, her brow creased deep in thought. "Is there anything else in that book Ron? Local legends or something that may indicate something worth looking at?"

"Well I didn't see anything about local legends," he replied, "but the author thinks that there's more to be found on the land itself. He says that the northern-most part of the island, above a place called Paradise Point, is a narrow strip of land covered by mangrove forest. It's right opposite the Bimini Roads, and he thinks there may be something there. There's a place called the Healing Hole in the mangrove creeks as well, and at low tide cold water that has a high mineral content rises up through a labyrinth of underwater tunnels and passages - the local people say it has healing powers."

"What do think?" asked Harry, looking at the others. "Is it worth a visit?"

"Well there's nothing else in these books, so why not?" said Ginny.

They all looked at each other and nodded. "Ok," said Harry. "Let's go to see Dumbledore. Maybe he knows somebody who can arrange for a Portkey."

"We'd better see Snape as well," said Ron, frowning. "You never know - we might have to go swimming, so we'd better take a supply of Gillyweed."

"Will you speak to him Margot?" asked Harry. "He likes you - or at least he likes you more than the rest of us." Margot groaned, but nodded.

"There were a number of Death Eater attacks last night," said Snape, "both here and in America." He gazed around Dumbledore's tent at the professors and protectors sitting around the headmaster's desk - they all wore grim expressions.

Dumbledore frowned. "He's getting impatient. Fudge managed to stall him with that message in the Daily Prophet, and so did Branson in America, but we've probably only got a day or two left before he uses the Disc of Gates again."

"Are they any closer to finding Atlantis?" asked McGonagall.

Professor Flitwick shook his head sadly. "I really feel for those kids. Ever since Plato wrote about it, the best minds in the world have tried to find it, but they haven't come up with anything definite in more than 2,500 years. Harry and the others have only had a few weeks, and we're expecting them to come up with the answers."

"The answer's there somewhere," said Sirius. "We know that, or the final quest would be impossible to complete, but it's just a matter of them looking in the right place to find the clue that unlocks the mystery of Atlantis."

"We can only hope that they find it soon," said Snape, looking towards the tent entrance as the five topics of conversation walked inside.

"Anything?" asked Charlie, hopefully.

"We think so," said Ginny.

"Come and sit down," said Dumbledore, gesturing to several empty seats. "Now - tell us what you've found."

Harry and Hermione, between them, told everyone what Ron had found and that they'd decided to check things out on North Bimini Island. "So in the absence of any other clues, we thought that this was our best chance," Hermione concluded.

"Right!" said Dumbledore. "Does anyone here know of somebody in the Bahamas that could help?"

They all shook their heads, but then Ceri brightened. "I don't know anybody in the Bahamas, but I know a witch who lives on the Atlantic coast of Florida - and Florida is only about fifty miles away from Bimini."

"Do you think she'd agree to set up a Portkey for us?" asked Remus.

"I'm sure she would, but how am I going to contact her? An owl would take several days to get there and several more to return with the answer."

"Is she on the American Floo Network?" asked the headmaster.

Ceri looked slightly puzzled - she knew that there weren't any transatlantic Floo connections. "Yes Professor, I think she is."

"Good. Just a few days ago, I had a private Floo connection set up direct to Cornelius Fudge. And I know that he's had a private link set up with Jack Branson at the American Magical Congress offices. So it should be possible for you to contact your friend very quickly."

Ceri rose from her seat. "Where's the chimney, Professor?"

"It's in the storage tent at the back of the main tent," he replied.

Ceri turned and walked quickly towards the tent entrance, but then turned back as she had a sudden thought. "Where do you want the Portkey to be placed?"

Four of the youngsters looked blank, but Ron smiled. "That's easy - Paradise Point, Ceri; ask her to make it a bit of driftwood right on the high tide line."

"Right," she replied and rushed out of the tent.

Ron grinned and whispered to his friends, "I should have asked her to put some sun-loungers and sun-umbrellas there as well."

Sirius turned to the five. "What do you know about the island? What's the terrain like?"

"North of Paradise Point," said Ron, "there's a four-mile narrow strip of land - only yards wide in some places, with the Atlantic on the Western end and a lagoon to the East. That's where we think we'll find something. It's uninhabited and the book I read said it's covered in mangrove forest with creeks running through it."

Sirius groaned, "So there'll be plenty of cover for an ambush then. We'd better make sure we take the new Relocators with us - has Fred and George showed you all how to use them?"

"Yes," Harry replied, "but what makes you think that there'll be any Death Eaters waiting for us? I can't picture a cell of Dark Wizards at a place called Paradise Point!"

"You can't be too careful Harry," he said. "Voldemort has most likely got every Dark Wizard in the world on the look out for you. Now that he's lost the services of his spy, he'll try any other possible ways to get to you."

"Have you got any photographs or maps of the place?" asked Oliver.

"No photos," replied Ron, "except some of the Bimini Road structures, but I've got a map of the island."

Ron pulled the book from his pocket and turned quickly to the page showing the map of North Bimini, which he spread out on the headmaster's desk. Everyone got up and pored over it while Ron pointed out Paradise Point and the strip of land they wanted to investigate.

"And this narrow strip is covered with mangrove forest?" asked Katie. Ron nodded.

"Well," she said with a sigh, "as Dad said, plenty of places to hide, but there's not many places to run. If we have to scramble out of the way, we'll end up in the sea!"

"Don't worry," said Ginny, grinning. "The sea temperature is about 72 degrees at this time of year."

They all turned as they heard Ceri walk back into the tent. "It's all set up - she knows the Island - goes there on holiday every year, so she'll be able to Apparate to Paradise Point with no problem. The Portkey should be in place by nine o'clock tonight, our time - that's four in the afternoon in the Bahamas."

"We can go tonight then!" exclaimed Harry. "And we'll still have a few hours of daylight to search when we get there."

"This *IS* paradise," breathed Ron as he looked out at the blue-green waters off Paradise Point. He'd already taken off his shoes and socks and was making a beeline for the gentle surf to paddle in the warm water. He stopped just before the water's edge and rolled up his trousers, then lifted his robes and stepped into the deliciously tepid sea.

He turned to the others, a broad grin on his face. "Can't you get Professor Dumbledore to move our headquarters out here?"

Nadine leaned up against Charlie and caught his hand. "I just love your brother, Charlie. He certainly knows how to enjoy himself."

"Come on Ron," shouted Charlie. "We've got work to do - remember?"

Ron sighed and walked back up the beach to his grinning girlfriend, where he flopped onto the hot sand and dried his feet before donning his shoes and socks once more. Harry and Hermione looked along the stretch of beach, lifting their heads to feel the warm afternoon sun on their faces, while the protectors walked back to the Portkey site after checking around the area to make sure there were no Death Eaters in sight.

Snape was the last to arrive back on the beach - he and Professor Flitwick had agreed to help with lookout duties in the potentially dangerous environment of the mangrove forest. He looked at Ron with a hint of disdain and blew away the droplet of perspiration that had rolled down from his forehead to his lip. He hated hot and humid climates - he much preferred the cool air of back home.

Ginny pointed past a stand of palm trees to the northwest. "The stone structures are underneath the sea just there."

Sirius, Ceri, Oliver and Katie stood close together and studied the low mangrove trees that stretched along the beach to the north. "According to the map," said Oliver, "it gets a lot narrower the further north we go."

"Well at least we won't have to worry too much about an attack coming from our left flank, especially if we keep close to the beach."

"Oliver, will you and Katie take point again?" asked Sirius. Oliver nodded.

"I'll take the right flank with Remus, Charlie and Nadine can take the left, while Ceri, Professor Flitwick and Snape can bring up the rear. Come on you lot," shouted Sirius. "It's time to find Atlantis."

They all moved slightly inland and started walking towards the first of the trees. Harry and the other four had spoken about the expedition back at the valley, and they weren't really sure what they were looking for, so they'd agreed to just keep an eye out for anything that looked the least bit unusual, although since none of them had been to this part of the world before, they weren't really sure what was or wasn't unusual.

They entered the trees and their progress slowed, the five looking closely at the ground and in between the trees, while the protectors kept a close watch on the dense foliage ahead and to the sides. None of them spotted the black-cloaked figure hiding behind the stand of palm trees back along the beach.

The Death Eater was amazed when the group had materialised on the beach a little while earlier - he hadn't expected Potter and his friends to come to this part of the world. He'd been lying on the warm sand doing his look-out stint opposite the Bimini Roads site, soaking up the sun behind the trees, luckily for him, so he hadn't been spotted, but there was no mistaking the lightning-bolt scar on Harry's forehead. His first instinct was to follow the group to see where they went, but changed his mind when he saw that they were heading along the narrow strip of land and into the mangrove forest - he knew that there was only one direction in which they could go - north. He closed his eyes and Apparated back to the cabin on the south side of the island, and rushed in to tell his group commander, and the other twenty-three Death Eaters that constituted the Bimini Dark Force, the good news - he felt sure that the Dark Lord would reward him for being so observant.

But he frowned when the commander didn't immediately go to the Floo fire to pass the word up the line to their headquarters in Cuba. Instead, the commander stared at the floor, deep in thought.

"We can do this!" he exclaimed. "Think about it - if we can capture or kill the Anima Summas and their friends, we'll be the toast of the Caribbean, and the rewards we'll all get will be immense. What do you say?"

Opinion was divided among the group, but the ayes just had it, and they Apparated back to the spot where the foreigners had last been seen. The watch Death Eater pointed towards the mangrove forest. "They went in there no more than ten minutes ago."

"Well split up," said the commander. "I'll take half of you and follow on the right-hand edge of the land and the rest of you take the left. Watch for my signal before you attack."

Three hundred yards further north, Ginny stooped to look at an odd-shaped rock on the ground. She lifted it to examine it more closely and screeched when a large beetle ran from underneath it and scurried away into the brush to her right. The protectors converged on her, their wands at the ready. "Sorry," she whispered, her face turning red. "I hate beetles."

She quickly ran ahead to catch up with her friends, who were all stooped over looking into one of the many creeks that wound through the mangroves. The next instant, they were all standing together among the closely packed trees ten yards away to their right. They watched wide-eyed as the curse that had activated their Relocators struck a tree branch, sending it tumbling to the ground. Harry and Hermione joined hands and said the spell that covered the five in the now-familiar emerald green protective light, but from where they were standing, they couldn't get a clear sight of the enemy through the thick scrub.

The protectors had also been transported a small distance away from where they were standing when the curses started to fly. The Death Eaters just stood transfixed when their targets just vanished from sight, and stared around the forest in confusion, trying to see where they'd gone. One unfortunate fellow sensed a presence just behind and to the right, and quickly looked around to see the sardonic grin on the face of Severus Snape just before he was stunned by the spell from the Potion-master's wand.

It was all confusion in the melee that followed. The protectors quickly became used to being Apparated around the forest in fairly quick succession and managed to get off some spells before a curse activated their devices and whisked them away again. Katie found herself staring at the back of one Death Eater as she materialised on the right-hand edge of the forest, and felt confident enough to tap him on the shoulder before putting him in a full body bind.

"Don't get too cocky, Katie," yelled Oliver who stood five yards away, but he found himself talking to thin air as she disappeared from sight.

"Why not?" she asked from her position just behind him. "This is fun!"

Oliver growled, but found himself in amongst a dense thicket of brush before he could reply. He took quick aim and downed yet another black-cloaked figure.

The remaining Death Eaters were no match for the quicksilver protectors, and they soon decided that discretion was the better part of valour and started running back through the forest towards Paradise Point. Sirius, Ceri, Oliver, Katie, Charlie and Snape gave chase, while Remus, Nadine and Flitwick stayed close to the five youngsters, although they were perfectly safe cocooned within their protective shield.

Fifteen minutes later, Remus couldn't help grinning when he saw about a dozen unconscious Death Eaters being levitated back to where he was waiting. He quickly did a head count of those that had already been disabled. "That's twenty-two of them Sirius," he said. "Did you miss any?"

"We saw three more run out of the trees and Apparate away," he replied. "Let's revive one of them and find out how many more are out there."

Remus revived the Death Eater lying a few yards away and roughly jerked him to his feet. "How many of you are in your group?" he asked, holding his wand menacingly to the side of the frightened Death Eater's head.

"T... twenty-five," he stammered. "I told them not to attack you - don't blame me!"

"Did you call for reinforcements?"

"N... no. The commander thought he could capture you all."

"How many more of you are on the island?" asked Sirius.

"None. There are only twenty-five of us."

"Which one is the commander?" asked Ceri, pointing at the unconscious Death Eaters who had now been collected together.

The man looked at his colleagues and shook his head. "He's not here. He must have escaped."

"Will he be able to send a report and bring reinforcements?"

The Death Eater, now feeling a bit more comfortable, shook his head once more as his lips twisted into a sickly grin. "Not if he values his life. He should have sent a report as soon as you were spotted."

"How did you know we were coming here?" asked Oliver.

"We didn't. We had orders to guard all sites that are connected with ancient civilisations, and the Bimini Roads site is the only one on the island."

Sirius pointed his wand at the man and put him in a full body bind, then Remus supported his weight as he lowered him to the floor.

"What do you think?" asked Charlie. "Should we get the hell out of here or spend some more time searching."

"We should continue the search," said Harry, leading the other four to join the protectors.

"That commander might still bite the bullet and report that we're here," said Charlie.

Sirius thought for a few moments and turned to Snape, who out of them all, probably knew more about the inner workings of the Death Eater mind than any of them. "What do you think, Severus? Should we stay or go?"

Snape stared at Sirius, surprised that he'd asked his opinion. "I think we'll have a couple of hours before the commander plucks up the courage to report his failure. I suggest we use whatever daylight is left to continue the search as quickly as we can - we really don't want to come back here another day."

Sirius nodded. "Let's get started then. We can leave these goons here and collect them later. No doubt whatever Auror force is on these islands will have detected all the magical activity, and they'll put in an appearance eventually."

They continued on through the mangrove forest, looking for any sign of an opening into the ground or a rock formation that might be man-made. The humidity was now quite high and the perspiration started running down their faces, so Harry took off his robes and slung them over his shoulder, as did Ron and the girls. After another half hour they hadn't found anything, but came to a large creek with clear water running out towards the sea.

"It must be low tide," said Ginny. "This must be the mineral water welling up from below - it must be coming from the healing hole we talked about yesterday."

"Let's see if we can find it," said Harry.

They followed the creek inland for about twenty yards - the land had broadened slightly - and soon stood looking at a circular-shaped pool. They could clearly see the water bubbling up from somewhere below. Ron knelt on the bank and leaned over, peering into the clear water.

"There's a hole there," he said, "and it looks like there's a tunnel running down and to the right."

"Fancy another paddle Ron?" asked Harry.

Hermione and Margot both gasped. "You're surely not thinking of going down there are you?" asked Margot.

"It looks terribly dangerous to me!" exclaimed Hermione. She turned as the protectors gathered round. "Tell them Sirius - it's far too dangerous to go down there."

Sirius looked into the depths and frowned. "I don't know Harry - that passage looks pretty narrow to me - you could get stuck."

Ron stood back up. "There's no problem - we've come prepared for this haven't we? Who's got the Gillyweed?"

"Look - Ron and I'll go down and scout around. If it looks promising, we'll come back up and fetch you three girls. Ok?"

They reluctantly agreed and Snape stepped forward to hand each of the boys a wad of the stringy-looking weed. "There's enough there for about half an hour," he said. "So make sure you start back in plenty of time."

They looked at their watches, sat down on the ground and took off most of their clothes, shoes and socks, and then started chewing on the rubbery material. Soon, they started to find it very difficult to breath as gills started to sprout on the sides of their necks and their hands and feet started to take on a web-like shape. They both jumped in and ducked their heads under the water, feeling relief as they started to breath more easily. Ron noted that the water was a lot cooler than when he paddled in the sea earlier, but realised that this wasn't seawater - it was fresh water coming from somewhere below.

"Be careful!" shouted Margot as the boys dove down towards the bottom of the pool. Harry led the way, swimming swiftly into the narrow tunnel that led down and to the right. He examined the walls of the tunnel, but they looked to be naturally formed.

They'd gone about twenty yards before the tunnel branched, both legs leading further down. It had started to become very dark and they had to illuminate their wands to see where they were going. Harry turned and raised his eyebrows questioningly. Ron shrugged and pointed to the left-hand tunnel - the general direction of the Bimini Roads.

They swam through a series of natural rock arches, some of them so narrow that they had to turn on their sides to get through. Harry was struck by the lack of fish swimming around in the tunnels, and looked closely at the rock walls for any sign of crustaceans, but he could find none.

Suddenly he felt, rather than heard, a disturbance in the water behind him. He turned quickly to see Ron flailing his arms around madly, trying to swim towards Harry, but making no progress whatsoever. Harry's eyes grew wide when he looked behind Ron to see that something had caught hold of his foot, but he couldn't see what it was - his foot was twisted behind the last of the rocky arches they'd come through. He swam quickly towards the arch, his wand held before him, ready to stun whatever horror was grabbing hold of Ron's foot.

Harry held his wand close, and grinned - what had caught Ron's foot was not a terrible denizen of the deep. Ron's foot was stuck in a small rocky gap between two slightly protruding pieces of rock low down on the right-hand side of the arch. Harry tapped his friend on the leg and grabbed hold of his foot, dragging it back until it came free, but he noted that there was a deep cut on the instep, which was bleeding freely.

Harry thought and tried to remember the spell that Hermione had taught him to stem the flow of blood - he held his wand against the cut, mouthed the spell, and grinned when the bleeding slowed and then stopped. He swam up alongside Ron, who was looking a bit shamefaced, and pointed ahead to continue with the dive.

After another fifty yards, the tunnel entered a series of circular chambers, and Harry and Ron split up to examine each one, but they could see no indication that the caverns were anything other than natural structures, formed by the action of the sea on the lime-filled rock.

Further on down the tunnel, they were met by a solid wall, any further progress barred, but they could see that the clear fresh water was rising from several narrow vents in the rocky floor of the tunnel. They stared at them for a few moments and then Ron tapped Harry on the shoulder and pointed back down the tunnel. Harry nodded and followed his friend back the way they had come.

They rose to the surface of the pool and waited there for several minutes before the effects of the Gillyweed started to wear off, and then clambered back onto dry land to see the relieved faces of the girls and the protectors.

"Well?" asked Hermione. "Was there anything interesting down there?"

"At one point I thought that a Grindylow or something grabbed hold of my foot," said Ron, "but I just got it stuck in the rocks. Thanks for stopping the bleeding Harry. But no - there was nothing there. All we saw were natural tunnels and caverns."

Harry grinned at Ron and nodded in agreement. "If there's an entrance to Atlantis on Bimini, it's certainly not down there."

Margot looked down at Ron's foot and the deep gash on its instep. "You'll need to get that seen to when we get back to the valley." She caught hold of the bottom of her vest and ripped off a narrow strip, which she bound tightly around the cut, than helped Ron put on his sock to hold it in place. "You can't be too careful - you don't want to get it infected."

A few minutes later, the boys now dried off and clothed once more, they all continued on through the forest. It wasn't long before the five friends emerged from the mangrove forest and stood beside Oliver and Katie, who were sitting close together on the sandy beach staring out to sea.

"End of the line," said Oliver, looking up at the youngsters. "We've reached the northern end of the island."

Harry's face fell. "And we've found absolutely nothing!"

"It must have been wishful thinking by that author," said Ron, staring back at the forest to see the rest of the protectors emerging to join them on the beach.

"So what now?" asked Sirius.

"Let's head back down to Paradise Point along the beach," said Hermione, trying to instill some enthusiasm into her friends. "That author might still be right - maybe there's something closer to the shoreline."

Ginny sat down and pulled off her shoes and socks. "You might be right," she said, looking at the dejected faces of Harry and Ron. "Come on you two - we can't give up now."

They found the going a lot easier walking on the compacted sand close to the sea, although Sirius and Remus found it quite tough to walk on the looser sand close to the tree line - Sirius had insisted that they maintain their formation, just in case.

"Look there!" exclaimed Margot, pointing ahead where the forest reached down almost to the water's edge. "There might be something amongst those rocks."

They ran along the beach and started to scramble over a rocky outcrop that led into the sea, before disappearing below the surface.

"This line of rocks seems to be pointing directly at the Road structure out there," said Ginny, excitedly.

Harry and Ron clambered up to the largest rocks at the edge of the forest and started looking for an opening. They found quite a few, but when they moved the loose rocks out of the way, found that there was just bedrock below.

"Check to see if you can feel any magical auras Nadine," said Sirius.

She nodded and closed her eyes as she walked along the line of rocks down to the sea. "Nothing," she said, shaking her head in disappointment.

They carried on down the beach but found nothing of interest until they arrived back at Paradise point, where they found four puzzled-looking Aurors staring down at the twenty-two Death Eaters they'd moved from inside the forest.

"Are you lot responsible for this?" asked one of them.

"Guilty as charged," answered Sirius. "They attacked us back in the forest, so we immobilised them - we knew you'd come here to check on all the magical activity."

"It... it's Harry Potter, isn't it?" said one of the other Aurors, staring at Harry's scar.

Harry grinned a bit shyly and nodded.

"So this must be part of your quest?" asked one of the others. "How's it shaping up? Are you close to getting your full powers?"

"We're close," said Hermione, "but the final piece of the puzzle is proving to be a bit troublesome."

The man looked out to sea to the northwest. "You've come here because of the structures below the sea, haven't you! You're looking for Atlantis!"

The five looked hesitatingly among each other, but didn't answer.

The Auror grinned suddenly. "Don't worry - your secret's safe with us. We won't tell anyone that we saw you here - what you're doing is far too important to be put in jeopardy by any loose talk."

"Thanks," said Harry gratefully. "But how're you going to explain this lot away?"

"Don't you worry about that Harry," he replied. "We'll think of something."

The Aurors went about the business of transporting the Death Eaters back to their headquarters, while the group gathered around a little further down the beach.

Sirius looked at the sun, which was just touching the horizon. "It's going to be dark soon - what do you want to do?"

Harry and Hermione glanced at each other. "There's no point hanging about here," said Hermione, shaking her head. "I think this was just a wild goose chase. I don't think we're going to find anything." Her four friends nodded solemnly.

"Come on then," said Ceri, feeling the disappointment that the five youngsters felt. "Let's get back to freezing Wales."

The five friends sat at their dining table eating a late breakfast the following day. By the time they'd arrived back at Craig Cerrig-Gleisiad it was the early hours of the morning, and they were all feeling a bit Portkey-lagged. Even Ron hadn't made any significant protests about missing his supper, and they went wearily to their beds in their respective tents.

"Professor Dumbledore didn't seem very surprised that we didn't find anything," commented Margot.

"No," replied Hermione. "When I think back on it, I'm sure he thought it was all a bit hairy-fairy even before we left."

"So why didn't he tell us?" said Ron.

"He's too much of a gentleman Ron," said Harry, grinning. "Even though he thought it was a wild goose chase, he knew that he shouldn't become involved in whatever we decide to do - he knows that we've got to solve this problem ourselves - and make our own mistakes."

"He's a very wise man," said Margot. "I like him - he reminds me so much of my grandfather."

"Speaking about your grandfather, Margot," said Harry, "when's our next learning session with him?"

"This afternoon," she replied, "so we've got the rest of the morning to do a bit more investigation."

"But what're we going to use for research?" asked Ginny, looking aghast at the others. "We've read all the books on Atlantis, and we haven't found anything useful in them."

Ron looked despondently down at the table as he twiddled his fork around in his third helping of scrambled eggs. "I wonder what Merlin used for research? I don't suppose there were many books around in his time."

Hermione's eyes grew wide as she stared fixedly at Ron, and her mouth dropped open.

"What!" said Harry, as he saw the expression on her face.

"He's done it again!" exclaimed Hermione. "Ron - you are the most brilliant wizard!"

"What do you mean?" asked Ron, looking rather puzzled.

"Merlin!" she said. "We've gone about this the wrong way! We've been looking in the wrong place!"

"Hermione," said Harry quietly, stroking her shoulder gently, "would you mind explaining what you're on about?"

"Don't you see?" she said. "Merlin and Morgana must have found Atlantis, and so must Osiris and Isis."

"We know that," said Ron. "And that's what we're trying to do as well!"

"Hush Ron," said Margot, gazing through narrowed eyes at Hermione. "I think I can see what she's getting at."

"Well don't keep it all to yourselves!" exclaimed an exasperated Ginny, looking from Hermione to Margot and back again.

"We've been reading all those Muggle books about Atlantis," said Hermione, her excitement plain to see, "but Muggles don't really know anything about it! We should be reading everything we can lay our hands on about Merlin! There might just be something in the wizarding books in the library about his visit to Atlantis. Oh, I don't for one minute think that there'll be a chapter on 'Merlin's trip to Atlantis' or anything, but there might just be something that's been a bit of an enigma to those who've read it, but might make sense to us - knowing what we know."

"How many books are there in the library about Merlin?" asked Ron, fearing another few days of intensive reading.

"There aren't many, I don't think," answered Hermione. "Come on - let's go and look for them."

She jumped up from her chair and walked quickly towards the tent flap. "Hang on a minute," shouted Ron. "I haven't finished my breakfast yet!"

By the time Ron caught up with his friends in the library tent, there were already several books on the table, and Hermione was in the process of pulling one more from one of the shelves.

"That's all I can find about Merlin," she said. "That's five books - one for each of us."

"Is that all?" asked Harry. "Merlin's so famous and revered, I thought there'd be a lot more books about him."

Hermione shrugged. "He lived a long time ago, Harry."

"So did Atlantis," said Ginny. "And look how many books there are about that!"

"But they're Muggle books, Ginny," said Hermione. "There're plenty of Muggle books about Merlin as well, no doubt, but we're after the wizarding legends and history about him. Wizards don't seem to go in for a lot of speculative writing like Muggles do - they'd rather stick to the solid facts."

"Right then," said Ron, taking his seat beside Margot. "You'd better take that one Hermione." He pointed to the thickest book on the table. "And I'll take this one." He picked up the thinnest book by far.

His friends laughed and then each of them picked one of the books and started reading. All was quite in the library tent - the five friends were captivated by the legends and history of the great wizard, Merlin. One by one, they finished reading their book and sat watching as Hermione finished the largest of the five books.

"Well?" asked Ginny.

"He was a great wizard," muttered Margot.

"He certainly was," said Hermione. "But I didn't find anything about a quest, or any reference to him being the Anima Summa."

Everyone nodded, although Harry mentioned something that he thought might be relevant. "It says here that he was involved in King Arthur and his knights' quest to find the Holy Grail."

"Well we know who the Holy Grail is, Harry," said Ginny. "We met him beneath the church in Rennes-le-Chateau."

"Yes, but I can't help wondering if, in this context, the Holy Grail might be the knowledge held by the ancient civilisation of Atlantis."

"It's possible, I suppose," said Margot. "Does it say where he went to find it?"

Harry shook his head. "No - it doesn't go into any details, I'm afraid."

"So we're back to square one again!" exclaimed Ron.

Hermione shook her head. "No - I'm sure we're on the right track now. There must be another book we haven't come across yet."

"Hey!" said Harry. "It might be in the Restricted Section of the library!"

"Yes!" shouted Ginny. "Of course - what was the name of that book we sneaked down to the library to read, Hermione? You know - the one that gave us the clue about the Anima Summa."

"The Aureus," she muttered. "You know, Ginny, I think you might just be right about this. It knew what it was talking about when it mentioned the Anima Summa and the Priory of Sion, so it just might hold something accurate about Merlin's quest as well."

"We'd better ask Dumbledore if we can look at it," said Ginny.

Hermione nodded. "We *did* promise to consult him if we wanted to look in the Restricted Section." She got up from her chair and walked out of the tent.

A few minutes later she was back. "No problem - he told us to go right ahead and look at it."

She walked over to the back of the library and stepped over the cordon into the Restricted Section. She went straight to the place where she'd last found the book and smiled when she saw it resting in its rightful place. She walked back to the table and placed the ancient-looking tome reverently onto the table, then looked in the index pages for any reference to Merlin.

"Merlin... Merlin..." she muttered as she ran her finger down the list of references.

"Here it is," she said. "Page 633." She quickly turned to the correct page and scanned down it looking for the name 'Merlin'.

"Merlin!" she said, placing her finger half way down the page.

"Read it out," said Harry, sitting back in his chair, looking forward to watching the changing animated expressions on his girlfriend's face whenever she read something that she hadn't known before.

She glanced a bit self-consciously at Harry, knowing what he was doing, but the pull of the unknown dragged her back to the pages of the Aureus and she began to read.

'And it came to pass that in the four hundred and eightieth year of our Lord, a great evil descended on the land, threatening to eradicate the good works of King Arthur for all time.

The good king appealed to his great friend and advisor, the mighty wizard Merlin, to aid him in the struggle with the Dark Forces that threatened the realm, and he gladly agreed to put his considerable powers at the king's disposal.

But fate took a hand, and Merlin found that he and the fair witch, Morgana, were thrust to the forefront of the conflict by a power that no man can appreciate. It became their divine task to build their powers to an ever-greater level for only then could they hope to defeat the horror that was in the land. For a year and twelve days, they roamed both within and without the country until they were at the very portal of achieving their aim.

But their final journey must remain hidden, for it was decreed by the Anima Summas that no man should speak of it lest it bespoil the very ground on which it has lain for eons since. Suffice to say that they journeyed by boat for 7 full days and nights before they came upon that place, and seven days and nights more to return. But then their countenance was dread to see - their power shining with awesome goodness.

The forces of Dark shrunk with fear from their power, and were banished in the final conflict. But a heavy price was paid. Morgana succumbed to the Dark Forces in that final struggle. Heavy of heart, brave Merlin gave up the will to live and followed his beloved into the Light soon after.'

"That's it," whispered Hermione. "There's no more about them."

"There it is again," said Ginny, looking fearfully at Harry and Hermione, but she didn't finish saying the dreaded words - that the job of being an Anima Summa was a very dangerous one. She quickly changed the subject. "Wow. I can't wait to see *your* dread countenance when we get to the end of this road!"

Harry pulled a face. "I wonder what the author meant by that?"

"But it doesn't tell us a lot does it," said Ron. "I mean, I know it says about the final journey to gain their full powers, but it doesn't say where they went - and that's what we want to find out!"

"But it does give us two very important clues," said Margot.

"That's right," said Hermione. "It says they went by boat and it took them seven days to get there."

Harry brightened. "So we have to go on a sea voyage for seven days."

"Come on Harry," said Ron sardonically. "We don't know in which direction to go or how fast Merlin's boat would have gone. So I don't see how it helps us that much."

"Well it couldn't have gone very fast," Harry retorted. "They didn't have outboard motors in those days!"

"What's an outboard motor?" asked Ron, looking puzzled.

"Let's look at this with a bit of logic," said Hermione. "They must have used sails to propel the boat, and we know they went out into the Atlantic Ocean somewhere."

"So how are we going to find out the wind speeds and sea currents of fifteen hundred years ago?" asked Ginny.

"We won't need to Ginny," said Hermione. "Merlin would probably have used a spell to propel the boat - perhaps he conjured up a strong wind to blow the boat in the right direction or something."

"But that's even worse!" exclaimed Ginny. "How fast could he have propelled the boat?"

"Well I doubt that the boat would have been very big," said Margot. "So they couldn't have gone too fast for fear of capsizing, and you know how bad the seas can get out in the Atlantic."

"That's a good point, Margot," said Hermione. "Now just as an example, let's say that even Merlin must have stopped to rest - say for eight hours a day. So that leaves sixteen hours a day when he would have propelled the boat."

"And let's suppose that he would have kept the speed down to no more than fifteen or twenty miles an hour," said Ginny, getting caught up in the exercise.

"So let's estimate an average speed of ten miles an hour over a twenty-four hour period," added Ron.

"That's..." Hermione thought for a few moments, "about 240 miles a day, and 1,680 miles in seven days, give or take."

"Let's say sixteen hundred miles as a round figure," said Harry.

"So what's within sixteen hundred miles of Britain?" asked Harry.

"He probably set off from either Wales or the West of England," said Hermione. "Those are the most likely sites for Camelot. So it's quite likely that he went from somewhere in the Bristol Channel area."

Ginny got up from her chair and walked over to the bookcases, where she looked along the row of books in the Geography section. She heaved a large atlas from the shelf and set it down on the table, turning the pages until she came to a double-page spread showing Britain, Europe and a fair bit of the Atlantic. Ginny checked the scale of the map and measured off just over six inches on her ruler. Then she took a piece of string from her pocket and cut it to the right length. She placed the end of the string at the mouth of the Bristol Channel and

swung the other end down towards the Straights of Gibraltar, where it rested just below the entrance to the Mediterranean Sea.

Then she slowly swung the piece of string out into the Atlantic, where it passed over just one chain of islands - The Azores.

She looked up at her friends. "What do you think? Is it The Azores?"

"It's too much of a coincidence that our original thinking was between those islands and the Caribbean," said Harry. "I think it has to be The Azores."

"But it was only a rough estimate how fast Merlin would have propelled the boat," said Ron. "What if he went twice as fast?"

The five friends looked at each other doubtfully. "We can't know that, Ron," said Margot. "I think that Hermione's estimate is as good as any - I agree with Harry, I think it must be The Azores."

She looked around at the other four and they all nodded. "Let's go to see Professor Dumbledore," said Harry.

"Just a minute," said Ginny, looking at the map intently. "There are nine main islands making up the Azores - we still have to find out which one we have to go to."

"Well there's nothing in the books we've read so far," Harry replied, "and if there'd have been any legends about Atlantis coming from The Azores, we would have read about them."

"I wonder if Remus or Professor Flitwick know anything?" asked Ron. "They seem to have travelled a fair way around Europe, so maybe they've heard something about The Azores. They belong to Portugal don't they?"

"That's right," said Margot. "They were discovered by the Portuguese in 1427, but I remember reading that they were supposed to have been uninhabited until then."

"But there may still be some legends," said Harry. "Perhaps about Merlin, if not Atlantis."

"Let's go and speak to the others," said Ginny. "Maybe they can think of something."

Chapter 7 - Island of the Crow

"So we think that Merlin, Morgana and their helpers went to the Azores," said Hermione. She'd just finished telling the headmaster and his team, including the protectors, about what they'd found in the Aureus and how they'd arrived at their conclusions.

"But we've got a big problem," said Ginny. "There are nine islands making up The Azores, and we haven't got a clue which one Merlin would have gone to."

"So we're hoping that either Professor Flitwick or Professor Lupin may have heard something during their travels about any legends of Merlin in the Azores," said Ron, looking towards the two professors hopefully.

Remus and Professor Flitwick glanced at each other, but they both shook their heads.

"I've been to Portugal," said Remus, "but not to The Azores, and I haven't come across any old legends about Merlin in those parts."

The hopeful looks on the faces of the five youngsters changed to ones of disappointment, but they looked up suddenly when Professor McGonagall spoke.

"I may be able to help," she said. "When I was a student at Hogwarts, many years ago now, I became friendly with an exchange student from Portugal. She lives in a little town not far from Lisbon, and we've kept in touch over the years. She was born in The Azores, on the Island of Flores, I think, but moved to the mainland when she graduated from Wizarding School. But I know that her family still lives there, and I remember her telling me that her ancestors were among the first people to settle on the islands in the fifteenth century. Now I don't know if she's aware of any old legends about Merlin, and to be quite frank, I don't see how there can be - after all, Merlin would have gone there over a thousand years before the islands were settled, but I'll get in touch with her and see if she knows anything."

"Thank you, Professor," said Hermione. "You're the best chance we've got."

The professor smiled at her favourite pupil. "I can only try, Hermione. May I use the private Floo link Headmaster?"

"Please do, Minerva," replied Dumbledore as he watched the deputy head walk out of the tent.

"I can see why The Azores is a candidate for the remnants of Atlantis," said Sirius as he looked at the map that Ginny had earlier placed on the headmaster's desk. "They're in the middle of the Atlantic, right opposite the straights of Gibraltar."

"They're just the tops of very large mountains rising above a curiously-shaped area on the mid-Atlantic ridge," said Hermione. "They're volcanic in origin, and some authors think that Atlantis sunk some two miles below the surface of the ocean during the terrible cataclysm, leaving just nine islands as the only remnants of Nibiru - Atlantis."

A little while later, Professor McGonagall walked back into the tent and took her seat. "I've spoken to her, but she's not aware of any legends about Merlin. But she says that if there are any, her mother would know about them. Her father, who died two years ago, was a mine of

information on the folklore of the islands and he may have told her something. But there's a problem - her mother hasn't spoken a word since he died - she just sits in her old armchair all day staring into the fireplace. But although my friend knows nothing, her brother might. He lives in the family home on Flores with his wife, two children and his mother. His father or mother may have told him about the old legends - he's very interested in that sort of thing."

"Would your friend mind if we visited her family?" asked Harry.

McGonagall nodded. "She's agreed to get in touch with them, and she'll arrange for her brother to set up a Portkey for tomorrow morning."

"Thank you, Professor," said Harry.

"What part of the island do they live on?" asked Ceri, standing up to look at the small map of Flores.

"They're a family of farmers," said McGonagall, "and they live in a sparsely populated area at the northern end of the island, so there won't be any prying eyes when you materialise. And I doubt very much that there'll be any Death Eaters there either - I wouldn't think that Flores would rank as a place for them to keep an eye on for an appearance of the Anima Summas."

She pointed to an area on the map. "Their farm is just about in this area - there aren't any other houses within several miles of the place."

"But we'll still have to keep our guard up," said Sirius darkly. "We don't want to be complacent about anything."

"I think that these five can be excused from your intended learning session this afternoon, Jules," said Dumbledore.

Margot's grandfather nodded. "Yes, they'll need to be fully alert in the morning."

At nine-thirty the following morning the group, which included Professor Flitwick but not Snape, who was away on a spying mission, materialised at the Portkey site, which happened to be behind an abandoned wine storage building on a fairly steep slope above a pretty little valley. They were all pleasantly surprised by the mild climate, much warmer than the valley back in Wales.

"Sirius Black?" asked a middle-aged wizard who stood just to one side of the building.

Sirius smiled and held out his hand. "Simao Garanito, I presume?"

The wizard smiled and nodded as he shook Sirius' hand. "It's good of you to let us visit, I hope it's not too much of an imposition - I know that your mother isn't well."

"You're all very welcome," said Simao. "I know how important it is to your quest." He looked at Harry and glanced at the famous scar on his forehead.

After the introductions, Nadine said, "I'm glad you speak such good English. I don't think any of us speak Portuguese."

"My father made sure that all the family learned English," he said. "He always used to say that a great deal of knowledge is written in the language, and he wanted to make sure we weren't excluded from all that wealth of knowledge. I've carried on the tradition, and made sure that my two children learned English as well."

He led the group down the hill and along the side of a stream that flowed along the valley bottom towards a large stone farmhouse. He opened the door and ushered everyone inside the large living room. It was a bit crowded, but there were enough seats for everyone. Simao introduced his wife, Sara, who then rushed into the kitchen to make the coffee, and his mother, Mafalda, who just sat in her armchair, staring into the empty fireplace.

Simao frowned, but smiled wryly. "I'm sorry if she appears rude, but she hasn't spoken for two years, ever since my father died."

"Please don't apologise," said Ceri. "Your sister's friend told us what an effect your father's death had on her. I'm so sorry."

Simao nodded. "I understand you want to talk about the local legends, but before we start, I'll get my two lazy kids - they seem to think that because they're on a two-week holiday from school, all they need to do is lie in the sun - that's all they've done for the past week or so."

He walked out to the garden at the back of the house and returned shortly with two youngsters in tow, both dressed in only the barest swimsuits. The sun shining through the back door showed them up in silhouette, so it was difficult to see their features.

"This is my daughter, Rafaela," said Simao, shutting the back door to reveal a slim, pretty, black-haired girl of about sixteen. "And this is her twin brother..."

"Hermes..." breathed Ginny.

Everyone stared at Ginny in astonishment, who was gazing at Rafaela's brother with undisguised admiration. He was slim but well muscled, and his body shone with a healthy tan. His dark hair fell over his forehead in a haphazard fashion, and his dark eyes sparkled with mischief as he gazed at the pretty redheaded girl.

"Uh no," said Sara, balancing a large tray of coffee cups as she walked to the centre of the room. "His name's Hugo."

"Ginny!" whispered Hermione. "Don't stare!"

"You kids can get better acquainted later," said Sirius, "but first things first - let's talk about the folklore of the islands - Hermione?"

Hermione nodded. "The final part of our quest is the search for Atlantis. And we know that the great wizard, Merlin, came to these islands and found the entrance to the legendary place. But that's all we know - we don't know which of the islands he came to, or where the entrance is. We're hoping that you'll know something - however vague it may seem to you - that could point us in the right direction."

Simao rubbed his chin and stared at the floor for a few moments, then slowly shook his head. "It's well known that The Azores have been sited as the remains of Atlantis, but there aren't any local legends about it. And I can't think of anything that would be remotely connected to Merlin."

He looked at his wife, who shook her head. "I haven't heard of any tales about Merlin visiting these islands."

"Caverna dos Ramos."

Every head turned towards the corner of the room and gazed at Mafalda, who still stared into the empty fireplace.

"Mother?" said Simao in a tremulous voice. "Did you just speak?"

Mafalda lifted her head and turned to look at her son. "Caverna dos Ramos," she repeated.

Simao walked slowly towards his mother and dropped onto his knees before her. He reached out and held her hand, a tear running down his face. "Those are the first words you've spoken in two years." The rest of his family quickly joined him by her side.

Mafalda let out a loud sigh, and started speaking once more. "Just after we met, your father used to speak of a mysterious cave at the northern tip of this island. He went there a long time ago when he was very young, and he saw something that convinced him that the cave had been visited by wizards a long, long time ago, long before the island was inhabited."

Mafalda looked at her family, her gaze resting on each of them for several moments. "It's time to come back home," she said. Then she looked towards Harry and Hermione. "I've been away too long. But these two have an awesome task to perform, and just seeing them made me realise that I should not dwell in the past. There are far more important things to be done in the present."

"What more do you know about this cave?" asked Harry gently.

"Nothing," she replied. "Only what I have told you."

"I know of it," said Hugo, looking at Ginny. "My friends and I used to play down on the beach close to the cave. We used to dare each other to go inside - but none of us did. You see, there is a very mysterious aura surrounding the cave, one that keeps everyone away from it. But it seems as if my grandfather was made of sterner stuff."

"Can you take us there?" asked Ginny.

Hugo smiled and nodded. "Yes, it's only a couple of miles away. It should take only about an hour to get there."

"Uh, I'd better warn you that we've been attacked by Death Eaters on our quests," said Sirius, looking at Sara and Simao. "It may be better if you just give us directions to the cave."

Sara laughed nervously. "Nonsense - there aren't any Death Eaters on Flores."

"Well we don't expect to run into any here," said Ceri, "but we thought it best to warn you."

Simao looked at his son. "It's up to you Hugo."

Hugo looked once more at Ginny and a slow smile spread over his face. "I'll go. If Ginny isn't afraid, then I won't be either."

Ginny smiled prettily, but looked down at the floor, a slight flush on her face when she broke contact with Hugo's sparkling dark eyes.

"Will you have something to eat before you go?" asked Sara.

Harry shook his head. "Thank you, but no. We need to examine this cave, but we'd like to come back later if that's ok?"

"Of course it is," she replied, and then turning to her son said, "Hugo - get dressed properly before you go."

"I'm going too," said Rafaela, running up the stairs after her brother.

Harry and Hermione walked over to Mafalda and gazed down at the old lady. "Thank you so much," said Hermione. "You've helped enormously."

"No - thank *you*," she replied. "Thank you both. I feel so much better now."

Simao looked up at the pair and mouthed silently through his tears, "Thank you."

A little while later, Hugo and Rafaela rushed back down stairs, both now more suitable attired for a trek through the rough countryside. They kept to their usual formation as they walked along the rough path bordered by a profusion of wild hydrangeas towards the north coast of the island, although Oliver and Katie walked only a few yards in front of the main group.

As they walked, Rafaela kept glancing at Ron and eventually plucked up the courage to speak to him. "I saw your photograph in our wizarding newspaper last year, and I read all about your exploits. You must be very daring to go to all those dangerous places to help the Anima Summas."

Ron smiled. "They're our best friends, Rafaela - I wouldn't have it any other way."

"Even so," she replied, "I think you're wonderful."

Rafaela flushed slightly and walked quickly ahead to join her brother, who was walking at the front of the group beside Oliver and Katie. Margot wore a frown as she nudged Ron. "Stop flirting with her Ron."

"What? I'm not flirting with her!"

"Humph!" she said and slowed her pace to let Hermione and Ginny catch up with her.

"What made you call him Hermes?" asked Hermione, grinning slyly at her red-haired friend.

"Uh... a slip of the tongue," she replied.

"So did he remind you of that statue of Hermes we saw when we climbed Mount Olympus?"

"Well he does look a bit like him don't you think?"

"Well apart from the fact that Hermes was fair and Hugo is dark, I suppose so," replied Hermione.

"You like him Ginny?" said Margot, grinning.

"I hardly know him," she gasped, but it was obvious in which direction her eyes had been wandering ever since they'd started on the trek.

Oliver, Katie, Rafaela and Hugo had stopped up ahead and were waiting for the rest of the group to join them. They stood at the edge of a steep cliff, coated in lush vegetation, that dropped precariously down to the sea more than two hundred yards below. Harry breathed deeply as he took in the lovely vista before him. Down on the beach to the right, a thin finger of land jutted out into the Atlantic, and just this side of it was a small green-topped island, not more than fifty yards out from the shore line. The beach was a narrow band of dark-coloured sand, evidence of the volcanic nature of the island.

"What's that island out there?" asked Harry, pointing to a hazy chunk of rock that rose steeply out of the sea on the horizon.

"That's Corvo," said Hugo. "It's the smallest island in the Azores, and it's about fifteen miles away."

"How are we going to get down there?" asked Katie, looking aghast at the drop below her.

"This way," said Hugo, smiling as he jumped off the edge of the cliff. Ginny gasped and held her hands over her mouth, but then smiled when she saw that Hugo hadn't thrown himself to his death - he'd jumped onto the start of a narrow winding track about three feet below, that zigzagged down the steep-sided cliff.

The walk down wasn't as perilous as it first appeared, most of the steep drops being hidden by the profusion of flowers and dense vegetation, but they still had to make sure of their footing in case they tripped on the loose stones that littered the path.

Ten minutes later, they all stood on the beach looking back up at the cliff they'd just walked down, and secretly dreaded the climb back up to the top. Hugo pointed to the right. "The cave's about a hundred yards over in that direction."

Ginny decided to walk beside the boy as he led the way over the warm sand. She looked up at him and smiled. "Your father said you're on holiday from school?"

"That's right," he replied. "There's only one small wizarding school in the islands - on the main island of Sao Miguel. My sister and I board there, but we can't wait to get back here to Flores."

"I'm not surprised," said Ginny. "It's so beautiful."

Hugo grinned and once more gazed deeply into Ginny's eyes, turning her knees to jelly. Then he glanced away and came to a stop, pointing at the base of the cliff. "This is the cave - Caverna dos Ramos."

The group gathered around Hugo and stared at the cave entrance, a roughly semi-circular hole about eight feet high and twelve feet wide.

"What does it mean - Caverna dos Ramos?" asked Nadine.

"It means the cavern of branches," said Rafaela.

"Why is it called that?" asked Charlie. "Is it filled with trees or does it branch into a number of different directions inside?"

Hugo shook his head. "I don't know - we've never been inside."

"Will you check it out Nadine?" asked Sirius. "Don't go inside - just check on the outside and see if you can make out what sort of aura is there."

She nodded and walked slowly over to the cave entrance, closing her eyes as she got near. She stopped when she was five yards away, putting her hands on the side of her head. She stood that way for a few moments and then walked back to the others. "There are very ancient wards protecting it," she said. "But they haven't been set by Dark Magic - they just give a gentle suggestion that the cave should not be entered. If we concentrate hard as we approach, we'll have no problem getting inside."

Sirius nodded. "Filius, Charlie, Remus, Katie and Oliver - will you stand guard outside the cave? Hugo, you and Rafaela stay outside as well if you feel uncomfortable about going inside. Ceri, Nadine - come with me inside the cave with Harry and the other four."

"I'll come as well, if you don't mind," said Hugo. "I've always wondered what was inside, and now that I know that the aura isn't evil, I'd like to see for myself."

Sirius, Ceri and Nadine led the way, followed closely by Harry and Hermione, then Ron and Margot, with Ginny and Hugo the last pair to enter. They all closed their eyes and resisted the urge to turn away as they walked over the threshold of daylight into the darkness of the cavern. Ginny instinctively reached out and held Hugo's arm as they stepped past the wards.

They all illuminated their wands and held them high, gazing around the interior of the large cavern. Harry walked to the back of the cave. "I can see why it's called the cavern of branches," he said, holding his wand high so that the others could see the five dark tunnels dotted around the back wall leading into the depths of the cliff. His voice echoed hollowly in the large cave.

Hermione squinted her eyes and walked towards the right-hand tunnel, where she'd spotted something on the rock wall at its entrance. "Look at this!" she exclaimed excitedly, holding her wand to a carving etched into the rock.

The others walked over and stared. "Do you think it's..." said Margot quietly.

"It has to be!" gasped Harry.

"Excalibur," whispered Ceri. "I think it's a carving of King Arthur's famous sword - the one that Merlin helped him get from the Lady of the Lake."

"It must be a message to us," said Hermione. "To the Anima Summas that came after Merlin's time. It's telling us that they were here, and whatever it is we have to find is down this tunnel."

"Come on," said Ron, walking into the tunnel. The other five, including Hugo much to Ginny's pleasure, followed him and soon caught up. After about fifty yards of winding rocky passageway, the tunnel abruptly ended in a small circular chamber. There were no exits other than the one they'd just come through.

"Look at these," said Hermione, staring at some faded writing on the rock wall. "Hieroglyphics - write this down Ginny."

Hermione held her wand close and started to translate, "Now let's see - it's not very clear, these glyphs are awfully faded, but I think it says... *The entrance to the fabled isle is located on the isle to the north, inside the centre of the volcano. A rock in the shape of the island's namesake points the way. This was told to us by our friend and mentor, Thoth, who often spoke to us of his homeland.*"

"The message must have been written by Osiris and Isis," said Harry quietly.

"And it must have been found by Merlin and Morgana when they came here," added Ginny.

"Is there a volcano on that island you pointed out to us earlier Hugo?" asked Harry.

"Oh yes," he replied. "There's a very large crater at the highest point on the island. I've climbed it many times - and when you get inside, it's huge."

"What about this rock?" asked Hermione. "Do you know of that?"

"And what's the island's namesake?" asked Ginny.

"It's known as the Isle of the Crow - that's what Corvo means," said Hugo. "But I'm not aware of any rock that looks like a crow. But that's not surprising - the caldera's so big, I've only walked over a very small section of it."

"How do we get there?" asked Sirius. "Can we Apparate?"

"I suppose so," said Hugo. "But whenever I've gone there I've gone by boat - I haven't learned how to Apparate yet."

"Don't worry," said Nadine. "If you give us the coordinates, we'll take you with us. Oh, I assume you'll come with us to show us the way?"

"Of course," grinned Hugo. "I wouldn't miss this!"

"We'd better get back to the farm," said Ceri. "We can Apparate to Corvo after lunch."

On the way back to the farmhouse, Ginny walked alongside Hermione and Margot, and leaned close to them to whisper, "Did you notice how Hugo helped us with the clues back in the cave?"

Hermione and Margot exchanged sly grins.

"Well what do you think?" asked Ginny impatiently. "He's going to help us get to that volcano on Corvo as well - do you think he's the sixth one?"

"I really don't know Ginny," said Hermione gently. "And I can't think what we can do to confirm whether he is or he isn't. Let's see how things develop when we get to Corvo."

"Well I think he is!" Ginny exclaimed, looking back at Hugo talking to Harry about twenty yards or so behind them. But her eyes narrowed when she saw Rafaela walking close to Ron. She nudged Margot and darted her eyes to the rear, drawing her attention to the intimate conversation that seemed to be going on between her brother and the pretty islander.

Margot's eyes narrowed in concern and she slowed her pace, straining to listen to what was being said.

"Uh, I don't get a lot of time to go out," said Ron. "And it's too dangerous anyway. We have to stay in a secret hideaway so that 'You Know Who' can't find us."

"That's terrible Ron," said Rafaela. "But you can come here sometimes if you want - 'You Know Who' would never come here."

Ron glanced at Margot walking not far in front of them, and slid his fingers down inside his shirt collar, trying to loosen it, but the heat he was feeling wasn't coming exclusively from the sunshine. He thought hard about what he could say to the girl. She was obviously interested in him, but he didn't want to upset her.

"Look Rafaela, I... well you probably don't know this, but I'm... engaged to Margot."

Rafaela gasped and put her hand over her mouth. "Oh I'm so sorry. I didn't know! If I'd known that, I wouldn't have... well, you know."

Ron smiled. "You weren't to know, but I thought it best that I tell you now. You're a very pretty girl and it's not that I don't like you - it's just that I'm... in love with Margot."

"I understand," she replied, and walked back to talk to her brother and Harry, her face pink with embarrassment.

Margot stopped and waited for Ron to catch up with her. She caught under his arm and whispered in his ear, "I don't remember you proposing to me?"

"Uh... I... I had to say something to her, Margot. I thought that if I said we were going to be married, she'd stop coming on to me."

"So what makes you think I'd say yes if you proposed to me?"

"What? I... well, purely hypothetically, of course, what *would* you say?"

"Well, purely hypothetically, what would you ask me?"

"Uh! You know what I'd ask you - hypothetically."

Hermione and Ginny both burst out laughing - they couldn't help but overhear the conversation. "Stop teasing him Margot," said Ginny. "You're almost as bad as Nadine."

Margot grinned and held Ron's arm tightly. Ron just looked confused.

Ditton-Under-Wold is a sleepy little village, nestling in the rolling Cotswold Hills in rural Gloucestershire. It's one of those picture-postcard olde-worlde places, situated away from the main tourist trail and glad of it. Apart from its beauty and idyllic location, the village was otherwise unremarkable - apart from the fact that it was the place where Cornelius Fudge had been born and raised.

John Ballot shivered in the early morning frost that covered the ground. John had taken over from Oliver as the leader of the team of Aurors, and he glanced around to make sure that everyone was in their designated place. There were five teams guarding the village that morning - one hundred Aurors - and John's team had been summoned from their normal area of operations to help out with the thinly stretched resources of 'The Shires' division.

Severus Snape had found out about the attack during one of his spying missions, but he hadn't been able find out much else - only that Cornelius Fudge's home village was on a list of places to be targeted by Death Eaters that morning.

"I wonder when they'll strike?" one of the team asked John.

John shook his head slowly. "No idea. But it's a good job we've had time to evacuate the place."

The five teams had arranged themselves around the village perimeter, each guarding a likely place where the Death Eaters would start an attack. They'd all been supplied with the newest version of Relocators, and felt slightly more secure after hearing good reports about them from other parts of the country.

John stiffened and spun around when he heard the familiar sounds of several Whammo explosions coming from the other side of the village, soon followed by the sounds of spells and curses being thrown. He reached into his robe pocket and retrieved the Muggle communication device when he heard his name being called.

"Keep your position, John." The group commander's voice came over the radio. "There's about fifty Death Eaters attacking from this side, but we should be able to take care of them - you stay where you are in case more of them attack from your end."

John acknowledged the message and called for his team to keep a close eye on the hill in front of them. Five minutes later, more Whamos exploded. They were the ones placed by John's team just the other side of the hill they faced.

"Get ready!" he shouted.

The minutes dragged by, but no attack came, and the Whammos had stopped exploding several minutes ago. The team members looked at each other in confusion, wondering what was going on. "Is this a new tactic?" asked one of the men.

"I don't ..." started John, but then fell silent as a dark green light covered the village and its perimeter, shimmering like a glass dome."

"What the hell?" exclaimed John and reached for his radio, intending to contact the group commander, but the radio was completely inert. He flung it on the ground beside him in frustration and kept his eyes peeled on the top of the hill.

"Oh bloody hell," breathed one of his team, looking towards the left-hand side of the hill. Striding over the hilltop came the sinister form of Lord Voldemort, holding the Disc of Gates above his head. The sounds of battle had died away shortly before the green light had appeared, and it was strangely silent all around the village.

John thought furiously - he knew what the device was capable of, and he knew that his team stood no chance against its awesome power. "Get out of here - all of you!" he shouted to his team, invoking the emergency procedure for his team to Apparate out of an area of immediate danger. He didn't Apparate himself - he wanted to make sure that everyone got away safely first. But neither did anyone else - they looked around in confusion as their attempts to Apparate away from the area failed.

John looked in horror at the Dark Lord, the realisation dawning on him that the strange green light covering the village was responsible for their failure to escape. His jaw set firm, determined that he wouldn't forfeit his life lightly. He shouted for his team to hold fast and take what cover they could as they waited for the inevitable attack. Voldemort still stood alone at the top of the hill, but he was too far away to attack.

Then Voldemort held the Disc high above his head and shouted several strange words. A black light shot from the glowing crystal at the centre, over the heads of John and his team, and covered the village and the other four teams. John turned and looked on in horror at what happened next. The black light seemed to intensify, hiding from sight all that it covered. Then it shimmered as barely-visible ripples of energy shot through the blackness. Then the blackness slowly faded away and the results of its evil endeavours were revealed for John and his team to see.

Nothing - there was absolutely nothing left of the village and the eighty aurors who guarded it. There was just a dark brown mark, completely devoid of life. Not even the Relocators had been of any use against such all-embracing evil. A growl of anger came from deep inside John Ballot as he turned once more to face the Dark Lord. He stood up from behind his cover, knowing that there was no protection from that awesome power, and waited. Deep in the back of his mind, he felt confused. He wondered why he and his team were still in existence.

"Four days," shouted Voldemort, looking down at John with disdain. "Tell Fudge that he has four days to capitulate. My patience is at an end, and if I do not receive word of his surrender by that time, the next target will be the ministry itself. I've obliterated the place where he was born, and I can do the same to the place where he works. Tell him to speak to his American friends. Tell them that the same fate awaits them also."

Voldemort turned on his heel and walked back over the hill and out of sight of the Aurors below. Then the green light covering the area disappeared. John turned and looked down at the ground when the radio he had earlier discarded suddenly burst into life with the sound of the group commander's voice.

"John... stay where you are... this green light is preventing us from Apparating away. The Death Eaters are just standing out of range from our spells, as if they're waiting for something. Keep a close look out at your end... what... What's that black..."

The radio fell silent once more. Everyone stood around looking at it incredulously. They'd just heard the final words of their commander before he was consumed by the black evil, but no one understood how his final message had suddenly emerged from the past to haunt their already fragile minds. Somehow, hearing their dead comrade's voice was even more terrible than the act that snuffed out his life.

"It's called Monte Grosso," said Hugo as he stood on a paved track half way up the huge volcano that dominated the small island of Corvo. He looked up towards the rim. "The entrance to the caldera is at the northern end and we can get to it by following this track that leads all the way to the top."

The group had just Apparated to the island of Corvo, taking Hugo as their guide. Rafaela had elected to remain with her family on Flores - she was still feeling very embarrassed at making a play for Ron's affections. Margot had spoken to her and tried to ease her discomfort, but the girl couldn't help but feel bad about things.

Oliver and Katie took their usual point position, this time in the company of Sirius and Ceri, with Charlie, Nadine, Remus and Flitwick bringing up the rear - the steep sides that bordered the track made it impractical and unnecessary to cover the flanks. The six teens walked in the middle of the group, with Hugo at their front, but he was soon joined by Ginny, who trotted up to walk alongside him.

The track was quite steep as it wound its way to the top, and the group were soon breathing quite hard, but they were all grateful for the stiff breeze that came off the sea to the south-west. Hugo turned and grinned as he heard Ron complaining vociferously about the way their quest always seemed to lead them steeply up or down - rarely along level ground.

"Don't mind my brother," said Ginny. "He always complains when we have to climb mountains. It's when he stops complaining that we have to worry."

Hugo gazed into Ginny's eyes and smiled.

"What!" she whispered, the boy's penetrating gaze bringing a slight tinge of pink to her cheeks.

"That photograph in our newspaper didn't do you justice," he said.

Ginny instinctively raised her hand and tried to stop her hair blowing around in the wind, remembering that it had looked unruly when Rita Skeeter had taken that unexpected picture at The Burrow.

"No," whispered Hugo, reaching out to push her hand away. "It looks beautiful just the way it is."

Ginny smiled shyly and dragged her gaze away from the sparkling eyes. Margot nudged Hermione and nodded at the pair walking in front of them. "What do you think?" she whispered. "Hugo seems very taken with Ginny."

"And I don't think it's a one-way thing either," Hermione whispered back. "She's convinced that he's the sixth member of the team."

"Oh I hope so," replied Margot. "She'll be devastated if it turns out that he isn't."

"I've been thinking about that," said Hermione reflectively. "If it's not Hugo, who can it be? I'm sure that this is the last leg of the quest, and we'll find Atlantis on this island, so time is running out for the sixth member to join up with us, and there aren't any other people around - it's a very isolated island."

Margot sighed as she gazed at the pair in front, now chatting and laughing - they seemed so right together, somehow.

After an hour's hard slog, the group finally stood at the rim of the volcano, looking down into the huge crater in amazement. It was about two miles across and over three hundred yards deep, and the sides and bottom of the caldera were sectioned into a patchwork of enclosed fields, evidence that the islanders used the fertile volcanic soil to good advantage. But there was no sign of anyone working in the crater - just the odd few cattle grazing in some of the lush green fields. At the far side, at the lowest point of the crater, were several clear blue lakes in which stood a number of small islands, some of them connected to the main crater floor by thin tongues of land that stretched out from the lakesides.

"This is a magical place," said Nadine. "I don't mean in the 'magical vibrations' sense - I think it's so beautiful and mysterious."

Charlie nodded and put his arm around her waist. "You wouldn't think such a place as this could exist inside a volcano."

Harry gazed around the crater walls, looking for any rocky outcrops that looked like a crow. "There's loads of rocks all over the place - we'll just have to examine each one we come to."

Hugo pointed to a rough path just below where they stood, that led down to the bottom. "That's the way down."

Sirius and Hugo led the way to the bottom of the crater, stopping every so often to peer at some of the larger rocks that dotted the sides on the way down. At the bottom, they decided to walk around the left-hand side, opposite the side where the lakes were, and spread out as they moved over the undulating ground. Half an hour later, they stood at the furthest end of the caldera, disappointed not to have spotted the rock formation thus far. They moved back towards the end of the crater they'd started from, this time walking beside the lakes, but the number of rocky outcroppings seemed to be far less than the other side.

As they approached the end of the lake closest to their entry point, Ron stopped and pointed up at a small hillock that overlooked the lake. "There's a line of rocks up there on top of that hill."

"There's a lot more over to the side," said Oliver.

"Come on Ron," said Professor Flitwick. "We'll check out your hill while the others check around the side of the crater."

The two climbed quickly up the hill and stood in front of a line of rocks that formed a ridge along the top, but there didn't seem to be anything unusual about their shape. Ron let out a grunt of disappointment, and started to walk back down towards the others, but Flitwick held up his hand. "One moment Ron. Let's walk around and look at them from the opposite side."

Ron shrugged and climbed back up to join Professor Flitwick as he moved around behind the left hand edge of the outcrop. They walked along behind the rocks, squinting at them from every possible angle in an effort to force them into an image of a bird, but they could see nothing. When they reached the right hand edge of the ridge, Ron again showed his disappointment, and sat down on the lush grass in disgust. The little Professor smiled and bent down to console him, but stopped in mid-bend, staring intently at the far side of the rocky outcrop.

"Look! Look!" he yelled, hopping from foot to foot in his excitement. Ron sat up and held his head close to the professor's arm to follow his line of sight, and gasped in amazement as he saw what the professor had seen.

"Here it is!" yelled Ron, running over to the far side of the ridge and waving his arms towards his friends below. "It's up here - come quick!"

Then he walked back to stand beside Flitwick, waiting for the rest to join them.

Harry was the first to approach, and Ron caught his shoulder and pushed him down into a sort of half-squatting position while he pointed to the rock that Flitwick had spotted. Harry gasped. The rock, seen from this angle and elevation, did indeed look like a bird, and because of its colour, it looked exactly like a crow, hunched low to the ground. But the most exciting thing about it was the thin rocky projection, jutting out from the 'crow's head' and pointing down into the crater below.

"Well done Professor," said Harry, grinning at his Charms teacher.

"I must confess," said Flitwick, "that if I wasn't so small, I'd have easily missed it."

By this time, the rest of the group were gathered around Ron, bending down and peering along his outstretched arm towards the rock.

Harry and Ron were the first to arrive at the rock, and scrambled up onto the ridge where they had a good view of the crater below and the direction in which the crow's beak was pointing. They lay flat on the rock and looked along the rocky beak.

"It's pointing to that little island on the lake," said Ron.

"And to a jumble of rocks standing at the end of it," said Harry, his voice full of excitement. "The entrance down to Atlantis must be in among those rocks somewhere."

They jumped down and told the others what they'd found; pointing to the little island perched at the end of a promontory of land that stretched into the middle of the lake closest to them. They all then moved swiftly down to the lake, around its left-hand edge, and onto the finger of land that led to the island. A few minutes later, they stood on the little island, looking back up to the spot where the rocky crow was perched, but from this angle and distance, they couldn't distinguish it from the rest of the rocks along the ridge.

Sirius and Oliver walked up to the rough volcanic rocks that protruded onto the island from below, looking at their odd arrangement. There were two stands of rock, a large one right in the centre of the island and a smaller one further down towards the edge of the lake. They peered into the space between them, and saw that there was just enough room to squeeze in between. Katie walked up and eased Oliver and her father to one side. "I'm a lot thinner than you two," she said as she turned sideways and eased her way between the rocks.

"Watch where you're treading," shouted Oliver. "We don't want you falling down a hole."

Katie muttered something that wasn't very complimentary to her boyfriend, and then just as she disappeared from sight, shouted, "It opens out a bit just inside. It's a sort of enclosure - like a cavern, but with a narrow opening up above. Hang on a minute... yes... there's something here. There's a cleft at the bottom of the larger stand of rock... it looks like it might lead into a cave or something."

"Hang on a minute Katie," shouted Oliver. "I'm coming in!"

He squeezed quickly between the rocks and walked over to stand beside Katie, who was bending down looking at a narrow opening at the base of the large crag. Sirius, Harry and Ron soon joined him, but there wasn't room for the others in the confined space between the two rocks.

"There's not enough room to squeeze through there," observed Sirius. "Not even for you, Katie."

"This has to be the way down," said Harry, looking down at the ground for a suitable piece of rock. He selected a loose piece of rock, flattened and ending in a sharp point and knelt on the ground to clear away the loose earth at the bottom of the cleft. Ron and Oliver soon picked up two other pieces of rock and joined Harry in his attempt to find out if the cleft extended below ground level.

Ten minutes of digging revealed that Harry was right. The opening at the base of the rock became much larger the further down they dug, and spurred them on to greater efforts. Soon, they'd uncovered an opening that was large enough for a person to crawl through.

"What's happening in there?" shouted an impatient Ceri from outside.

"We think we've found it," shouted Sirius. "Give us a couple of minutes to squeeze through and then follow us."

Harry was the first to ease his way into the opening, going in feet-first, with Sirius and Oliver holding on to his arms in case there was a drop on the other side. Harry stretched his legs as far as he could and grinned when his feet touched a hard surface. He eased himself further inside and told his two supporters to let go of his arms as he pulled himself completely through the gap.

Harry took out his wand and lit it, moving it around above his head to get a feel for the place. He saw that he was standing on a four-foot wide ledge about three feet below the level of the ground outside, that extended to either side of him for about five feet. It was just over six feet to the rocky ceiling, and he cautiously edged further along the ledge and held his wand into the dark space that opened up below. He lay flat on the ground and extended his arm further into the space to reveal a sort of funnel-shaped passageway, no more than two feet wide, that slanted down below the ground at an angle of thirty degrees from horizontal - steep, but not too steep to crawl down if he wedged his arms against the sides of the funnel to stop him falling out of control.

He moved back to the outside opening and told the waiting three what he'd found, and then waited until they'd all eased their way into the cave. They moved to one side to allow the rest of the group to follow and soon, everyone was packed like sardines inside the confined space.

"I'll go down first," said Harry, brushing a loose bit of dirt away from the side of his face.

"We're all coming with you kids," said Ceri, looking to Sirius, who nodded. "We'll come as far as we can before it's obvious that you have to proceed alone."

"Hang on," said Ron, reaching into the rucksack that Charlie was carrying. "I thought this might come in handy again."

Everyone stared and grinned as he pulled a long length of rope from the sack and tied one end around Harry's waist. "What! I take this with me everywhere, ever since I used it in the labyrinth at Rennes-le-Chateau. There's one golden rule I've learned since we started these quests - never go anywhere with Harry unless you've got a piece of rope!"

Harry grinned and waited until Sirius, Oliver and Charlie had the end of the rope securely in their grasps before easing himself feet-first into the narrow funnel. He stretched out his elbows to the sides and braced himself against the walls, and then eased himself slowly downwards, letting gravity do the hard work as he alternately relaxed and tightened his grip on the wall.

Everyone held their breath as Harry sunk out of sight, only the vibrations on the rope that held him showing that he was still moving downwards. After several minutes, the rope suddenly slackened, and Harry's voice echoed up the funnel from below.

"It's about twenty feet down," he shouted. "It comes out into a cavern, and it's big enough to hold us all easily. I'm untying the rope now - if one of you eases down like I did, the rest of you can just slide down and two of us can support you at the bottom."

Oliver was the next one down, and then helped Harry catch the others to ease their momentum as they slid down the funnel one by one.

"You're not going to like this!" said Hermione, who stood at the far end of the cavern, looking out through the opening at the far end while the last of the group slid down to join them.

Ceri walked over and looked out, then gasped, "Uh oh! Not very nice at all!"

The rest crowded around the pair as they held their wands into the space beyond the opening. They looked out into a large circular gallery, and the cavern in which they stood was about a hundred and fifty feet above the floor. Down to the left, stretching at a fairly gentle angle was a narrow rock ledge that wound around the sides of the gallery from their position, right down to the rock floor.

Ginny looked with apprehension at the narrow ledge, and seeing her expression, Hugo leaned close and whispered, "Don't worry, Ginny. I'll help you get down."

Ginny smiled gratefully and stepped back to let someone else take the lead. Oliver and Katie were the first to step out onto the ledge and stood with their backs pressed tightly against the rocky wall as they moved side-wards along the perilous path. Remus and Flitwick followed, and soon they were all edging their way cautiously down the gallery. Hugo kept hold of Ginny's hand as he led her down, not taking his eyes from the girl as she inched along the ledge. The pair was the last to reach the bottom, and Ginny hugged Hugo gratefully for his help, although she clung to him just a little too tightly, and a tad too long for a mere display of gratitude.

Hermione and Margot again grinned at each other as they watched Hugo and Ginny, and then sat down beside one of the rock pools that dotted the bottom of the gallery, rippling the cool water with their hands.

"Over here," shouted Remus from the opposite end from where the others were resting. "I've found something."

They all walked over to Remus, who was standing alongside an opening in the gallery wall. As they approached, he pointed to the wall above the opening, holding his wand high to illuminate the ancient writing.

"Hieroglyphics," said Harry. "Perhaps it's a message from Osiris and Isis."

He stretched up onto the tips of his toes and translated the short column of glyphs. "It says... *Be warned that the way forward is only for the Anima Summas and their helpers.*"

He turned to look at Hermione, who nodded that she agreed with his translation.

"Well this is as far as we go then," said Sirius.

Harry and Hermione held hands as they ducked inside the opening and peered inside. Harry turned back to the others. "It's a round-shaped tunnel - a bit like that funnel we came down at the top, only a bit bigger and not so steep. From what I can see, we should be able to walk down it fairly easily."

Nadine looked at her watch. "It's six o'clock. You'd better have something to eat before you go."

"Good idea, Nadine," said Ron, smiling.

After they finished some of the sandwiches that Margot and Nadine had helped Sara make, they sat drinking a hot cup of tea as they chatted about what might lay ahead.

"How much further down do you think we have to go?" asked Ginny.

"You might have quite a way to go yet," said Remus. "I'd estimate that we're not far from sea level at the moment, and if Atlantis has sunk down as far as the Mid-Atlantic ridge, it'll be at least another two miles further down."

"In these sort of conditions, that could take quite some time," said Oliver.

"You'd better take some of the food that's left," said Charlie, grinning at his brother. "I wouldn't want to see you going hungry down there."

Harry and Hermione walked over to look once more into the tunnel, and gestured for Ron, Ginny and Margot to join them. "We've got a decision to make," said Harry, looking at Ginny.

"Should Hugo join us or not," said Hermione.

"Of course he must," said Ginny quickly. "I think it's obvious that he's the sixth one."

"I'm not sure, Ginny," said Harry. "Oh I know he's been a big help to us, but there's nothing that's happened so far that tells me he's the right one."

"And there's that warning," said Hermione, looking up at the hieroglyphics. "If Hugo's not the one, then it could be dangerous for him to come with us."

"So how will we know?" asked Ron.

Ginny brightened. "Ron's right! If he *is* the right one and he *doesn't* come with us, we could fail at the last hurdle. He's got to come!"

"But, of course, it may not be the last hurdle," said Hermione. "I've got a feeling that it is, but when did anything on these quests work out the way we thought it would?"

Harry pondered for a few moments. "You're right, of course, Ginny. He'll have to come - if he wants to, that is. We'll leave it up to him, shall we?"

Ginny grinned and rushed over to Hugo, who'd been watching the five talk and look in his direction several times.

"You've been talking about me haven't you?" he asked.

Ginny nodded. "You have to understand that things could get very dangerous from now on. It's always been the case at the end of the last two quests. I... we think that you may be the sixth one - there has to be six of us to complete the final quest. But it's up to you whether you want to come with us."

Ginny looked hopefully at Hugo, who smiled. "Of course I'd like to come with you. I don't know whether I'm the sixth one or not, but I don't want to miss out on the rest of the adventure. And in any case," he looked slyly at the beaming Ginny, "I've got to come to look after you, haven't I?"

Ginny caught hold of his hand and dragged him to his feet, and then pulled him across to the other four. "He'll come with us!"

"You're aware that it could be dangerous?" asked Harry. Hugo nodded solemnly.

"We'd better do the same as we did in the labyrinth," said Hermione. "Ginny - will you keep a map of which way we go, just in case there may be branches in these tunnels?"

Ginny reached into her robes and pulled out several pieces of parchment and a quill, holding them up to show the others.

"Right," said Harry. "Time to go, I think."

"You lot take care," said Sirius, walking up to them.

Katie walked up and hugged Harry, whispering in his ear, "Be careful, Harry - and make sure you all come back safely." She kissed him on the cheek and then stepped back. Harry grinned warmly at her - he still hadn't fully got used to having a cousin who cared for him.

The six, led by Harry and Ron, walked into the tunnel and soon disappeared around the first bend, the shouts of encouragement from the protectors ringing in their ears.

"Come on," said Professor Flitwick, walking back to the large rock pool at the centre of the gallery. "We might as well make ourselves comfortable. We might be waiting here for some time."

He pulled his wand from his robes and sent a charm towards several rocks protruding from the gallery walls. He grinned as they started to glow with a white light, flooding the gallery with a soft and gentle illumination. Then he pointed his wand at a large rock embedded in the floor, and sent another charm that transformed it into a large and sumptuous cushion. He sank down onto it with a sigh, and raised his eyebrows at the others, inviting them to follow his lead.

Only Remus could remember the charm, however. The others had to let Flitwick provide comfortable seating for them. They settled down to wait - something that they found very hard to do, especially when they remembered the agonies they went through when they had to wait for the four to emerge from the Great Pyramid of Giza.

Remus and Flitwick spent much of the time wandering around the gallery, inspecting the rock formations and reminiscing about the revelations at the top of Mount Olympus, while the other six split up into their natural pairs. Katie, however, couldn't help glancing across at her father whenever Oliver started to get a bit frisky, and likewise, Sirius, however much he tried, couldn't help glancing at Katie whenever he and Ceri held each other closely. The big problem was the lack of any privacy in the gallery.

As the hours wore on, Flitwick settled into a gentle slumber, while Remus just stood at the entrance to the tunnel. He smiled wryly as he looked towards the three couples, pleased that they were all so happy with each other, but feeling a pang of regret for his own situation. Ever since he'd been smitten with the curse of the werewolf, he'd made a pact with himself never to become involved with a girl. He just couldn't risk the cursed gene being passed along to any children that may result from such a liaison. But even with that in the forefront of his mind, he still deeply regretted that he could never find the kind of love that Sirius had found.

He sighed and walked back to his cushion, sank down and closed his eyes. Sleep was still far away, but he could still dream.

Harry and Ron led the way through the smooth-sided tunnel, which twisted and turned as it moved ever further down into the bowels of the earth. They walked for about an hour before the tunnel suddenly petered out at a narrow crevice. Harry squeezed through and found himself standing at the top of a sort of chimney that stretched vertically below him. He looked all around, but could see no other way forward, so he called back for the others to join him on the ledge of rock.

The chimney was quite narrow - narrow enough for them to ease their way down by making use of the many rocky projections for footholds, and by stretching their arms and legs to the side to give support against the sides of the walls as they moved down.

Again Harry led the way, but kept glancing up to make sure that the girls, in particular, were comfortable with the awkward climb down. But he should have concentrated more closely on his own progress. It was the concern for his friends that landed him in one devil of a pickle. He stretched down with his right foot to brace it against the projecting rock that until that moment had always been there for him, but instead found that he was trying to stand on thin air.

His leg shot from underneath him, dragging the rest of his body after it. He flung out his arms and for a few agonising moments, hung suspended above a dark and unknown abyss. But he couldn't hang on and then he fell, feeling the increasingly warm air flood over his face as he opened his mouth to shout a warning to the others coming behind. Then he closed his eyes, concentrated, and transformed into his eagle animagus form, spreading his wings to halt the fall to the hidden depths below.

He flapped his wings and flew back up to where the chimney exited into the huge space, and screeched loudly, both in warning and to let his friends know that he was safe. He hovered directly beneath the hole and waited while an astonished Ron, who hadn't realised the mess that Harry had got himself into, eased himself down onto the eagle's back. Harry continued to hover until Hermione came into view, staring fearfully at the gaping hole that opened up beneath her feet.

Harry moved closer and tried to project his thoughts to her, telling her to remain still until he came back for her. Hermione cocked her head to one side, listening intently, and then nodded. She looked up and shouted to the others to stop climbing down the chimney, and she also shouted down for Ron to light his wand, so that Harry could see where he was flying.

Harry turned and circled around the top of the rocky ceiling, trying to get a feel for the size of the place in which he'd emerged. He could see that it was huge - really huge - the light from Ron's wand couldn't reach to the far side of the circular chamber. Harry dropped lower, keeping his keen eagle eyes peeled beneath him, trying to see the bottom of the chamber. Down and down he flew, always circling so that Ron could keep watch for any exits to the side, but there were none. Finally, after several minutes of flying, Harry spotted that the chamber started to curve to the right until it levelled out into a flat area where he could safely set Ron onto the ground. But before he dropped to the ground, Harry flew on a while longer to see where the huge chamber led. After about a hundred yards of flat ground, it once more dropped down to form yet another seemingly bottomless pit.

He flew back to where the level ground started and transformed as soon as Ron jumped down from his back.

"I'll go back and fetch the others," said Harry. "You have a look around down here and see if there's any tunnels leading out of this place."

Ron nodded, and wiped his forehead, which had started to perspire. "It's getting bloody hot down here," he said.

Harry grinned at his friend and then transformed once more, kicking off from the ground and rising swiftly up to the chimney exit. He hovered directly beneath, as before, and allowed first Hermione, then Margot, to climb onto his back. As soon as she felt she was secure, Hermione screwed her eyes tight shut, while Margot held her lit wand high for Harry.

After setting the girls safely down, he once more rose into the air and hovered while a still-incredulous Hugo climbed down onto his back and held his arms out to steady Ginny as she flopped down in front of him. Hugo grasped her tightly as Harry once more flew down to the bottom of the chamber, and then helped her climb down once Harry had landed.

"Whoa - that was something else!" exclaimed Hugo, as Harry transformed once more.

"It very nearly wasn't," Harry replied, and told the others what had happened.

"That was quick thinking," said Hermione quietly as she caught around her boyfriend and held him close, trying not to think of what may have happened.

They all turned when Ron came into view, grinning from ear to ear. "I've found an exit," he said. "It's about fifty yards along this stretch of chamber, on the left hand side."

"What is this place, anyway?" asked Margot, looking around at the smooth sides of the chamber.

"I think it's a magma tube," said Hermione, "formed when the molten lava swelled up from the main magma chamber somewhere below. I'd guess we flew down for nearly a mile before coming to this level stretch - the lava must have hit a very hard core of rock when it welled up, forcing it to the side before coming to softer rock once more."

"And from the heat in this place, there's a bit more of that stuff down below somewhere," said Ginny, wiping her forehead.

"The tube drops off once more about a hundred yards further on," said Harry, "so it's a good job Ron's found something."

"And we're on the right track," replied the red-haired boy. "There's more of that strange writing above the tunnel entrance."

Harry and the others followed Ron as he led them over to the tunnel entrance. It looked to be far craggier than the places they'd come through so far, indicating that it hadn't been formed by the action of molten lava. Hermione held her wand high and looked at the hieroglyphs above the entrance, whispering to herself as she translated the script.

"It's just a message saying that this is the right way to go," she said.

Harry led the way into the tunnel, which although leading ever downwards, he was relieved to see that the slope was fairly gentle. After several minutes, the passage started to get steeper, and began to spiral around, always turning to the right and always heading down.

"I think it's winding around the outside of the lava tube," said Harry.

After another half hour of walking, the passage started to straighten out once more and the slope became a lot gentler. Up ahead, in the light from his wand, Harry saw a dark open space - he groaned when he realised that the tunnel was about to exit into another chamber, and he hoped it wasn't like the last one.

He walked slowly forward until he came to the exit and cautiously leaned out, holding his illuminated wand before him. As he'd feared, the exit led to yet another large gallery, although it didn't appear to have been created by the magma welling up from below. It looked more like one of the caves below Rennes-le-Chateau, only on a far grander scale.

In the increased light afforded by Ron's wand, the two boys could just make out the floor of the chamber some forty yards or so below, but this time, there was a wider ledge running down around the walls of the cavern to the bottom, where he could see huge stalagmites rising up into the heights above his head. He called for the others to be careful and stepped out onto the ledge, testing that the rocky floor was strong enough to support his weight.

He moved towards the right, keeping his back to the rock wall, and edged slowly along while the others followed. They'd gone about half way down when Harry stiffened at the sound of a scream coming from somewhere behind him. He turned his head quickly to see that Ginny had fallen to the floor of the ledge, and was scrambling frantically to stop the momentum of the fall taking her over the side and down to the rocky floor below.

Quick as a flash, Hugo fell to his knees and reached out to grasp Ginny's right arm, just as she toppled over the edge, the sinews in his neck tightening and his face contorting with the effort of holding onto her. Ron, who was immediately in front, bent down and grasped his sister's left arm as she reached it towards him, and between them, the two boys lifted Ginny back onto the ledge.

Ginny was shaking and gasping from the shock of her experience, and clung to Hugo as she started to sob. Hugo placed his hand on the back of her head and whispered into her ear, trying to calm her. After a few minutes, Ginny stood back and nodded, "I'm ok now I think. That bloody rock!"

She kicked out and sent a loose rock flying over the edge onto the floor below, satisfied that the object that had been the cause of the near-disaster had suffered the fate that she almost had.

Everyone breathed a lot easier and continued down around the cavern walls, this time keeping a wary eye out for any loose stones. At last, they reached the bottom and sat on the floor to rest for a few moments. Then they all wandered around the cavern looking for the continuation of their path. Margot called out when she came to a gap in the rock wall, the only one in the cavern as it turned out, and pointed to the strange writing that had been placed alongside it. But this time, the script was not in Egyptian hieroglyphics, and it also differed in that it was written onto a metallic-looking plaque, rather than directly onto the rock wall.

"What does it say?" Margot asked as Harry and Hermione looked closely at the oddly shaped characters. They both shook their heads.

"It's very similar to the cuneiform writing of ancient Sumer," said Hermione. "But it's not quite the same."

She looked up at the others, and whispered, "I think this could be the writing of the ancients - the writing of the people of Atlantis."

"But wouldn't Thoth - Enki - and the other Atlanteans have taught their own language when they re-civilised the world?" asked Ginny. "Why would they teach something different?"

Hermione shrugged. "I don't know, Ginny, but let's face it, look how many languages and dialects there are in our world - it must have been the same in Atlantis. And in any case, look how English has changed over the last few hundred years."

"I wonder what it says?" asked Margot. "Do you think it could be something important - you said it was very similar to the cuneiform of the Sumerians, so can you at least have a stab at what it says? It might be some sort of warning or something."

Harry shook his head. "I wouldn't have thought so - if it was that important, surely Osiris and Isis would have written something to warn the future Anima Summas don't you think?"

"You're probably right," said Hermione. "Come on Harry, let's take a closer look at it."

The pair held their wands close to the script and looked very closely at the wedge-shaped characters, talking quietly between themselves. After about five minutes, they stepped back, looking doubtfully at each other.

"Well?" asked Ron. "Any luck?"

Hermione let out a deep breath. "There are a few words that we think we recognise. But we can't be absolutely sure."

"So come on - tell us what you think it says!" exclaimed Ginny.

Hermione pointed to several of the shapes. "This first sequence of letters seems to be some sort of warning - you know, like 'DANGER' at the top of a sign, but it's not 'danger' as such. Then there's a sequence that we don't recognise, apart from the words 'Anima Summas'. After

that, there's a sentence that includes the words 'true' and 'helpers', and in the last sequence are the words 'enable' or 'permit' and either 'to pass' or 'to proceed'."

Margot summarised what the pair had been able to translate. "So it goes something like, 'Warning - Anima Summas and true helpers. Permit to pass.'"

"That's right," said Hermione. "So it could be similar to the message left by Osiris and Isis back at the cavern where we left Sirius and the others."

"That said, 'be warned that the way forward is only for the Anima Summas and their helpers,'" said Harry.

"So it's not really telling us anything that we don't already know," said Ginny.

"I suppose not," said Harry. Then he looked at Hermione, took a deep breath and stepped across the threshold into the dark passageway.

Chapter 8 - And Then There Were Six

As he stepped across the threshold into the dark passageway, Harry stiffened and jumped back, looking wide-eyed at the dark tunnel entrance. "There's something there," he gasped. "I felt something when I stretched inside."

"What was it!" exclaimed Hermione anxiously, clutching Harry's arm.

Harry shook his head. "I don't know - it felt like some sort of force field - a sort of strange vibrating feeling."

"Do you feel ok?" asked Ginny.

Harry nodded. "Yes - it didn't stop me going inside, and it wasn't painful or anything like that. I just didn't expect it."

"What do you think it is?" asked Ron, looking once more at the strange writing on the plaque. "I bet that says something about it in the bits you couldn't translate."

"Well we won't know until we go inside," said Harry, taking a deep breath and stepping into the darkness. After the initial magical vibration as he stepped across the threshold into the passageway, Harry breathed easy when the strange feeling stopped.

"Whatever it is," he said, "it's only at the entrance. There's nothing inside here."

Hermione stepped through next, and shivered as she felt the strange vibration, but relaxed as she stepped up alongside Harry. "It's only when you walk through," she said. "There's nothing to worry about."

Ron and Margot stepped through and waited while Ginny followed close on their heels, and then turned to wait for Hugo. He closed his eyes and stepped through the entrance, but a bright blue light suddenly covered him and sent him reeling back the way he had come.

Ginny shouted fearfully and walked back out to make sure he wasn't hurt. "Hugo - are you ok?"

Hugo appeared shaken, although he wasn't hurt in any way. "What was that!" he exclaimed, looking at the entrance fearfully.

"Come on, hold my hand," said Ginny as she pulled Hugo once more towards the tunnel.

As they both stepped through together, the bright blue light once more covered Hugo and sent him reeling to the outside, but leaving Ginny untouched. Harry put out a hand, stopped her walking back out of the tunnel, and turned her around to face him. His eyes were full of concern for his red-haired little friend as he spoke gently to her. "It's no use Ginny. Hugo can't come with us."

"What!" yelled Ginny, looking searchingly into Harry's eyes.

Hermione stepped up to her and reached out to hold her hand. "Harry's right, Ginny," she whispered. "Hugo can't come through the portal - he's not the sixth one."

"How... how do you know that?" she asked in a tremulous voice, bringing a lump to Hermione's throat as she saw the hurt in her friend's face.

"That message on the outside of the portal," she whispered. "It's starting to make a bit more sense now. It probably reads something like this - Warning, Only the Anima Summas and their true helpers are permitted to pass beyond this portal."

Harry nodded. "It looks like there's a spell on the entranceway to check that only the permitted ones are walking through it. If Hugo was the sixth one, he'd have been able to come through." He shook his head gently. "You... we weren't to know that he wasn't the right one."

"They're right Ginny," said Hugo from the other side of the portal. "I can't be the sixth one. You go ahead, I'll wait for you here. Be careful."

Ginny stared at Hugo for a long moment, then suppressed a sob as she whispered, "You too."

Hermione and Margot caught around their friend as they led her down the passageway, while Ron passed out some food and water to Hugo, then waved sadly goodbye, knowing how terrible both he and his sister must be feeling.

They walked on down the passageway for about a hundred yards before Harry called a halt. He turned to the others, his expression showing some of the despondency he felt. "You know what this means, don't you?"

Hermione frowned and nodded. "It means that this can't be the final leg of the quest. Thoth left us in no doubt that we have to be six to complete the quest, and since there's obviously no one else down here, the sixth one must be somewhere else - probably on the way to the next part of the quest after we've found whatever it is we need to find in Atlantis."

Harry shook his head worriedly. "We just haven't got the time," he said. "Voldemort's going to start killing a lot of people before too long."

Ginny felt awful. She slumped onto the ground and started to cry quietly. Margot knelt beside her and held her hand, trying to comfort her.

Ginny looked up at her friends. "It's not fair," she wailed. "As soon as I find someone, he's taken away again. I don't think I'll ever find the right boy."

Hermione joined Margot and put her hands on Ginny's cheeks, forcing her to look directly into her eyes. "It doesn't mean that Hugo's not the right boy for you Ginny. All it means is that he's not the sixth member of the team - there's nothing written anywhere to say that the sixth one will be the one for you. It might even be a girl. And it's obvious that Hugo still feels the same way about you as he did before he found that he wasn't the one."

"But that's not how it's supposed to be!" she cried, but then sniffled and wiped her eyes, and she smiled wryly as she thought about what her friend had said. "You're right Hermione - as usual. Come on - I feel a bit better now."

She rose to her feet and wiped the dust from her robes, but it was plain to everyone that she didn't feel all that much better - she had it in her mind that perfect symmetry would only be realised with the arrival of the sixth member of the team. But she resolved not to be a worry, and stuck out her chin in defiance of the way she felt deep inside.

They all walked on down the gently sloping passage, and they soon began to realise that the walls seemed very smooth - much smoother than anything they'd seen before. But that soon changed as they emerged from the passage into a small but very rough natural-looking cavern. Harry held up his hand and stood quietly, listening to the familiar sound that percolated up from somewhere below.

"Water," he whispered. "That's the sound of running water."

They walked to the far end of the cave and stepped into a narrow passageway, the rough sides and smooth floor telling them that a stream had once flowed through the place. As they walked on, the sound of running water became louder and louder, until they stood looking down at a narrow chute of water, that emerged from their right-hand side, flowing beneath a low rock wall, and disappeared once more down the chute to their left. They could see no other exits from the tunnel, and Harry knew that the chute was the only way forward.

Biting the bullet, Harry looked at his friends and then turned and yelled as he jumped into the swiftly moving stream. Hermione's eyes went wide as she saw Harry disappear down into the depths below - she couldn't believe that he'd just taken off like that, leaving her to fend for herself. Her eyes glowed angrily as she jumped in and followed her boyfriend down the water chute.

Ron, Margot and Ginny stood looking at the spot where their friends had disappeared, and then followed, but not before Margot exclaimed, "It's one thing to go down there, but how the devil are we going to get back up again?"

"We'll worry about that later," shouted Ron as he jumped in.

Further down the watercourse, Harry shouted as he felt a great exhilaration as he was swept ever downwards. He didn't have time to think about what lay at the end of the ride, he was too busy concentrating on trying to keep his head above water and preventing it bashing against the rugged walls and ceiling of the narrow tunnel. After only two minutes - it seemed a lot longer - he was swept out into space, following the curve of the waterfall as it emerged from the end of the chute. He yelled once more, but quickly closed his mouth as he tumbled with a great splash into a deep pool, the depths formed by the action of the falling water over the years.

His head sunk below the water and he flayed his arms about, trying to get back to the surface of the pool. As his head broke above the water line, he just had time to see Hermione flying past, landing rear-end first in the rock pool. Ron, then Ginny and finally Margot quickly followed her.

Harry struck out for the side of the pool and heaved himself up to sit on the rocky bank. He grinned as he saw that the other four had risen to the surface and were swimming towards where he sat. "That was exciting wasn't it?" he shouted.

His face dropped when he saw the expression on Hermione's face as she climbed out of the pool, and raised his eyebrows questioningly as she stood up and strode purposefully towards him. He stood up as well, wondering what had got into his girlfriend, but he felt a bit like a rabbit sitting frozen in the blazing headlights of an approaching juggernaut.

Her eyes flashed as she reached out, caught the front of Harry's robes and pulled him towards her. Her face was no more than six inches away from Harry's and her voice was low and deadly. "That was the second time you've gone into a dive without putting your brain in gear! One of these days, your hair-brained bravado is going to get us all killed!"

"I... I..." he stammered, then stopped as Hermione's expression changed. He thought he saw a little tear in her eye as she once more pulled him towards her, but this time kissed him forcefully on the lips. She relaxed as he responded, and they broke apart only when the other three started whistling.

"Sorry," said Harry, speaking to all four. "It just felt like the best thing to do at the time."

For the next hour, they sat at the side of the pool while they dried off a bit and ate some of the food. They gazed around the large cavern, which was obviously a natural feature, but the light from their wands couldn't penetrate the furthest recesses of the place. Eventually, they stood up and started to explore.

Harry and Ron followed the stream that fed off the pool, which flowed at a gentler pace towards the far side of the cave where it disappeared beneath a narrow gap at the base of the rock wall. "Well there's no way out that way," said Ron.

They turned and saw the lights cast by the wands of the three girls moving around the walls to the left of the pool, so they decided to check the right-hand side. They stopped to examine a likely looking exit point, but the narrow passage soon came to an abrupt end. They walked back into the main cavern to hear the girls calling to them from a point almost directly opposite them. They walked quickly across the rocky floor, dodging the many stalagmites, and saw them standing alongside an opening in the rock wall.

"At first, we thought it was a natural tunnel," said Hermione, "but when we went in a little way... well, come and see for yourselves."

The two boys followed them into the tunnel, which turned slightly to the left just after they entered. The rocky sides and ceiling were very rough and natural looking at first, but they soon saw that the passageway took on a more refined appearance, the walls becoming smoother and the ceiling settling at a more or less constant height above their heads. After thirty yards, they came to an obviously man-made feature - smooth square columns rising from the floor to the ceiling, where they supported a square cross beam.

Harry gazed closely at one of the columns and run his hands over the surface. "It looks and feel like concrete, but it's a lot smoother."

They walked on down and found that there were similar structures spaced every thirty yards or so along the gently sloping passage. "Do you think we might be coming to the outskirts of Atlantis?" asked Margot.

"What are we likely to find there anyway?" asked Ron. "I read the descriptions of the city given by Plato, but even if he was right, that was before it sunk two miles under the sea."

"Your guess is as good as mine," said Hermione. "But I wouldn't have thought there was a lot left of it, especially if it was on the surface of the island exposed to all the destruction. I suppose the best we can hope for is an underground facility of some kind, maybe one that was hewn into the rock at the bottom of a mountainside, and which may have been sealed off when the sea flooded the city."

They walked on down the passage for what seemed ages, and Margot couldn't stifle a loud yawn as they stopped briefly to examine an odd looking projection at the base of the left-hand wall.

"I feel tired too," said Ginny, yawning infectiously as she looked at her watch. "Hey! It's twelve midnight! It's been eight hours since we left Sirius and the others back in the upper gallery."

Harry glanced at Hermione and saw that she, too, looked a bit tired. "We'd better stop and try to get some sleep."

Hermione shivered slightly - the air had become progressively cooler the further down they'd come - and pointed her wand at some loose pebbles, which started to glow with a warm reddish light. The five huddled close with their backs against the rocky walls and were soon fast asleep, helped by the drowsiness brought on by the comforting warmth from the glowing pebbles.

Several hours later, something percolated into Harry's mind and his eyes shot open as he jumped quickly to his feet, pulling his wand from his robes as he instinctively crouched in a defensive posture. He looked quickly in both directions along the passageway, but could see nothing in the light that was still given off by the pebbles.

"What!" gasped Ron, roused from his sleep by Harry's movements.

The girls stirred and quickly jumped to their feet when they saw Harry's obvious agitation. "What's there?" asked Hermione anxiously.

Harry shook his head and relaxed, although he still held his wand at the ready. "I heard something - a sort of crashing noise."

The other four gazed along the passage, raising their wands to give more light, but everything was as quiet as the grave. Ginny glanced at her watch. "Six o'clock."

"Let's get some breakfast," said Ron. "Whatever made that noise has long gone by now."

Fifteen minutes later, Hermione extinguished the pebbles and they started off down the passageway once more, Harry and Ron in the lead. They remained cautious whenever they came to a bend, making sure that the way was safe before proceeding.

Ron held up his hand when the tunnel branched to the right and came to an abrupt end. Harry whispered for the girls to remain in the passage while he and Ron went to investigate what lay

in the darkness beyond. They walked slowly into the cavern and held their wands high above their heads, listening intently for any unusual sound.

The cavern was roughly rectangular in shape, about twenty yards long and fifteen yards wide. The floor was covered with dust and loose rocks, but was otherwise devoid of any features. Ron pointed to the far side, where he saw an opening in the rock wall, looking to be the same size as the passage from which they'd just emerged. Harry turned and called for the girls to join them, and they all moved across towards the far side.

They all jumped when they heard a loud crashing sound coming from their right, and turned to see several large rocks and loose dirt tumble to the floor from a small gap where the rock wall met the cavern ceiling about fifteen feet above. After a few moments, they walked over to see the obvious signs of previous falls, the floor on the right-hand side being littered with rocks and dirt.

"That's what probably woke you earlier," said Hermione, looking up at the gap in the ceiling. "It doesn't look very stable up there."

"Come on," said Ron. "Let's get going before the whole roof comes down."

"I hope it doesn't Ron," said Margot, "or we won't be able to get back."

They entered the tunnel at the far side of the cavern, and saw that it was exactly like the other, with supporting structures spaced every thirty yards or so. The tunnel angled gently downwards, like the one before, and continued on for about half a mile before the group emerged into another cavern, or what they initially thought was a cavern.

"This is not a cavern," said Ginny as she looked around the square-shaped space. "It's a man-made room cut into the rock."

The room was fifteen feet square and about eight feet high, and there were unmistakable signs of previous occupation. There was a large dust-covered stone table at the centre, supported by square stone legs at each corner, and several niches cut into the walls around the room. There were several jumbles of decayed wood strewn around the floor, which had probably once been chairs. There was a smooth area on the left-hand wall, polished to a lighter colour than the rest of the walls, which held some roughly written script similar to the writing they'd seen on the plaque earlier.

"Can you make any of it out?" asked Margot as she walked over and held her wand closer to the writing.

Hermione shook her head. "It's not as organised as the writing on the plaque. It looks to be rough notes or something - a bit like untidy handwriting."

"This could have been some sort of meeting room," said Harry. "Perhaps they came here to discuss ideas or work out some problem or something, writing their thoughts on the wall while others sat around the table and talked about them."

"You may not be too far off the mark, Harry," said Hermione, walking over to peer into one of the niches adjacent to the polished section of wall. She reached in and pulled out an odd-

looking metallic object. It was flat, about fifteen inches long, and had gradation marks in the same strange script along one of the sides, which terminated in a multi-faceted array of levers.

"This must be some sort of measuring instrument," she murmured. "But I don't know what these levers are for."

She replaced the instrument and brought out another metallic object. She looked at it with complete incomprehension, turning it over in her hands and shaking her head. It was oval in shape, about five inches long, three inches wide and two inches high. There was a hinged lid at the centre, but when Hermione opened it, the small compartment was empty. Again, all around the sides of the object were markings of some sort, but she couldn't work out what they meant.

She replaced the object and turned to gaze around the room. "I think it's something to do with scientific research, or something similar," she said.

"Maybe there's more rooms through there," said Ron, pointing to a square shaped opening in the corner of the room, opposite the passageway they'd come from.

"This is Atlantis isn't it?" breathed Ginny.

"I think so," said Hermione. "Come on, let's see what's through that doorway."

Harry and Hermione led the way through the square opening, and found themselves in a much larger room. They looked around the place as they moved towards the centre, and Hermione suddenly gasped, "It's a laboratory of some sort."

She pointed to the stone tables arranged around the sides of the room, and the odd metallic structure that stood at the side of each one. At the far end of the room were a number of very large stone vats, but they found that upon further examination, they were all empty - apart from some traces of a very fine white powder.

"Ma-na," exclaimed Hermione. "This must be the place where they made the Shewbread - the mfkzt!"

She rushed over to one of the tables and peered closely at the metallic structure that stood beside it. It was about eight feet high, with a hinged rotating arm at the top that could be adjusted to move over the centre of the table. She looked closely at the end of the arm and saw that there was an oval recess built into it - but it was empty.

"I think that this recess held the Philosopher's stone," she exclaimed, "and they used it to transform the dried contents of those plants into the white powder stuff. This must be the place where Thoth and the other scientists used to work!"

"What I don't understand," said Ginny, "is why those tables and vats are made of stone. They were obviously an advanced culture, so why didn't they use metal or something?"

"I think it may be to do with the properties of the Ma-na," said Hermione. "Perhaps stone - and it may be a particular type of stone they used - keeps it stable or something."

"Do you think we'll find the final spell, and whatever else we need to find, in here?" asked Harry.

Hermione shrugged her shoulders. "It's possible, but we'd better do a bit more exploring first. Once we know how much of the city is still remaining, we'll have a better idea."

They all wandered back up the centre of the laboratory, looking towards the left-hand wall opposite the stone tables, looking for an exit point that would take them further into the city.

"Through here, I think," said Margot, pointing to a huge stone door back towards the middle of the room. "But I don't know how we're going to open it - it looks very heavy."

Ron walked over and looked up at the door's bulk. There were no handles or locks in sight, so he reached out and tentatively gave the door a push.

"Whoa..." he exclaimed when the door swung silently away from him. "That thing's solid, but it seems to be as light as a feather!"

The five youngsters stepped through the doorway and suddenly stopped, looking in awe at the vast space that was before them. It was cold; it was dark; and it was as silent as the grave. They all raised their wands high, gazing at the cathedral-like cavern, each of them struggling to come to terms with the majesty of the place.

They could just make out the decorated ceiling high above their heads, and the ornate walls on either side that stretched into the distance beyond the light provided by their wands. A number of statues still stood in the middle distance, but everywhere, there was evidence of the destruction that had befallen Nibiru. Huge fluted columns lay on their sides all around the floor amid the rubble of the buildings that had fallen during that terrible time so long ago. Parts of the walls and ceiling had also crashed down, as had a number of large ornate fountains, which lay on their sides, now devoid of the sparkling water that once flowed from them. The atmosphere - the ambiance of the vast place - was strange, and it had a magical quality that was almost tangible.

"This must have been an amazing place," whispered Hermione, trying to visualise what it had looked like in its heyday.

"I know it's all in ruins," said Ron, "but it still managed to survive - I mean, we must be at least two miles under the ocean, so how is this place still in tact, relatively speaking?"

They walked to their left, along the outside walls of the laboratory and past a number of other low buildings built into the side of the cavern, until they came to the far wall. Then they turned and walked alongside it, down the length of the cavern. They stopped after about two hundred yards and stood looking up at a huge stone door. Harry reached out and placed his hand on the cold marble-like stone, looking up to where it was recessed into the cavern wall some twenty feet above his head.

"This must have been the main entrance into the place," he said. "Out there is the main city of Atlantis."

"As well as the Atlantic Ocean," said Hermione. "I think these doors saved the place from complete destruction when Atlantis sunk beneath the sea. This facility - whatever it was -

must have been built inside cliff walls, and this door must be the only point of entry, and like that other stone door we came through, I think it's been specially treated with Ma-na to give it tremendous strength, while at the same time making it as light as a feather. It must open outwards, so it must now be held fast by the tremendous pressure of the ocean on the other side."

Ginny shivered as she thought of the destructive power that lay only a short distance away on the other side of the door. "What *is* this place do you think?"

"I think," said Hermione, her voice full of reverence as her gaze roamed around the cavern, "that this is the place that housed the Council of Science. Housed inside a large cavern, the laboratory, the meeting room - it's the Academy of Science."

"The one that Thoth told us about in his book?" asked Margot. "This must be the place where he worked on the white powder and managed to transform it into the exotic Shem-an-na."

"This is where magic first started," breathed Harry, his voice mirroring the reverence of Hermione's words.

After standing silently for several minutes, they continued on to the far side of the cavern. As they walked on, they found that there were very few buildings left standing, only some of the single-storey ones that were built along the sides of the cavern walls. They went into several of these, and found that they were mainly laboratories and alchemical workrooms, most of them seemingly related to the development and production of the white powder - the Ma-na.

They arrived at the far end of the cavern and walked along the far wall, finding more laboratories and workrooms. "Let's try the centre," said Ron, pointing into the rubble that littered the floor. "We might find something different there."

They wove their way around the fallen jumble of masonry, heading into the central region of the cavern, but there was little that remained in tact, just a few statues of unknown Atlanteans, obviously of scientists venerated by the people of Nibiru, but long since forgotten by the human race since the destruction of Atlantis.

They called a halt when they reached what they thought to be the centre of the cavern and sat eating some of their food. Ron looked miserably at the food that remained. "There's only enough left for one more decent meal. We'll be hungry by the time we get back to the others."

"Don't worry Ron," said Harry, grinning. "Just think of the appetite you'll be able to build up."

"You won't find anything here, you know!" said a soft, oddly familiar voice from behind them.

Back up in the first chamber, Sirius paced worriedly around the rock pool. For what must have been the tenth time in the last half hour he suddenly stopped, turned to face the others, and hissed, "They've been gone for over twenty-four hours. What's keeping them!"

Remus sighed as he gave the same answer that he'd given only a few minutes before. "Don't worry Sirius - it's bound to take them some time to get to Atlantis, then find what they need,

and then climb back up here again. Just try to relax and let them get on with the job - they've come through worst ordeals than this before."

Sirius stared at his friend pointedly, and then resumed his pacing around the rock pool. Remus raised his eyes to the cavern ceiling, and made helpless gestures to Ceri and Katie, who stared worriedly at Sirius's back as he strode slowly around the far side of the pool.

Some way below them, Hugo sat on the cavern floor and fiddled distractedly with some loose rocks on the cold, hard floor. He stared at the tunnel entrance where his friends had gone, although his eyes didn't really register any details. He was deep in thought about the recent events, feeling regret that he wasn't the sixth member of the team, wondering what would happen when they came back, and feeling concern for the safety of the beautiful red-haired girl that had walked into his life only a day or so earlier.

He sighed as the image of Ginny filled his mind, and grinned sadly as he visualised the cute way her lips curved as she was about to break into one of her dazzling smiles. He picked up one of the rocks and angrily flung it to the far side of the cavern, frustrated that he was stuck there and not standing beside Ginny, facing whatever was below together.

The five jumped up from the fallen pillar on which they sat at the sound of the voice - a voice that was strangely familiar to them. They turned and stared wide-eyed at the ghostly form that drifted over the ruins towards them, and then sat on the end of one of the fallen pillars.

Ginny was the first to gain control of her voice. "Draco?" she whispered. "Is that you?"

The ghost of Draco Malfoy - his Ba - looked at the pretty redhead and smiled, his smoky blue eyes softening as he gazed at her. He nodded. "One and the same, I'm afraid."

"But... but you're supposed to be safely tucked away in Malfoy Manor," she breathed, her eyes wide.

"Oh I'm certainly tucked away at Malfoy Manor," he replied with a wry smile. "But I'm not *in* it, I'm six feet *under* it - or to be more precise, six feet under the garden providing sustenance for the daisies."

Ginny gasped as she covered her mouth with her hands and two little tears ran down her cheeks from her watery eyes, forming two rivulets in the dust and grime that covered her face. Draco looked at her sadly, relishing her beauty despite the dirt.

"What happened?" asked Harry.

"Voldemort killed me Potter," he said, turning towards Harry. "He killed me with the killing curse."

"But why didn't you get away when you had the chance?" asked Hermione, her eyes full of compassion.

"If I'd known he'd kill me, perhaps I would have done. I thought that he'd just torture me for a bit and then let me go - I don't know what I thought would have happened after that though. I

had some hair-brained scheme to just feed him the minimum amount of information to keep him off my back, but to warn you what I'd be telling him so you could stay safe - I don't know."

"But what are doing here of all places?" asked Harry.

"Now that, Potter, is the million-dollar question. When my ghost rose out of my dead body, a being of Light spoke to me and told me I had to wander the Earth and find one more thing to do - an act of great kindness that would be beneficial to the Light side. After that, I'd be allowed into the Realm of Light. Then I found myself stuck in this dusty old place."

"How long have you been here?" asked Ginny in a trembling voice.

"Since before last summer. My father took me to Voldemort just after I spoke to you."

"But surely, your father didn't just stand and watch as he killed you?" asked Ron.

Draco nodded. "What could he do? He gave me the chance to run away, but nobody can stand up to Voldemort's power. My father's out for revenge, you know, and you might be able to use that snippet of knowledge to your advantage in the future. Just as my ghost was stirring inside me as I lay on the grass in the garden back home, I heard my father swear that he'd get Voldemort for killing me. He might still be helping him, but I know how my father operates - he'll wait his chance; wait for the right moment - then he'll act. Voldemort probably thinks he's still his most loyal servant, but he won't know what hit him when the time comes." Draco shook his head sadly. "My father can be a nasty bugger, believe me, but he's still my father. Even though he's manipulated the way I think ever since I was a little kid and tried to groom me for great things on the Dark Side, he's still my father."

"I'm so sorry Draco," said Margot. "That's a terrible story."

"Yes it is, my little beauty, and one that gives me great pain to tell. But that's enough about my sorry situation. What about you? What the devil are you five doing here?"

"Do... do you know where you are Draco?" asked Hermione.

Draco shook his head. "Apart from some old and ruined city, I haven't got the foggiest idea. Oh I've spent the last six months or so roaming around trying to find a way out of here, so I know the place pretty well. But that's not strictly true - for the first few months I just sat around wallowing in self pity before I realised I had to try to do something positive, but it hasn't got me very far up to now. I found some passageways leading upwards and I followed them until I came to this strange portal, but somehow I couldn't get past the odd force field that covered the exit, so I was forced to come back here."

"This is Atlantis, Draco," said Hermione. "Or to be more precise, Nibiru. It's the place where magic first got started, the place where wizard-kind was born."

"You're kidding me," he said, a doubtfully smile on his face.

"We're not Draco," said Ginny, walking closer to the ghost and sitting down beside him. She had the sudden urge to reach out and hold him close, to try to ease his pain, but she knew it

was pointless to even try - after all, he was a ghost now, and she couldn't touch him physically. She roughly wiped the tears from her eyes and took a deep breath.

"There's a lot you don't know, Draco," she said. "About this place, why we've come here, the true nature of the Gods, about the four forms of the spirit, what life's all about. I'll tell you about it..."

For the next hour or so, Draco listened intently to what Ginny told him, looking in wonderment and amazement at the things they'd experienced and learned over the course of the quests.

"So if I manage to do this one good act, I'll be transformed into this Akh think by Thoth?" Ginny nodded.

"Do you think that's why I was brought here?" he asked quietly. "To help you with the final part of your quest? Could that be the one good thing I have to do?"

Harry and Hermione glanced at each other and touched hands, sending the myriad confusion of thoughts back and fore between their minds as they tried to work out whether Draco could, indeed, be the sixth one. They looked with compassion at Ginny, who was gazing at Draco, her confusion plain to see as the conflicting emotions played over her lovely features.

'How can this be?' thought Ginny. 'I've just found Hugo, and then he was taken away from what I thought he was. Now I've found Draco again - but he's a ghost! And you can't have a ghost as a boyfriend can you! This just isn't fair!'

"I don't know, Draco," Ginny finally said, looking down at the ground.

Draco stood back up. "Well this place is starting to make a bit more sense to me now. There's a secret room that I found only last week over on the right-hand corner of the cavern. I found it just by chance - there was a strange sort of emanation that I felt when I floated past some pillars still standing against the wall. I drifted up to them and found that I could move through the bare wall that stands between them. It's a small room, with the portrait of an old man hanging on the wall - that's where the emanations were coming from - but I couldn't find anything else there. I've thought about that room ever since I found it, and I've been there several times since, but although the emanations were still there, I couldn't find a way to find out what magical spell is causing them. Maybe the Anima Summas can do it."

Harry walked over and stood closer to Draco, looking him squarely in the eye. "Will you show us where this room is Draco? Will you help us?"

Draco chuckled, a low sound that wasn't at all like the sneering chuckle he usually used when he spoke to Harry. "Fancy me, Draco Malfoy, feeling excited at the prospect of helping Harry Potter. Come on - follow me."

Draco turned and drifted in the direction of the far wall of the cavern - the wall that the five hadn't explored. They all stood and then followed, Harry and Ron at the front with Hermione and Margot walking at either side of Ginny, catching under her arms in a protective way as they stepped over and around the rubble on the cavern floor.

When he reached the two pillars, Draco turned and waited for the others to catch up. He pointed at the bare wall between the pillars. "Through here," he said.

"Hang on a minute, Malfoy," said Ron. "You're a ghost, so it's easy for you to drift through, but we're solid - how are we going to get in there?"

Draco glanced at Ron disdainfully, and then turned and floated between the pillars and disappeared from sight into the secret room.

"You don't have to remind him that he's a ghost Ron," said Ginny sternly. "He's only too well aware of that."

"Whether I remind him about his ghostly status or not," he replied, "it still leaves us with the problem of how we're going to follow him in there."

Harry and Hermione instinctively held hands and pointed their other hands at the space between the pillars. They closed their eyes and spoke the ancient spell.

"ITIMA PETA"

The familiar silvery-blue rays of light shot from their raised palms and met just before combining in front of the bare wall, which shimmered for a few moments and then slowly dissolved to reveal an arched portal leading into the secret room.

"Cool," said Ron. "What did that spell mean?"

"Roughly, 'Secret portal - Open for me'," said Harry as he led the group into the small room, where they found Draco standing at the furthest end looking up at the portrait hanging on the wall.

"We've seen him before!" exclaimed Margot, as she stood looking up at the painting of the old man.

"Of course!" exclaimed Hermione. "In the largest of those buildings we found in the Garden of Eden. His portrait was there as well. This is Anu - the head of the Council of Science and the leader of the Eden Civilising Project."

"Can you feel it?" asked Margot, turning her head to the side as if listening to some dimly perceived sound.

"Magical vibrations," said Ginny. "Yes - I can just about pick them up."

"Hey!" exclaimed Ron, looking around the room as if expecting to see something that hadn't been there before. The emanations had become much stronger as Harry and Hermione walked over to stand directly beneath the portrait.

Suddenly, the surface of the painting seemed to shimmer, and the image of Anu started to move. First it moved out from the landscape which formed the background of the painting and then floated slowly down to rest on the floor immediately beneath. Then the image started to take on a more substantial and brighter form, finally appearing as a shining being of Light - an Akh.

Everyone stared in astonishment when the Akh of Anu started to speak.

"Greetings Anima Summas and helpers. Welcome to the once great land of Nibiru."

"You're Anu, aren't you?" asked Ginny.

Anu smiled. *"I am, compassionate one. You recognise my portrait from your visit to the Garden of Eden."*

"Is this the final part of the last quest?" asked Harry.

Anu nodded. *"That is so. You have reached the end of your journey. I know it has been long and arduous, and there were times when you doubted the wisdom of those that subjected you to such ordeals, but be certain that such a path was necessary for your development."*

Anu looked at Draco. *"Ba of Draco Malfoy. You now know why you were brought here. You are the fourth helper to the Anima Summas; the sixth member of the team and your presence is needed in the struggle ahead. Remain with these others until you have fulfilled your task and gained the right to join the Shining Ones in the Realm of Light."*

"But what am I supposed to do?" asked Draco. "I'm a ghost - a Ba - and since I have no physical form, how can I help in the fight against the Dark Side?"

"That will become clear when the time arrives," said Anu, smiling at the ghost enigmatically.

"Thoth - Enki - told us that you have one final spell to give us," said Hermione.

"Quite so, one of intellect," he replied. *"Ah Enki - he was like a son to me when we were together here and in Eden. I had great hopes for him when he first joined us at the Academy, and he has fulfilled all the early promise that he showed back in those far-off days. He has grown to become the best friend that humanity will ever have, and to Wizard-kind in particular. I see in your minds that you have come to respect him greatly, and I am well pleased."*

He raised both arms and pointed his palms towards Harry and Hermione, staring at them with love and friendship before closing his eyes. Brilliant white beams shot from both his palms, one striking Harry and the other Hermione, and then covering their heads in a soft glow for a moment or two, after which it faded to nothing.

"You now have the final spell, Anima Summas," he said gently. *"And your awareness of the spells given to you by another Shining One, after your ordeal in the labyrinth, has been amplified. Use them with compassion and wisdom, qualities that you have come to know during your long voyage."*

The pair glanced at each other and touched, sharing their thoughts and newfound awareness of the knowledge that had been awakened.

Hermione looked back towards Anu. "We thank you, Anu. But the final spell you gave us - we know the words but not what they mean. What does the new spell do?"

Anu smiled. *"You will find out in due course. For now, it is sufficient for me to tell you that it must be used only in the most dreadful of times. When all else fails, invoke the spell, but be aware that its power will drain your energies greatly, and you will need to recharge yourselves before you are able to use it again to its fullest extent. Now I must return to the Light. My visit, which was triggered by your presence in my chamber, can only be for a fleeting moment. My task is done, but your greatest task is before you. Enter that task in the knowledge that you have the Light on your side, and that you are now well prepared. Farewell, Children of Light."*

Anu slowly faded until he was no more. His image was once again on the portrait, but the magical emanations had now disappeared. The six stared at each other, feeling privileged to have seen and spoken to the Akh of a once-great wizard - the father of all wizards.

"How do you feel?" asked Ron, looking at Harry and Hermione.

"The same as before," said Harry. "We're aware of all the ancient spells that Jesus gave us and we know what they'll do, but that final spell - that's weird."

"We'd better get back," said Hermione. "Poor old Hugo must be wondering where we've got to, not to mention Sirius and the others."

"Who's Hugo?" asked Draco.

"He's a local boy," said Ron, smirking, "from the island of Flores. Ginny fancies him, like mad."

Ginny shot her brother a dark look and glanced at Draco, who had just drifted out of the secret room, any reaction stemming from Ron's revelation remaining hidden. The five followed the ghost into the main cavern and found him sitting on a fallen pillar just outside.

"You'd better lead the way," he said.

Harry and Hermione took the lead as they walked back across the cavern to the laboratory where they'd first entered the Academy and then through to the passageway beyond the meeting room.

"This is the way I went when I tried to get out of here," said Draco. "There'll be a force field barring our exit up ahead somewhere."

"We know, Malfoy," said Ron. "But it didn't stop us getting in, only you getting out."

"What was that Weasley?" he asked at the sound of Ron muttering under his breath.

Ginny headed off the inevitable confrontation. "It probably kept you here until we arrived Draco. You had to join up with us before it allows you to go through."

It was almost one and a half hours later that the group entered the cavern where the water chute spilled into the deep rock pool, the sound of the waterfall getting louder as they approached the far end.

"Now we're buggered!" exclaimed Ron, looking with trepidation at the waterspout. "How are we going to get back up that?"

"You can swim against the tide if you want Weasley," said Draco, drifting over to the right-hand side of the waterfall. "But I'm going up the stairs like I did the last time I came this way."

"What!" exclaimed Hermione, looking at Harry darkly. "See what I meant about leaping before you look Harry?"

Harry looked sheepishly after his girlfriend as she stormed up the stairs in the wake of Draco's ghost, but then grinned at the sound of sniggers coming from the other three behind him. At the top of the stone stairs, which zigzagged up inside the rock wall, Draco drifted through the rock wall, but the others were left to find the way out, which happened to be a narrow cleft in the passageway some twenty yards back from the start of the water chute.

"We'd never have found that entrance!" said Harry, defiantly gazing into Hermione's eyes.

"Humph!" was all she said as she followed Draco back up the passage.

"What's this Granger," said Draco as he turned to face her. "Trouble in paradise?"

"Of course not Draco," she replied. "Just a very minor difference of opinion on tactics, that's all."

Draco grinned and drifted on up the passageway. Before long, they came to the portal that was protected by the force field. "This is as far as I got," said Draco, looking at the portal with distaste. Ginny walked up to stand beside him and peered through the exit but Hugo wasn't anywhere in sight.

Harry stepped up and held his breath as he stepped through the doorway into the large cavern beyond. "It's ok," he said, grinning as he turned back. "I couldn't feel anything - I think the force field's been lifted."

The other four stepped through and waited for Draco, who still looked a bit hesitant. Then his face set in determination and he drifted through. He smiled with relief as he joined his new found companions, and then turned as he heard a shout from deep within the cavern.

"Ginny!" shouted Hugo as he ran up to greet the grinning girl and the others, but he pulled up short when he saw the ghost.

"Who or what is that!" he exclaimed, pointing at Draco.

"He's the ghost of one of our school friends," said Hermione. "We met him in Atlantis."

"Friends?" whispered an incredulous Ron, staring at Hermione as if she'd suddenly gone mad.

"You must be Hugo," said Draco, drifting up and circling the staring boy. "Weasley tells me that Ginny likes you. Do you like her as well?"

"I... I..." stuttered Hugo, lost for words.

"Don't pay him any attention Hugo," said Ron, catching Hugo by the arm and dragging him back into the cavern. "He wasn't very nice when he was alive, and it doesn't look as if he's changed all that much since he died."

"Habit of a lifetime Weasley," said Draco, grinning wryly.

They walked across the canyon and climbed up along the rock ledge to the tunnel above, where they decided to stop to eat the rest of their food.

Ron couldn't resist getting in a dig at Draco. "Want some Malfoy? Oh I forgot - you've lost your appetite haven't you!"

Draco scowled and Ginny slapped Ron's arm. "Stop teasing him Ron. How would you like it if you suddenly found that you didn't need to eat."

"Sorry," whispered Ron as he contemplated a fate just as bad as death.

After telling Hugo what they'd found in Atlantis, and explaining that Draco was the sixth member of the team, they continued on up the tunnel, both Hugo and Draco remaining strangely silent, and Ginny glancing first at one then the other hoping that world war three wouldn't break out.

Eventually, they reached the huge magma tube where Draco stood looking up at the dizzy heights above. He spoke for the first time in a long while, "Well I know how I'm getting up there, but unless you lot suddenly sprout wings, I think you're stuck!"

Harry grinned, closed his eyes, and transformed into his animagus eagle. "You're full of surprises Potter," said Draco, looking wide-eyed at the eagle. Harry just screeched an eagle laugh.

"You'd better take me up first Harry," said Ron. "I'll wedge myself in that chimney and help the others when they climb off your back."

Harry nodded and bent his legs for Ron to climb onto his back. Then he kicked powerfully off from the ground and flapped his wings as he rose rapidly up into the magma tube. It took him only a minute or so to reach the top, where he hovered while Ron climbed up into the chimney. He waited until Ron gave the thumbs-up, and then flew back down to where the others were waiting.

Hermione and Margot were the next to be taken up to the top, where Ron carefully helped them to get off Harry's back and to scramble around him to the comparative safety above, where there were a lot more footholds.

Draco had steadfastly resolved to remain with Ginny and Hugo until Harry came back down to collect the last pair. Ginny felt uncomfortable as Hugo and Draco stared at each other, and was glad when Harry appeared out of the gloom above their heads. As they climbed for the last time, Draco drifted alongside Harry.

"This is fun Potter," he said. "You should have told me about this when we were back at school - we'd have had a great time."

The eagle gave Draco a piercing look, and then slowed as he neared the roof. Ron helped Ginny and Hugo into the chimney without incident and then looked at Harry with concern, wondering how he'd be able to transform without falling back to the floor of the magma tube. He thought furiously, then turned and told Hugo to grab hold of his waist, while he stretched down with one hand to take a precarious hold onto the end of the eagle's slowly flapping right wing. Ron braced himself, wedging himself tightly into the chimney and then nodded at Harry.

The eagle closed his eyes and transformed. As he did so, Ron reached down with his free hand and grabbed hold of Harry's left hand. Ron cried out as he took Harry's full weight on his arms, and was grateful that Hugo's grip on his waist was sure and strong. Harry stared up at his friend as he dangled beneath him, and couldn't help but grin at their unusual situation. He realised, of course, that if he and/or Ron fell, he'd be able to quickly transform back to his eagle form and prevent a disaster.

"Harry!" Ron shouted when he saw the grin. "Have you gone completely bloody bonkers? Come on - I don't know how long I can hold you like this!"

With a mighty effort, and aided by Hugo, who was himself being supported by Ginny, Ron leaned back up into the chimney, his face showing the strain he was under, lifting Harry up into the bottom few feet of the chimney to a place where his friend could grab hold of a jutting piece of rock. As the weight eased, Ron reached down and grabbed Harry by his trouser belt and helped him climb further into the chimney.

"Thanks Ron," said Harry, as he finally stood safely wedged in the chimney just below his friend. "I wondered how I was going to get back in here."

It was another hour and a half before the group finally approached the large gallery where Sirius and the others were waiting. Harry glanced at his watch and was surprised to see that it was almost eleven o'clock at night. He led them into the gallery and spotted the protectors sitting by the large rock pool at the centre.

"We're back!" shouted Ron, grinning as the startled adults jumped up and started running towards them. Katie was the first to arrive, and once more hugged Harry, but then stepped back as she spotted the ghost.

"Draco Malfoy?" she whispered.

"What!" shouted Sirius as he saw Draco drift into the cavern. "How the hell did you get here?"

"It's a long story," said Draco, grinning as he saw the startled, confused, incredulous and finally sad looks on the adults' faces.

Remus was the first to recover from the shock. "You lot must be hungry. We kept some food for you - come on, you can tell us all about it while you eat."

It was midnight before the meal and the story were finished, and they decided to get some sleep before they started back up to the surface. They all felt tired after the arduous trek up

from Atlantis, and the youngsters soon fell asleep - with the exception of Ginny. However much she tried, she found it impossible to get to sleep; the confused thoughts about Draco and Hugo running around inside her head just wouldn't let up as she tossed and turned on the comfortable cushion provided by Professor Flitwick.

Draco, of course, didn't need to sleep and he drifted over to sit beside the girl, looking down at her beautiful features with a wistful smile on his face. "Ginny?" he whispered. Ginny opened her eyes and looked up into the smoky blue eyes of the ghost.

"I could see you tossing and turning - something bothering you?"

Ginny smiled sadly at Draco, but didn't answer.

"Hugo - do you... like him?"

Ginny frowned, wondering how Draco had known what she was struggling with, and nodded silently. 'I think,' she muttered under her breath, but Draco didn't hear.

"Look," he said, "if Hugo's the one you want, then it's ok by me. I just hope that he feels the same way about you as you feel for him. All I want is for you to be happy."

Ginny brushed a tear from the side of her eye as she stared at Draco, but remained silent.

"Before I go... go up into the Light, I want you to know something. It... it was you that turned me from the ways of the Dark Side. It wasn't anything that you did particularly - it's just the way... the way you are. The way you treat life; your spirit; the way you always seem to think of the well being of other people. And it was the way you and your friends always seemed to have this special thing when you're together... love; respect; and something that I find difficult to describe - a special sort of quality - one that I could never have with my friends. I know it's far too late to tell you this, and I don't really know why you're bothering to listen to me - after all, I'm only a ghost. But what I came to think; what I came to feel... about you... was love, Ginny."

Draco dropped his head and stared at the ground, so he didn't see the tears that were streaming unchecked down Ginny's face. He was glad that he'd finally told her how he felt, and he hoped that she wouldn't laugh at him, but his only concern now was for her future happiness - even though he knew that it couldn't be with him.

With a great effort, Ginny closed her eyes and waited for Draco to drift away from her once more. She turned her face into the cushion and cried silently - until her tortured mind at last found the sanctuary of sleep.

Ginny was once more in tears the following morning. They'd all returned to the island of Flores, and said their farewells to Simao and his family, declining the offer of food - they wanted to get back to Craig Cerrig-Gleisiad as soon as they could to plan their next moves.

The group stood holding the Portkey while Hugo stood a little way apart from them, holding Ginny's hand and speaking to her softly, "Will I see you again?" he asked. "When this is all over, I'd like you to come back to the island, where we can spent some time together in less..."

trying circumstances." He glanced towards Draco, who stood with the others holding the Portkey.

"I'd like that, I think," said Ginny softly, wiping away a tear that rolled down her cheek. She reached up and kissed the boy on the cheek, and then turned away and joined the rest of her group. A minute later, they disappeared from sight. Hugo sighed deeply and then walked slowly back down the hill to the farmhouse.

"Ah good," said Sirius as the group materialised at the cold and snowy hanging valley. "You're still with us Draco. I wasn't sure whether a ghost could travel by Portkey."

"So now you know," he said, drifting along beside the group as they trudged through the snow up to the main tent.

Dumbledore, McGonagall and Snape looked up as they all walked in, and stared in astonishment when they saw Draco. Snape stood up and walked slowly over to the ghost. "So it's true. They killed you." He turned and slapped the side of his leg in anguish.

"Why are you still here - on Earth, Draco?" asked Dumbledore softly, looking at Draco with compassion.

"He's the sixth member of our team Professor," said Harry. "He has to help us before he can get to the Light."

Dumbledore nodded in understanding and whispered, "It's all in the scheme of things."

After Hermione related the story once more for the benefit of the three professors, Professor Dumbledore got up from his chair and walked slowly over to the youngsters. He looked at each of them in turn, his eyes misty, although they still held their sparkle. "You have completed your tasks. I... and everyone else here are very proud of what you have achieved."

Harry stared at the headmaster, who dropped his eyes to stare at the floor for a few moments. Harry could see that a great weight had been lifted from the great wizard, and he watched as the emotions played over his wrinkled face. Then Dumbledore sighed and looked back up at Harry and Hermione. "Do you have any idea what your next moves will be?"

Harry glanced at Hermione. "We thought that you'd be able to help us with that Professor."

"How confident do you feel with your powers?" he asked.

"Quite confident Professor," answered Hermione. "Since we've become more aware of those spells that were dormant in our minds, we think that we can handle most things that will come our way."

"Do you feel confident enough to tackle Voldemort?"

"Yes!" exclaimed Harry. "And the sooner the better."

"The power he wields in the Disc of Gates is very strong," said Dumbledore quietly. "Are you sure you can face that?"

"We don't know," said Hermione, "but I've been puzzling about the final spell we were given. Anu said that we should only use it when everything else fails, so I think that perhaps it must generate the strongest possible power that we have within us. Maybe that's what will defeat the power of the Disc of Gates."

"Perhaps so," said Dumbledore. "Now getting back to that spell that you read about in the Book of Thoth back last year - the one that will tell you how to get to the Forces of Dark - how do you think that spell can be best used? The one thing that worries me is that you can Zapparate to wherever you detect them. Unless the protectors can Apparate there with you, you may find yourselves too exposed. For instance, if Voldemort and a force of his Death Eaters are there, you'll have your hands full with Voldemort - you won't want to worry about a load of Death Eaters as well. Do you see what I'm getting at?"

"Yes Professor," said Harry, "but we haven't used the spell yet, so we don't know whether we'll get co-ordinates that we can tell the protectors about or not. We may just be able to only Zapparate to a place about which we have no knowledge whatsoever."

"I agree," said Dumbledore. "So I wouldn't want you to take the risk of getting into anything too risky until you're more sure about what you can do with your powers. I've thought a lot about it ever since you told us about the spell, so I've made sure that we can do something to help. I've enlisted the help of Fred and George, and they've made a number of special Portkeys to my specifications."

He opened a drawer and placed several objects on the desk. "These little devices are not time-activated. They become active whenever you say the spell 'ADIGO CLAVIS'. The spell activates the related Portkey at the other end of the chain - the one that Sirius will be carrying with him at all times. Now obviously, to avoid getting them mixed up, you must each carry only one related set of Portkeys at any given time."

"But Professor," said Harry dubiously. "I already have the 'Find Me' stone that Sirius gave me. I can activate that to summon help."

Dumbledore smiled. "That's true, Harry. But that stone has a limited range - it won't work if, for instance, you Zapparate to America. And let's face it, you probably won't be able to determine exactly where you materialise, especially if you need to summon help the instant you get there."

Harry nodded. "I hadn't really given much thought to where we're likely to Zapparate. The new Portkey option should cover every eventuality."

"That's great, Professor," said Hermione, smiling at Sirius, who nodded.

"When can we try them out?" asked Harry, impatient to begin a more active involvement in the struggle.

"We have until 11 o'clock tomorrow morning," said Dumbledore grimly. "The deadline set by Voldemort runs out then and he's threatened to destroy the Ministry of Magic offices if he doesn't get his answer by that time."

"We'll go after lunch then," said Harry, looking at Hermione, who nodded.

"Do you think you can... Zapparate... me as well?" asked Draco. "I might be able to provide some distraction while you set the Portkey and wait for the rest to arrive."

"We've done it with Ron and Ginny," said Hermione, "and you've Apparated with Charlie when we returned to Flores from Corvo, so I don't see why not."

After the meeting, the five youngsters went to the library tent - this time to talk and not to read - while Draco drifted around the valley to get a feel for the place. They sat around the table just staring for a few moments before Ron raised the problem that had been plaguing him ever since they'd met up with Draco.

"Can we trust him?" he asked.

"Of course we can!" exclaimed Ginny. "He's not the Draco Malfoy we all hated back at Hogwarts - he's changed."

"How do you know that!" exclaimed Ron. "It might be a front that he's putting up to get close to us."

"Because... because I do. If you heard how he spoke to me the other night, you wouldn't have any doubts about him."

"And don't forget," said Margot, "he was killed by 'You Know Who'. That doesn't exactly make them the best of friends does it?"

"And not only that," added Hermione, "if Anu and the Light side have accepted him as genuine, who are we to argue?"

Ron glanced at Margot and Hermione, but then turned his attention back to his sister. "How did he speak to you? What did he say?"

"That's none of your business Ron!" she exclaimed. "But he's changed."

Ron looked at his sister suspiciously. "He... he doesn't fancy you does he Ginny? Come on! He's a bloody ghost!"

Ginny looked fixedly down at the desk but didn't reply.

"He does, doesn't he - you wait till I get hold of him!"

"Uh, you might find that a bit difficult to do Ron," said Harry, looking worriedly towards Ginny. "A ghost hasn't got any physical substance for you to bash."

Ron grunted with frustration, then sat bolt upright in his seat, gazing at the top of his sister's head. "Oh no - you fancy him as well don't you! I don't believe this, Ginny. You know that nothing can come of it! Draco bloody Malfoy!"

Ginny sat up once more, her eyes wet, but blazing. "I bloody well know that Ron! You don't have to tell me!"

She stood up quickly, sending her chair crashing to the floor, and ran out of the tent.

Hermione and Margot looked at each other worriedly and got up to follow their friend. Hermione turned back when she got to the tent flap and hissed at Ron, "Now look what you've done! You can be so insensitive on times Ron!" Then she rushed out after Margot.

"What did I do?" asked Ron, turning towards Harry, his face the picture of innocence. "I thought that she fancied Hugo."

"I think you've just hit on a raw spot Ron," said Harry. "Hermione and I talked about this back at about the time Draco disappeared, and we both felt that Ginny was starting to get feelings for him. And meeting him once more has brought those feelings back to the surface. But now it's a lot worse for her, isn't it?"

"Because he's a ghost," said Ron, shaking his head slowly. "This is a mess! Why didn't you tell me about this before Harry?"

"Because I knew how you'd react, and the last thing Ginny wanted back then was a grilling from you, or anybody else if it comes to that. She seemed to get over it quite quickly, and then when she met Hugo..."

Ron sighed and looked worried. "Draco Bloody Malfoy!" he whispered.

"You don't actually think that he's still working for Voldemort do you?" asked Harry.

Ron shook his head. "No - but it's hard to think of him as one of the team after all the grief he gave us at Hogwarts. Ginny's right when she says he's changed - I can see that for myself - but it still doesn't make it any easier."

Ron brooded for a few minutes and then sighed, glancing at Harry. "But getting back to 'You Know Who' - are you and Hermione ready to face him?"

"I think so Ron - but there's only one way to find out, isn't there?"

The six stood outside the main tent after lunch, together with the protectors, Dumbledore, his advisors and Fred and George and their team. The Headmaster handed Harry one of the special Portkeys and then gave its twin to Sirius, although Sirius' Portkey was a lot larger to enable everyone to grasp it when Harry or Hermione activated it.

"Are you sure you're ready to do this?" asked Sirius, his face full of concern. They'd come up against Death Eaters in the field several times before when they'd been ambushed, but this was different - the Anima Summas were actively trying to ambush Death Eaters, and conflict was inevitable.

They'd all earlier decided that because it would be their first attempt to find the Dark Side, they wouldn't try to get to Voldemort - they'd try to locate an active band of Death Eaters who were on, or about to go on, a raid.

Harry and Hermione both nodded; then they faced each other and joined hands. Draco drifted towards them and reached out his ghostly hands to touch them.

Sirius nodded and the rest of the protectors, together with Ron, Margot and Ginny, grasped the Portkey, ready to be transported into a place of danger. They'd all earlier activated their Relocators, so they were reasonably happy that they'd make a safe landing.

The Anima Summas closed their eyes and thought of the spell that Thoth had drawn their attention to and spoke it together.

"NADU GUG DUGA IM AMELNAKRU"

They both shimmered for several moments, and then they were gone - and so had Draco.

Chapter 9 - The Nephilim

Margot glanced at Ron as they all held the Portkey, waiting to be whisked away in support of Harry, Hermione and Draco. She frowned when she saw the scowl on her boyfriend's face.

"What's the matter Ron?" she whispered.

Ginny, who was standing on the other side of her brother, glanced at Ron when she heard Margot's whisper.

Ron turned to Margot and said, "It's just... just... why didn't Harry take *me* with him - why did he take Draco Malfoy? After all, *I'm* his best friend - not Draco bloody Malfoy!"

"Ron!" exclaimed Margot, glancing at Ginny.

"Use your bloody head for once Ron," whispered Ginny, and then turned and looked steadfastly down at the ground.

"Ron," whispered Margot, "Harry took Draco because he's a ..." she glanced worriedly at Ginny, "he ... can't be hurt any more. He's left you - us - behind because we're his best friends and he doesn't want to expose us to any danger. He knows that there'll be Death Eaters there - maybe even 'You Know Who' - so they'll probably have their hands full with them and won't want to worry about protecting us at the same time."

"And not only that," whispered Ginny, "he's still thinking about Trelawney's prophecy about a death. He'll want to make sure that we won't be put in any immediate danger."

Margot frowned, thinking about her dream back in the summer, when she also saw a death. She still hadn't told her friends about that - only Ceri knew about it.

"Yes, you're right I suppose," whispered Ron, the scowl now gone from his face, only to be replaced by a worried frown. "I can't stop thinking about the danger that Harry and Hermione are in. I can't get it out of my mind that one or both of them may ... lose their life - just like it's been in the past when one or both of the Anima Summas have died to overcome the Dark forces. They must realise that - but why haven't Harry and Hermione talked to us about it?"

"I don't think either of them can afford to dwell on it," whispered Ginny, her face ashen. "If they worry about what may happen then it could distract them from what they have to do. I think ... I think that they're very brave. I just hope that they'll come out of it ok."

Margot gently rubbed Ginny's arm and made eyes at Ron - willing him to change the subject.

After a few minutes, Ron gaped in frustration. "Why are we still waiting here? Why haven't they activated the Portkey? You don't think anything ... has happened to them do you?"

Everyone holding the Portkey was now glancing worriedly at each other, wondering why there was a delay in it being activated.

Harry and Hermione instinctively crouched low to the ground as they materialised in the middle of a dark wooded area. They could hear the sound of twigs crunching under feet not too far away, but the conifers obscured their vision. Draco drifted just above the treetops and looked around.

Then he moved back down and whispered, "There's a group of about fifty Death Eaters walking along a path just the other side of those trees, and they're headed towards a village not more than half a mile away, just beyond the wood. Have you set the Portkey yet?"

Harry shook his head. "I don't think there's any need to drag the others into this. I think we can handle it."

"Draco," said Hermione. "Will you position yourself just inside the wood and distract them when they approach?"

"But don't get too close to them," said Harry. "We don't want you to get caught up in the spell."

Draco nodded and moved quickly to his right, drifting around the tall fir trees towards the edge of the wood. Harry and Hermione cautiously walked over and peeked out between the dense branches, and then waited for a few moments while the last of the line of Death Eaters moved out of sight along the winding path. Then they stepped out from behind their cover and followed slowly behind, waiting for the sound of startled voices before they made their move.

Draco grinned with anticipation as he waited for the first of the Death Eaters to appear in the small clearing, just inside the line of trees that marked the edge of the wood. He sat on a rotting tree stump and thought about what he could do to make sure that he held the full attention of the black-cloaked figures while his new companions did their stuff. He thought of several things, but rejected the more outlandish ones, finally settling on something that made him chuckle quietly to himself.

Then, as he heard the sound of a vehemently uttered curse as one of the men stumbled over a fallen branch, he drifted over to a lone hawthorn tree, devoid of leaves and standing forlornly at the far end of the clearing. He moved along one of the branches that stretched out over the path, dangled upside down so that his head was no more than three feet above the ground, and waited.

The three Death Eaters at the head of the column didn't notice the dangling ghost until they were almost upon him. Then they all spotted him at the same time and stopped dead in their tracks, and started walking quickly backwards away from the apparition. Foul language filled the air as the ones coming behind bumped into the startled three, and soon, all fifty men were clustered at one side of the clearing, staring wide-eyed at the grinning Draco at the other end.

"What the hell..." said one of the Death Eaters, who was the first to recover, and pulled his wand from his black robes and sent a curse towards the ghost.

"That tickled," shouted Draco as the beam flew harmlessly through his wispy form. "But that wasn't very nice was it?"

"Who the hell are you?" asked one of the men. "You look a bit like Lucius Malfoy!"

"Uh... this is no time to think about my father," said Draco, pointing behind the men. "You should be thinking about those two behind you!"

They all spun around, just in time to hear the spell issued by the Anima Summas.

"SUQALLULU ADDANU."

A bright silvery-blue beam shot from their outstretched palms and surrounded the Death Eaters in a silvery haze. Then Harry and Hermione dropped their hands and walked around the black-cloaked group towards Draco, who drifted over and inspected their handiwork.

"What was that?" he said, looking at the men, frozen in various poses.

"We've used that spell before," said Harry. "It encloses them in a suspended bubble of time, where they'll stay until we free them."

"With a team of Aurors in attendance of course," said Hermione.

"Cool," breathed Draco.

Hermione reached into her robes, pulled out a parchment and quill and started writing on it. "What are you doing?" asked Harry, looking over her shoulder.

"Well, if we're going to be doing a lot of this sort of thing, we'd better make a note of where they all are," she replied. "And when it's all over, we can spend some time with the ministry Aurors while they take them into custody."

"Where are we anyway?" asked Draco.

"Gleninchry," said Harry immediately, then stared at Hermione in confusion. "How did I know that?"

Hermione grinned. "I don't know. But I knew it too. It must be a side effect of the locating spell we used - it must put the name and precise location of the place we Zapparate to in our heads, somehow."

"It's in Scotland isn't it?" asked Draco.

Hermione nodded. "Only a few miles from Hogsmeade."

"How are we going to get back to Wales?" asked the ghost.

Harry grinned. "Grab hold of us again." Harry and Hermione joined hands and closed their eyes, concentrating on their base at Craig Cerrig-Gleisiad. The next instant, all was quiet once more in the little clearing, the shouts from the wide-open mouths of some of the Death Eaters frozen in an intangible moment of suspended time.

When they materialised back at the valley, the scene was almost the same as when they'd left only ten minutes or so previously. The protectors and their three friends still stood holding the Portkey, and Professor Dumbledore and the others still stood to one side.

"Where the hell have you been?" shouted Sirius. "We've been waiting here for ages!"

"Sorry about that," said Harry. "There were only fifty of them, and we were hidden from sight behind a load of tall trees."

"If we'd brought you there," added Hermione, "they'd most probably have heard you if you'd started walking about in all the dead undergrowth and we'd have lost our element of surprise."

"Well it's nice to know that we're not needed!" exclaimed Ron sullenly.

"Of course you're needed Ron," said Hermione gently, "it's just that... well, we won't know whether we can handle things on our own until we get there."

"And it's pointless dragging you all into danger if it's not really necessary," added Harry.

"Well next time you go," said Ron, "it might be a good idea to bring some chairs outside - at least we can wait in comfort."

Everyone chuckled, and then Dumbledore stepped forward. "You'd better tell us what happened."

After Hermione had explained everything, she held up the parchment. "So I thought it would be a good idea if we kept a record of where all the bubbles of suspended time are."

"I'd better get onto Fudge," said the headmaster. "He's going to be delighted now that we've started to go on the offensive, and he'll probably want to send some people to Scotland to put some wards around that bubble, just in case any Muggles get curious if they stumble across it."

"What about informing the magical community, Headmaster?" asked McGonagall. "On the one hand, it'll give them a lot of hope and encouragement if they know what's happening, but do we want 'You Know Who' to find out about it?"

"I think that's a very good idea, Minerva," he replied with a twinkle in his eye. "It'll give him something to think about! I'll speak to Fudge about it - I'm sure he'll want Rita Skeeter to make a big splash in the Daily Prophet."

"If you hold off speaking to him just yet," said Harry. "We might be able to give him something a little bit more positive." He turned and gazed at Hermione, holding out his hand and sending his thoughts to her. She frowned, but then nodded her head.

"We'd like to try to get to Voldemort," he said. "Now!"

"Are you sure about this Harry?" asked Dumbledore. Harry nodded.

"I don't care what you find when you get there," said Sirius. "Set that Portkey as soon as you arrive! Do you understand? I'm sure you'll get the time to do it if Draco distracts him."

"We promise Sirius," said Hermione.

Again, they grabbed hold of the Portkey as Draco drifted up to touch the pair as they concentrated on getting to Voldemort.

"NADU GUG DUGA IM VOLDEMORT"

Everyone watched as the three shimmered, but gasped when they didn't disappear.

"What's the matter!" exclaimed Remus.

Harry and Hermione shook their heads slowly and tried once more.

"NADU GUG DUGA IM VOLDEMORT"

Again, they just shimmered but remained in the valley.

"What's going on?" asked Ceri.

"I don't know," said Hermione, shaking her head. "There's something that seems to be stopping us."

"Perhaps you're not meant to confront him yet," said Ginny.

Dumbledore stroked his beard, deep in thought, and nodded. "It's quite likely that the time is not yet right for the final conflict. Think about it - there are thousands and thousands of Death Eaters in the world. Most of the active cells are in this country and America, and if you were to dispose of Voldemort now, they'd just go into hiding for a while until they found a new leader. Then, after several months, or a year at the most, they'd once more begin their campaign of terror. It might well be that you've got to confine most of them first, before you meet Voldemort, so that their power base will be broken for a long time to come."

Harry nodded. "That makes a lot of sense, I suppose Professor. So the sooner we round up more of the Dark Side, the sooner we'll get to Voldemort."

"Before you go whizzing off again," said the headmaster, turning to go to the tent that held the Floo Chimney, "I'll get in touch with Fudge. The deadline is going to run out within the next few hours, so he might want to relocate the ministry here, and I'm sure he'll want to get in touch with Branson at the American Magical Congress to put him in the picture about you two."

He returned after about fifteen minutes. "They'll start arriving within the hour. Fudge didn't really want to abandon his offices but he could see the sense of keeping out of sight for the moment. He was very pleased when I told him about your little foray, by the way. And he'll be speaking to Rita Skeeter before he leaves the ministry. It seems that Branson is going to move his offices to some secluded place as well."

"So they won't be giving in to 'You Know Who's demands then?" asked Ceri.

"No one had any intention of giving in to him," replied Dumbledore. "I think we'd all rather fight and risk death than submit to the horror of his rule."

"Ready to go on the next trip Draco?" asked Hermione.

He nodded and drifted over to the pair as Harry and Hermione once more closed their eyes and concentrated.

"NADU GUG DUGA IM AMELNAKRU"

Dumbledore, McGonagall, Snape, Flitwick, the twins and their team watched as Harry, Hermione and Draco first shimmered and then disappeared. They were followed shortly afterwards by the rest of the group as the Portkey was activated.

They found themselves at the top of a rocky knoll, overlooking a large field of parched grass. The field was covered by several rows of tents, and the place was a hive of activity with a number of groups of black-cloaked figures walking along the lines of tents. Beyond the field was a wooded area, and the group, who now lay on the ground at the edge of the hill as they surveyed the scene below, could clearly hear the sounds of curses and spells.

"We must be somewhere in the southern United States," whispered Ceri. "It's obvious we aren't anywhere in the U.K. from the rise in temperature."

"I think this must be one of the Death Eater training camps," said Oliver. "It's not unlike Camp Merlin."

"How many of them do you recon there are?" asked Charlie.

"Judging by the number of tents," said Katie, "there must be a couple of hundred at least."

"How do you want to play this?" Sirius asked Harry and Hermione.

"Well they're too scattered to use the time bubble spell - we'll have to try to get them closer together in a more confined space first."

"Perhaps we should have brought a few sheepdogs along with us," grinned Ron.

Hermione didn't laugh as she stared at Ron, deep in thought. "That's not a bad idea Ron."

"What?" he replied. "That was supposed to be a joke, you know."

"If you wait here until Harry and me get around behind that wooded area, we can start the round-up."

"When you see a load of Death Eaters start to walk out of the woods," continued Harry, "lay down some fire to distract all those others down on the field. Then we'll herd them all up into the middle of the field where we can confine them in a time bubble."

"What about me?" asked Draco.

"You can sit this one out," said Harry, as he and Hermione crept to the back of the hill. "Just enjoy the scenery."

Harry and Hermione scrambled down the back side of the hill and moved swiftly around the outskirts of the camp, keeping low to the ground, heading towards the training area inside the woods. They approached a large clearing and watched in amazement as a number of groups of

Death Eaters attacked several low buildings, using stealth to approach and then bursting inside to throw spells and curses.

"That must be a mock-up of the American Magical Congress buildings," whispered Hermione, "or something similar."

They waited until all the Death Eaters were inside the flimsy structures and then stood up straight, holding hands and pointing their palms at the buildings. Before they could say the spell, they heard a shout at their right-hand side and saw a large black-cloaked figure running towards them, shouting at the top of his voice in a hysterical manner, and pointing his wand at them.

The pair adjusted their aim and shouted, "*NAHU DUGU ISTEN.*"

The silver beam of light hit the Death Eater, who stopped in his tracks, dropped his hands to his sides, and just stared blankly at the pair. Then Harry and Hermione pointed their palms once more at the buildings.

"ALKA."

After a few moments, the Death Eaters walked out of the buildings, their eyes blank and staring, and moved slowly over to the solitary man that had earlier been calmed and subdued. Harry spoke once more, this time in English, "Walk out of the woods into the middle of the camping area."

The Death Eaters turned and started to slowly walk in the direction of the field. Harry and Hermione moved swiftly around to the right and waited at the edge of the wood.

As the line of zombie-like figures emerged from the wood, the air crackled with magic as the group at the top of the hill started hurling spells into the field below. Amid loud shouts, and a jumble of confusion, a lot more Death Eaters, some of them scantily attired, emerged from the tents and sought whatever cover they could behind several rocky outcrops surrounding the bottom of the hill. After waiting to make sure that there were no more still inside the tents, Harry and Hermione crept up behind a group of about forty on the right-hand side of the hill and used the same spell as they had earlier, causing them to just stand and stare blankly.

The group of thirty Death Eaters immediately to their left looked around to see what had caused their colleagues to behave in such a strange manner, but soon turned their attention to the top of the hill when their position was hit once more by a load of spells.

"*ALKA.*" The pair shouted once more, covering the thirty hapless figures in silvery light. They, too, stood and stared.

After another five minutes, the job had been completed, and seven groups of Death Eaters, including the one that had walked out of the woods to the centre of the field, just stood, staring blankly at nothing in particular. Hermione shouted at each of the groups, compelling them to walk to the centre of the field to join their colleagues, and soon there were more than two hundred figures quietly standing together at the centre of the field.

"Amazing!" exclaimed Remus as he led the group down the hill.

"There's some ugly looking buggers amongst that lot!" cracked Ron, as he slowly circled the subdued Death Eaters.

"You'd better stand back Ron," said Hermione, as she and Harry raised their hands, ready to say the spell that would confine the group in a time warp ready for later retrieval.

Ron moved quickly out of the way to stand besides Margot as the silvery haze settled over the staring hoard.

Hermione made another entry on a fresh piece of parchment, bearing the heading 'America', and then Apparated back to Wales with Harry, while the rest climbed the hill once more to take the route back via the Portkey.

Voldemort hissed with frustration as he flung a copy of the Daily Prophet onto the floor of his cave. For the fifth day running, the lead story had been about how the Anima Summas had overcome yet another group of his Dark Forces.

He'd fulfilled his threat to destroy the ministry of magic buildings in London and the magical congress buildings in America, but had gleaned scant satisfaction from the deeds, obliterating empty buildings wasn't the most productive of targets on which to demonstrate the power of the Disc of Gates.

"Wormtail!" he roared, bringing him scampering into the cave. "Any news from America yet?"

Wormtail shook with fear as he handed Voldemort a copy of the latest dispatch from the States. The Dark Lord glanced at the headline and flung the newsheet onto the cave floor to join its British sister paper.

"Lucius!" roared Voldemort.

"Yes, my Lord," he said as he walked into the cave.

"What news from my spies around the country? Are they any closer to finding out where Potter and Granger are?"

"I'm afraid not, my Lord. They seem to have disappeared from the face of the earth."

"But they haven't, have they Lucius!" The danger in the quietly spoken words was plain to behold. "Because those newspaper reports are gloating at the defeat, by their hands, of my so-called terrible forces!"

Lucius remained silent, knowing that whatever he said would provoke an adverse reaction.

"Pick out a place, any place, that will serve to demonstrate my power once more. I will *not* be ignored by Fudge and his crowd any longer."

"Yes, my Lord." Lucius bowed and walked quickly out of the cave to consult the rest of the inner circle concerning a suitable target.

The snow covering the hanging valley of Craig Cerrig-Gleisiad shone in the bright moonlight. Above the valley, along the Roman Road leading to the right, three figures shivered as they sat in the old partially ruined farmhouse that they'd spotted when they first came this way last year.

The full moon was just rising above the horizon, and Remus Lupin, together with his friends Sirius and Ceri, had decided to wait out the night in that remote place while the worst effects of his werewolf curse were upon him. He still had some of the Wolfsbane potion left in the jar at his side, but he'd already taken his fill.

"You'd better transform," muttered Remus as he felt the first signs of change coming over him.

"What's that?" hissed Ceri, as she heard the door at the back creak open. She and Sirius quickly got up and looked into the back room, where they saw a shadowy figure walking towards them. They stepped back into the room and pulled out their wands.

"Who are you?" Sirius shouted as the figure came into the dark room.

The figure let out a shrill cry as she jumped, startled that anyone had managed to find her regular hiding place. But she quickly recovered. "Who are *YOU!*" she exclaimed.

Ceri lit her wand and looked closely at the dark and attractive woman before her. "You'd better leave quickly," she said, glancing at Remus. "It's not safe here for you."

"I've been coming here for over a year," said the woman, her voice quite agitated. "What gives you the right to take over my hiding place?"

Remus stood up and staggered over to the woman, trying to keep in check the tortures of the full moon for just a few minutes longer. "You'd better listen to her," he said. "It's not safe here. Now go, quickly, before it's too late."

The woman stifled a cry as she doubled up, seemingly in pain. "You don't understand," she said through clenched teeth. "I... I'm a werewolf, and it's the full moon. If you don't all get away from here soon, I won't be responsible for my actions. Go... please!"

Remus' eyes flew wide open, then he walked quickly back to his seat and picked up the jar. "Here - drink this," he said, holding the jar out to her. "Quickly now - it will help you. I'm a werewolf too, and this Wolfsbane potion will help to curb your aggressive tendencies."

The woman stared for a few moments, then took the jar and gulped down the contents.

Remus quickly explained why Sirius and Ceri were there with him, and then said, "You are welcome to join us. They can help us with this curse."

The woman nodded and then doubled up once more. Ceri and Sirius both transformed into their Animagus forms and trotted over to the door, where they flopped down to stand guard - and to make sure that the newly introduced werewolves didn't do each other any damage.

Ceri growled as she saw and heard the two werewolves howling at the moon through the window of the old farmhouse. Something in her wolf's genetic makeup tugged at her as she resisted the temptation to howl along with them. Padfoot turned his head towards her and nuzzled her ear gently, helping her to calm down.

It was a long night. The female werewolf, not having the length of exposure to the Wolfsbane potion that Remus had, and thus the full effects of its calming influence, tried to attack Ceri at one point, but was stopped from getting to her by the large bulk of Padfoot, and the somewhat less effective help that Remus provided.

At last, just when he thought that the night would never end, Sirius let out a doggy sigh as he saw the first faint light of dawn, and watched as the two werewolves, now sleeping side by side on the floor, slowly started to transform back to their human shapes.

Sirius and Ceri transformed as well, and stood over the pair as they completed their transformation. Sirius put his arms around Ceri and kissed her tenderly. "Thanks, Ceri," he whispered. "It's been a big help - especially with two of them to watch out for."

"There's no need for thanks," she replied, leaning her head on his shoulder. "Remus is my friend as well, now."

They both turned as Remus cleared his throat. "I'm not interrupting anything am I?"

They laughed and watched as the woman slowly rose from the ground. "Thanks," she said. "You've all been a big help. I'm Sioned Griffith, by the way." She reached out and shook hands with the three friends. Remus introduced himself and then Sirius and Ceri.

"So what are you doing in such a remote part of Wales?" asked Sioned.

"We... uh, we were out camping, and I sort of forgot it was a full moon last night," said Remus. Both Sirius and Ceri raised their eyes to the sky, cringing at the pathetic answer that Remus had given, and wondering why he hadn't thought of a better excuse.

Sioned looked doubtfully at Remus. "Out camping... at this time of year and in this weather... a werewolf forgetting when the full moon rises. You must be mad in more ways than one!"

Remus smiled weakly, and tried to ignore the woman's obvious disbelief. "So... how long have you been a werewolf, Sioned?"

"About two years," she replied, looking sadly at the floor. "It happened when my friend and I went on a walking holiday through the Carpathian Mountains, and we were attacked by what we thought was a wolf - but we soon found out that it must have been a werewolf at the time of the next full moon - we were both bitten, you see. Beth and I managed to get through that awful night, but soon after, well... she just couldn't accept what had happened to her and just took off, and I haven't seen her since. I live in a little village between Brecon and Llanwrtyd Wells, and I used to hide myself away in one of the huts the soldiers use during exercises on the firing range up there, but I had to stop when they started holding night exercises. I looked far and wide before I happened on this old place about a year ago."

"You must have had a shock when you found us three here last night," said Ceri.

"You can say that again!" she exclaimed. "But I'm glad you were here, as it turned out. That... potion... you gave me certainly helped."

"Are you... a witch?" asked Sirius.

"A what?" she exclaimed, looking disbelievingly at Sirius. "I've been forced to believe in werewolves, but witches? Are you as mad as your friend?"

It was Remus' turn to lift his eyes to the heavens. "Sioned... there are certain things that you're obviously not aware of. You see, Ceri here is a witch, Sirius is a wizard, and so am I. Don't you remember them transforming to their Animagus forms last night?"

"What? You're kidding me aren't you? And what do you mean 'Animagus forms'?"

The three shook their heads solemnly.

"Whoa - this is too much! Witches and Wizards... wow! Is that the reason you gave me that cock and bull story earlier?"

Remus nodded. "There are quite a few things you don't know. We're stationed not far from here, along with a group of other magical people. We're in the middle of a war with Dark Wizards, who are trying to take over the world, and things are coming to a head just about now."

Sioned walked across the room, sat down on one of the chairs, and leaned forward to place her head in her hands. "This is a lot to take in," she said shakily.

"We have to go now," said Ceri.

Sioned looked panicked as she rose from the chair. "Can... can I see you all again? I mean, it's the first time I've met anyone who understands my condition, and I don't want to lose you as soon as I've found you."

"Look," said Remus. "Can you come back here first thing tomorrow morning? I'll get the Potions Master to brew some more of the Wolfsbane Potion and bring you a supply."

"Oh would you?" The relief was plain to see in the woman's face.

"No problem," said Remus. "See you in the morning."

They all waved as they walked out of the farmhouse, Sioned turning to the right to follow the Roman Road back down the mountainside, and the others turning in the opposite direction.

"She was very nice," said Ceri as they walked back up to the valley. "Don't you think so Remus?"

Sirius grinned slyly as he waited to hear Remus' response.

"Yes, she is, Ceri," he replied. "She's the first female werewolf I've ever met. Pity she's not a witch though."

Harry, Hermione and Draco materialised at the edge of a town somewhere in California. A large contingent of Death Eaters were spread out immediately to their right, hurling curses at the houses, but no one had spotted the three appear suddenly.

"There's not enough time to set the Portkey," said Hermione. "Hold my hand Harry, we've got to do something quick."

They joined hands and pointed their palms at the line of black-robed figures. "*SEHERU ERIMHA*," they yelled.

A blue beam shot from their palms and engulfed the enemy fighters, who stopped hurling curses and looked up in astonishment, to see the Anima Summas suddenly grow huge, stretching up to almost reach the clouds.

What had actually happened, however, was the opposite. Harry, Hermione and Draco bent their heads, as the enemy suddenly diminished in size until they were no more than an inch high, and the length of the space they occupied was only about ten feet.

The seventy or so Death Eaters panicked and started to run in all directions, but they didn't get very far - their tiny legs couldn't carry them fast enough. The time bubble spell caught them in its silvery haze a few moments later, and they froze into immobility.

"That's two spells we'll have to use to get this lot secured," said Hermione as she added yet another entry to the growing list on her 'America' parchment.

They turned around towards the town when they heard two people shouting, and saw a man and a woman rapidly approaching, but they relaxed when they saw the broad grins on their faces.

"You're the Anima Summas," said the man, loudly, first pumping Harry's hand in an iron grip, and then Hermione's. Then he shot a confused glance in Draco's direction, "Who's the ghost?"

"That's Draco," said Hermione. "He's our friend - he's helping us in the fight against the Dark Side."

The man and woman grinned at Draco, who just raised his eyebrows and grinned weakly in a typically Draco fashion.

"We're so grateful to you both," said the woman, hugging Hermione tightly. Harry stepped back, but couldn't avoid the tight embrace.

"We though we were dead meat," said the man. "The Muggles in the town are terrified, but at least we can tell them that the show's over while we wait for the memory Aurors. What did you do to those jerks, anyway?" he pointed at the time bubble.

"We shrunk them a bit, and then put them in a time warp. I hope you don't mind having them on your doorstep until this is all over," said Harry.

"We'll be back to take charge of them as soon as we can," added Hermione.

"Listen," said the woman, "I don't mind seeing them like that one little bit. It'll give the rest of the magical community in the town a lot of satisfaction and hope."

They waved to the two friendly Americans as they Zapparated back to Wales, shivering once more at the sudden change in temperature.

"You two are going to catch a hell of a cold if you keep doing this," said Draco.

"Harry... Hermione... Draco." Charlie shouted to the three and waved them into the large tent, where they saw everyone sitting around the headmaster's desk. Over the last week or so, they'd agreed that if the Portkey wasn't activated within five minutes, they'd assume that they weren't needed, and would relax.

Fudge looked up as the three walked in. "Successful trip?" he asked.

Harry nodded. "America - about seventy this time."

Fudge nodded with satisfaction. "Excellent... excellent."

"Minister Fudge was just telling us about a raid that Voldemort carried out about a half hour ago," said Dumbledore.

Fudge took up the story, "A small town in the North of England was destroyed. It's hard to estimate, but the latest reports say about five hundred people were killed in the blink of an eye. It seems that a wizard saw everything that happened while he was walking in the countryside close by. The Dark Lord used the Disc of Gates again - the wizard said it was horrible, so horrible that he hasn't been able to give the details of what happened yet. He's trying to put the terrible images of what he saw out of his mind."

"But we Zapparated to America about half an hour ago," said an anguished Harry. "Why weren't we taken to the site of that attack?"

Dumbledore shook his head. "It's pointless to think about it Harry. It's not your fault, you know. Everybody knows you want to get at Voldemort as soon as you can."

"He's right Harry," added Fudge. "You'll get to him when the time is right."

Early the following morning, Remus trudged through the snow towards the ruined farmhouse on the mountainside a few miles from the valley. He carried a large container of the Wolfsbane Potion that Snape had brewed the previous day. He quickened his pace slightly, anxious to meet the charming Sioned once again.

He reached the farmhouse and stepped quickly inside, but was disappointed to find the place empty. He sighed and sat down on one of the chairs in the front room, hoping that the woman would turn up.

He didn't have long to wait, and stood up as he heard the sound of footsteps crunching in the snow outside. Sioned walked into the room and smiled when she saw Remus, waving a greeting as she walked over to him.

"I wondered if you'd turn up," he said, "after listening to all that talk about witches and wizards yesterday."

Sioned smiled. "I still can't believe what you told me. Are you sure you're not pulling my leg?"

Remus smiled and pulled his wand out from his robes. "This is my wand. We use wands to do magical spells."

"Yeh - right," said Sioned dubiously, and then noticed finally that Remus was alone. "Where are the other two?"

"In a meeting," he replied, "but I managed to get out of it to bring this to you."

He held out the container. "Wolfsbane Potion?" she asked, taking the container from Remus and gazing at it as if it were a pot of gold.

"That's right - there's enough there to last you for about six months. That should be enough until the conflict is over and I can bring you more."

"You... you won't be coming back here for six months?" asked Sioned, looking a bit sad as her gaze travelled over Remus' face.

"I don't know," he replied. "As I told you yesterday, we're in the middle of a conflict with some very bad wizards, and I don't really know where I'll be from one day to the next. But I'll probably be here with Sirius and Ceri at the times of the full moon."

"I hope so," she said, dropping her gaze to the ground. "Come on then, let's see some of that magic you're on about."

"What would you like me to do?"

Sioned gazed around the room and then pointed at one of the chairs. "Make that chair rise into the air."

Remus grinned and pointed his wand at the chair. "*WINGARDIUM LEVIOSA*," he said.

Sioned's mouth dropped open when the chair rose into the air, and moved across the room, under the direction of Remus' wand, and settled back onto the floor just behind the startled woman.

"I... I didn't really think..." she whispered, sitting down on the chair with a bump.

"It's true," said Remus. "But enough about me - what about you? Are you married? Have you got a boyfriend?"

Sioned shook herself out of her amazed stupor and answered quietly, "No. I'm not married, but I had a boyfriend before this thing happened to me. But when I told him what happened, he run a mile - he still does whenever he sees me. I think he thinks I'm crazy or something."

Remus smiled wryly in full understanding for her plight. "It's a terrible thing. Always alone - never daring to form a close relationship."

"But your friends who were with you last night? You're obviously very close to them."

"Sirius has been my best friend since our schooldays, and Ceri is his girlfriend. We've worked together on the same team against the Dark Side for several years now, and when you get into dangerous situations, it tends to bring you closer together. But what I meant was - I can never dare to get too close to a woman. I can't risk passing on the werewolf genes to any future children."

"I see," said Sioned quietly. "I hadn't really thought about it like that before. Not that there's any risk of me having kids - I haven't been able to bring myself to go out with anyone ever since it happened. And since Beth left, I haven't got a close female friend either."

"I'm sorry," said Remus, reaching out to squeeze her hand. "It's a lonely thing being a werewolf, and it must be a lot worse for you - at least I've got friends who understand the condition." Remus looked deep into her eyes, his admiration growing by the minute at the way she had forced herself to cope with her affliction alone for the past two years.

"I... I have to go now," he said finally. "Take care - I hope to see you soon."

They walked out of the farmhouse and started down the old Roman Road in opposite directions. Remus turned when he heard Sioned call his name.

"Remus - be careful... please."

Remus grinned and waved, then turned and walked back up the track to the valley.

"RABUM DUGU ERIMHA," yelled Harry and Hermione as they pointed their hands at the large force of Death Eaters that raced towards them across Salisbury Plain.

They hadn't Zapparated on this occasion - they and the protectors had arrived by more conventional means following Snape's spying report of an imminent major attack on the divisional headquarters complex there. They'd hoped that Voldemort would lead the attack, but they were disappointed in that respect. Still, about seven hundred Death Eaters was a formidable enemy to face.

Their protectors and friends, together with a large force of Aurors, were hiding behind the large mound on which the pair was standing, held in reserve in case they had to help the Anima Summas. But this day, their services were not needed.

A bright blue beam of light shot from their outstretched palms and quickly settled onto the advancing hoard, which suddenly stopped. They had no choice really, since their legs were no longer capable of carrying them. Some of them tried to send curses at the pair, but they found it impossible to point their wands at them - in fact, they found it impossible to even hold their wands.

The force waiting behind the mound walked into sight when they heard the noise coming from the Death Eaters - an astonishing noise that none of them could identify.

"What did you do to them?" asked Ceri as she looked with amazement at the scene before her. All seven hundred Death Eaters were lying prone on the ground, shaking uncontrollably as if they were encased in a large block of ice. Ceri could now see that the noise was being caused by seven hundred sets of teeth rattling around in seven hundred heads.

"We just told them to tremble," said Hermione.

"What are you going to do now?" asked the commander of the Salisbury Plain camp. "There're too many of them for us to take into custody here - we're going to need some help."

"No problem," said Harry, as he and Hermione once more pointed their palms at the sea of trembling black-cloaked figures and stopped the rattling sound when they enclosed them all in a large bubble of suspended time.

"We can come back when the war is over," said Hermione, writing another entry on her U.K parchment.

"I'd better get some wards set up around this area," said the commander, signalling to some of his men. "As much as I loath those scoundrels, I don't want any Muggle tanks running over them - this is part of their tank firing range and they tend to use this spot quite a lot for target practice."

"What would happen Harry - if a tank bumped into that lot?" asked Ron, trying to work out the effects of such a collision.

"I don't know," he said. "What do you think, Hermione?"

Hermione thought for a few moments, and then shook her head. "I don't know either, for certain, but the tank would probably just come to a dead stop - it won't be able to enter the area because the bubble's time is out of phase with ours."

"Interesting," breathed Ron. "I wonder if we could set up a little experiment..."

"Don't even think about it Ron," said Sirius, tapping him on the back. "Come on - the commander has just invited us all to a spot of lunch in the officer's mess."

"Lead on," said Ron, all thoughts of setting up an experiment to test Hermione's theory now completely forgotten.

"I wonder what 'You Know Who's going to do," said Oliver, talking to Sirius, Ceri and Katie as they walked towards the headquarters buildings. "I make it that he's lost at least three thousand Death Eaters in this country in the last week or so, and about twice that number in America. He must be getting desperate."

"But it's not all one way traffic," said Katie. "He and his forces are still hitting towns and villages both here and in America, and we've lost a lot of Aurors in the conflict as well..."

"Yes," said Ceri, "but if Harry and Hermione keep degrading his forces like they've been doing, it's bound to affect his ability to keep up the attacks. Oliver's right - I think he must be on the verge of doing something really horrible."

"I don't know what he'll do," said Sirius, "but it probably means that the final showdown won't be too far away."

"I hope they'll be all right," said Katie, looking around worriedly at the pair as they walked with the helpers a little way behind. "That Disc of Gates is a terrible weapon."

Hermione made eyes at Draco, who drifting along beside her, and slowed her pace slightly, allowing the rest of her friends to walk on ahead.

"You want to talk to me ... Hermione?" asked Draco. He'd dropped the use of her surname a little while ago, but still found it strange to be addressing her in a more intimate manner.

"Draco, I... I've been meaning to speak to you for almost a week now. It... it's about Ginny. You know that she's got... feelings for you, don't you?"

Draco sighed and nodded. "Yes - I gathered as much. That's why I haven't spent much time alone with her lately."

"She was terribly upset after that spat with Ron the other day. She's awfully confused Draco, and I don't know how to help her."

"Neither do I," he said. "I didn't want this to happen - at least, not after I was killed. Before then - well that was different, but I didn't have the time to do anything about it - she was the one who made me realise that I was on the wrong path, you know."

Hermione nodded. "Yes, she told Margot and me about your little chat in the cavern."

"The best thing she can do is forget all about me - in that way at least. But how can we make her see sense?"

"I'd hoped that she'd start to miss Hugo," she replied, "but she hasn't mentioned him once since we came back from the Azores."

Draco shook his head. "I don't think he's the right one for her anyway - but I might be just a bit biased on that score. It's difficult for me to think who could possibly be good enough for her."

"Well we'd better think of something soon - she's suffering badly with this. She doesn't show it, but I know she is. I... I've been there before."

Draco grinned wryly at his new friend. "I know this will sound a bit flippant, but I really do mean it when I say that she hasn't got a ghost of a chance with me. I wish things were different, but it's pointless dwelling on what might have been. Keep an eye on her, Hermione - she needs a friend like you to help her through this."

Hermione nodded, and looked sadly towards her red-haired friend walking in front, chatting away to Harry as if she hadn't a care in the world.

"My Lord!" shouted Lucius as he ran into the cave, stopping briefly to bow at the foot of the throne. "I've just had word from Salisbury Plain. The Anima Summas were there waiting for our men, they... they've all been captured."

Voldemort turned his head to the side and hissed loudly as he tried to keep his anger in check. "I *knew* I should have led that attack myself. This whole sorry mess would have been sorted out then and there, once and for all."

"I've told the rest of the inner circle to get in touch with the field commanders," said Lucius. "In a short while we should know how many Death Eaters are still active, but I don't think it's looking very good."

"Get in touch with your opposite number in America as well," said Voldemort. "I want to know what the head count is over there as well."

"Yes my Lord," said Lucius and walked back out of the cave.

A little while later, Lucius was back. "Fifteen hundred in this country and three thousand in America," he said quietly.

"What!" Voldemort exploded. "That's all? That's nowhere near enough for what we have to do!"

"It gets worse, my Lord. If the Anima Summas keep up their present rate of operations, we'll have no one left in just over a week."

"We've got to stop them, Lucius. That's my only hope if we're going to fulfil my ambitions." Voldemort thought deeply for a few minutes, and then shook his head slowly. "Desperate situations call for desperate measures. If we can't locate the Anima Summas, then perhaps someone else can. It's about time we had some help from the Dark Side, Lucius. Tell Crabbe, Wormtail and Travis to get ready - we're going to pay another visit to Irem."

"But my Lord, you've always maintained that it would be dangerous to our cause if you summoned the Nephilim back to the Earthly Realm."

"I haven't got a lot of choice in the matter. Now tell the others to get ready."

Lucius turned and walked back out of the cave, but turned when he got to the entrance when he heard Voldemort call his name once more. "Lucius - don't ever question my decisions again," he said in a quiet but deadly voice.

Lucius bowed and walked out of the cave, scowling.

It was cold, and it was damp. The previous day, a slight thaw had set in at Craig Cerrig-Gleisiad, and the snow had become slushy, turning the ground into a wet and sticky quagmire, making it difficult to walk from one tent to the next. And with the increased population in the

valley following the ministry evacuation, everyone was glad to go to bed to get away from the horrible conditions.

Hermione stirred restlessly in the tent she shared with Ginny and Margot, brought to the edge of awareness by the sounds coming from Margot's bed. She opened a bleary eye and saw that it was starting to get light already - she looked at her watch and groaned - 7.30 AM. Then she shot upright in her bed as she heard Margot cry out.

She padded over to her bed and shook her gently. "Margot! Margot!"

The French girl's eyes flew open, and she looked all around the tent in desperation, trying to find the cause of her unease. Then she relaxed slightly and caught hold of Hermione, hugging her tightly.

"Was it another of those dreams?" whispered Hermione.

"Yes," Margot nodded. "It was horrible. I saw something that made me want to run and hide."

She stiffened and caught hold of Hermione's shoulders as she eased her away. "I've got to speak to the others - and the sooner the better. I've got to tell them what I saw."

Half an hour later, the usual group sat around the headmaster's desk as Margot recounted the details of her dream.

"I was standing in a dark and dusty place, looking into a circular chamber with five large paintings on the wall. 'You Know Who' was there with some of his Death Eaters, and they were staring at something in front of them. I couldn't see what it was, at first, but then I saw a sort of blackness form in the air, at the point into which a very bright beam of greenish light was streaming.

"Then, the blackness started to open, and a bright portal took its place. Then... then, the most horrible creatures started to come through the portal. They were very large, with gruesome heads and pointed ears, but it was the sound they made that made me want to run and hide. Their mouths were open, showing sharp pointed teeth, and they were... I can only describe it as a grating sort of laugh. But there was no humour in the laughing - it was like they were gloating in anticipation of doing some horrible thing. Then I woke up to find Hermione looking down at me."

"The Nephilim," said Snape, darkly.

"I'm afraid so Severus," said Dumbledore. "I was afraid he'd do something like this when he saw the tide starting to turn against him. Was your dream in the present or the future, Margot?"

"The future, Professor," she replied.

"There's no hope for us now," said Remus, staring sadly at the floor.

"There's always hope, Remus," said Dumbledore. "Voldemort might have the Nephilim and the Disc of Gates, but we've got the Anima Summas."

"You've spoken about the Nephilim before, Headmaster," said Harry. "And we learned a bit more about them from the Book of Thoth. He said that he and his wife, Ninhursag, were able to banish them into a parallel realm, but he didn't say how they did it."

"He didn't say how they did it," said Hermione, "but he hinted that they used the Disc of Gates to do it. He didn't come right out and say it, only that they managed to recapture the Disc beforehand."

"So if Voldemort brings these things through the gate," said Draco, "we've got to defeat Voldemort to get the Disc before we can send them back again?"

"It seems that way," said Dumbledore, "although that path isn't too clear. All we can do, I think, is to hope that the power of the Anima Summas will be enough to stand up to them."

"And Satan," said Ron. "Don't forget him - their leader was a bloke called Satani."

Voldemort led his four men through the dark and dusty city of Irem towards the Temple of Gates. He glanced towards the left-hand side of the entrance and saw that the petrified Plonger still stood guard over the place.

He breathed deeply as he entered the temple, savouring the evil atmosphere that permeated the sinister chamber. The four torch holders still stood at the corners at the base of the black altar at the centre of the room, and he instructed Travis and Wormtail to bring more of the black material from the artefacts chamber located to the side of the temple.

He slowly climbed the short flight of stone steps leading up to the altar, and lowered his head as he took off the Disc of Gates and placed it on the shiny black surface. Then he pulled the Necronomicon from his robes and opened it to the page containing the ritual for raising the Nephilim, before placing it on the altar beside the Disc. Finally, he pulled the parchment containing the Spells to activate the Disc and placed it beside the Necronomicon.

He waited while Travis and Wormtail filled the torch holders with the black substance, and lit it with a magical light, and then nodded for the four to take their place at each of the four corners. As he started the ritual, he looked up in satisfaction as the dark material on the walls started to spark into life, flashing brighter with a bright green light as the ritual progressed towards its climax.

The Dark Lord spoke the final words of the ceremony as he pointed his wand at the Disc of Gates before him, "SA KAPU... GEN KURUM." And then he added the spell that had been missing when he'd enacted the ritual previously.

"ATI ME PETA BABKA."

The dark crystal at the centre of the Disc flared with power, reaching up with black tendrils of light to the dark material on the walls.

Green light started to stream down from the walls onto the Disc, where it gathered for a few moments before sending a beam of bright green power towards the fresco at the far end of the temple.

Voldemort hissed with excitement when he saw that the beam of light was far more intense than it had been before, now resembling the beam depicted in the frescos. The beam stopped midway between the altar and the fresco at the far end of the temple, and a small black hole started to form in the air at the place where the light was concentrated. Slowly, an 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 - Voldemort knew from the intensity of the light streaming through and the size of the portal that the gate was now fully open.

Voldemort waited for something to happen. On the two previous occasions that he'd partially opened the gateway, the Nephilim gatekeeper had appeared almost immediately, but this time, there was a much longer delay. Then, a shadow fell across the portal and a figure stepped through, landing on the marble floor at the far end of the altar. He was huge, about ten feet tall, and like it had before, the face reminded Voldemort and his four men of a slightly more refined Neanderthal. His pointed ears extended for about six inches, and he was naked from the waist up; his bottom half was covered in tight-fitting trousers made from an unknown material.

The figure stepped forward, closer to the altar, while others started to stream through onto the temple floor behind him. Although he was standing at the base of the altar, he had to raise his head only slightly to look at Voldemort.

"You are the one whom the Keeper of Gates calls Lord Voldemort?" he asked, pointing a bony, long-nailed finger at the Dark Lord.

"That is correct," he replied, his eyes narrowing as he appraised the being.

"I am Satani," said the Nephilim. "I am the leader of the Nephilim. Why has it taken you so long to summon us to this realm?"

"I have been unable to find the Anima Summas - they have fled from my reign of terror and hidden from my sight."

"The Anima Summas are still at large in this realm?" roared Satani. "Did the Gatekeeper not tell you to destroy them before we were summoned?"

"He did - but how can I destroy something if it doesn't want to fight? The reason I called you here now, is to help me find them so that I can complete the task."

"That is not for us to do!" said Satani, looking around the room, where he spotted Lucius and his three companions looking at him with wide eyes.

He pointed his bony finger at them and roared, "Avert your eyes, scum! I will not be stared at!" The four quickly turned their heads and stared fixedly at the floor.

"We will set up our base of operations here in the City of Pillars," said Satani, looking back up at Voldemort, "while you find the Anima Summas and destroy them. We have much to do before we are strong enough to take our rightful place in the world. For too long, we have lived on the scraps of aged souls and the few new ones that Lammashtha has brought us over the millennia. We have grown weak from lack of sustenance, but that will now change. The

weakest of us remain in the Dark Realm, but we shall soon send them fresh souls on which to feed."

"Is there a spell I can use to find the Anima Summas?" asked Voldemort.

"That is your concern," Satani roared. "Be sure to destroy them. Return here as soon as the deed is done. Now go!"

Voldemort held his natural instinct to flare at the Nephilim - there were now over a hundred standing behind their leader, all just as big and all just as ugly. For the first time in his life, Voldemort decided that it would be better not to force his will on a group of people - there would be time for that later. He replaced the Disc of Gates around his neck, pocketed the spells, and stowed the Necronomicon back inside his robes. Then he turned and walked back down to the base of the altar, snapping his fingers for his four men to follow him back out into the city of Irem.

Satani stood at the top of a tall dune looking down at a Bedouin camp in an oasis below. He grinned a sickly grin and turned to look at the rest of the Nephilim lined up behind him - their mouths slobbering with the anticipated soul-fest that was soon to follow.

Satani raised his arm and pointed at the camp. "Attack!"

The huge ten-foot figures loped quickly down the sand dune and soon reached the outskirts of the oasis. A young Arab woman, her face hidden beneath a dark veil, was the first to spot the intruders. She looked up in disbelief at the large bulk of the strange creature standing over her, and opened her mouth to scream a warning to the rest of the camp, but no sound left her mouth.

The Nephilim placed his hand on her head and squeezed, sending the evil vibrations into her skull, and then opening his mouth to receive the fruits of his labours. He closed his eyes in ecstasy as the poor woman's soul was wrenched from her body, travelling through her wide-open mouth, between the intervening space, and into the gaping maw of the Nephilim. He could have sucked out her soul without touching her, but he found it so much more satisfying to make contact with his victim as he fed. He grunted with satisfaction and flung the woman's body, now an empty living shell, to one side and strode on into the camp looking for more juicy titbits.

Two Nephilim entered the tent closest to the edge of the oasis, where they found two children sleeping - one a boy of about twelve and the other his younger brother by about four years. Mercifully, they remained asleep as the two demons placed their hands over the children's heads. Mercifully, they weren't to feel the horror as their souls were sucked from their bodies. At the last minute, they awoke to feel just the last sparks of awareness, and then they closed their eyes once more - but this time not to dream - just to an existence of nothingness.

The screams of the terrified victims filled the air as they realised what was happening, but they didn't understand how such demons could come to walk the earth feeding on the souls of the innocent - they thought that the old tales about such things told around the camp fires were just that - stories to frighten and entertain. One by one, they succumbed to the terrifying attack

until no one was left. They all still lived, but there was no spark of recognition in any of the staring eyes that looked out from their sunken and tortured sockets.

Satani stood in the middle of the oasis and looked around with satisfaction. The first feeding was over, but it would be just the first of many in the coming days. Not only did his force in this realm have to be fully sated, he also had to send sufficient souls back to his waiting people in the Dark Realm. Once they had had their fill, he could increase his numbers to over five hundred - enough to take control of the Earthly Realm. Then, after that pretentious Voldemort had taken care of the Anima Summas, he would personally take his dark soul. He had ached to do just that in the Temple of Gates, but he knew that he had to rely on the Dark Lord - he and his fellow Nephilim couldn't risk a confrontation with the Anima Summas.

He gathered his force together and led them back out into the desert, seeking the highest point to look out for more victims to ease their raging hunger.

"This is terrible," said Fudge, reading the report he'd just received from the Jordanian Ministry of Magic. "Over one hundred Nomads have been attacked in an oasis in the desert. All of them were left alive, but they were just empty shells - their souls had been taken."

"Just like those poor kids when Lammashtha attacked them close to Abydos," said Charlie, shaking his head.

"Well there's no doubt that the Nephilim are here," said Snape. "But what can we do about them?"

"We've got to try to find where their base is," said Dumbledore. "It's probably Irem - the City of Pillars - but I'm afraid only Voldemort knows where that is."

"Can't we take a look around out in the desert?" asked Katie. "Maybe we'll find something."

"It's a big place Katie," said Remus. "Irem could be anywhere between the Gulf of Aqaba and the Persian Gulf - and there's a lot of desert in between."

"There'll be a lot more attacks," said Snape. "If the legends are right, they'll want to capture a lot more souls than they had in that oasis."

Everyone turned as Fred rushed into the tent, looking very flustered. "A garbled message just came over the Floo Network," he gasped. "It's from the new link set up with new French Ministry headquarters. It was hard to make it out, but I think they must be under attack - there were sounds of spells and curses in the background."

"Demont!" gasped Nadine, covering her mouth with her hands.

"We've got to help them!" shouted Charlie, putting his arm around Nadine's shoulders. "Where's Harry and the others?"

"The last time I saw them, they were heading to the dining tent to grab a snack," said Sirius. "Come on, we can all go through the Floo Network."

"No wait," said Dumbledore. "Their end might well have been captured by now, and you could be walking straight into an ambush."

"We can use the special Portkey we set up when Demont and Anne-Marie came over for Christmas," said Charlie. "It should still be located just outside Demont's cabin. Anne-Marie told me that she wanted to leave it in place in case of emergencies."

Dumbledore stood up and walked to the back of the tent and retrieved the battered can of Coke from a drawer in one of his cupboards. Then he moved swiftly out of the tent and handed it Sirius. "Only four of you will be able to go at a time," he said.

"We'd better go first!" shouted Harry as he and the other five came running out of the dining tent along with Fred. "Draco, you can supply the element of surprise in case we need it when we arrive - come on Hermione."

"Activate your Relocators!" shouted Sirius, but the three had already disappeared.

They materialised in a small depression in the ground between the cabin and the stream, which was running swiftly down the little valley and almost spilling over the bank as a result of the winter rain. Draco reacted very quickly and flew at an astonished young woman who had stopped dead as she approached the Portkey - a two-foot branch of decaying wood.

Draco roared and waved his arms as he hovered only a foot from the startled girl, while Harry and Hermione approached cautiously, arriving just in time to cushion her fall as her eyes rolled up in their sockets and she fainted away.

"Nice one Draco!" exclaimed Hermione as she gently laid the girl's head on the ground. "She's not a Death Eater - look at her."

The girl, about twenty years old, wore the light blue robes that marked her as a French Ministry of Magic employee. Hermione tapped her face gently, trying to revive her.

"Well how was I to know?" said Draco, staring down at the unconscious girl.

"Don't worry Draco," said Harry, instinctively raising his arm to pat him on the back. "She'll be ok..." Harry faltered as his arm sailed through the ghostly shape of Draco.

"Who's this!" exclaimed Sirius, as he, Ceri, Oliver and Katie walked quickly over.

"We think she's a ministry employee," said Harry. "Draco... uh, thought she was a Death Eater and frightened her."

"That's Eva Deschamps!" said Nadine as she, Charlie, Remus and Flitwick arrived. "She came up to the cabin just after she started work in Demont's Magical Creatures office. All new recruits go on a tour of the outlying facilities."

They all looked as the girl groaned and slowly opened her eyes. "Aaaaarrrhhh," she cried when she saw Draco looking down at her.

"It's all right," said Nadine gently. "He's friendly - he thought you was a Death Eater."

The girl visibly relaxed, and shakily stood up, but then her face screwed up in horror. "The others! He... 'You Know Who' came with a load of Death Eaters and attacked the headquarters buildings. Anne-Marie sent me down here to get help - she asked me to take the Portkey to Britain in case the message failed to get through on the Floo Network."

"Demont!" exclaimed Nadine. "Is he all right?"

Eva nodded. "He was when I left a few minutes ago, but there's a lot of Death Eaters up there and I don't know how long they can hang on."

"Where are they?" asked Harry, glancing over his shoulder as the group was joined by Ron, Ginny, Margot and Snape.

Eva pointed in the direction of the Forbidden Forest. "The headquarters buildings are in a valley just this side of the forest - about a mile away."

Harry nodded at Hermione and they joined hands. Draco drifted swiftly between them as they concentrated and then disappeared.

"Come on," shouted Sirius. "Let's get up there quick."

"You stay here Eva," said Ceri. "There'll be a lot more people arriving at the Portkey - send them after us."

They ran around to the front of the cabin and across the small valley and up the steep bank that led onto the path that would take them towards the Forbidden Forest.

"Wait for us!" shouted McGonagall, as she, Fred, George and Lee quickly followed them.

Harry, Hermione and Draco stood on a rocky ridge above the valley that had once housed the new French Ministry headquarters buildings. They looked with horror at the hole that smoked in the middle of the valley, and knew that Voldemort had once more used the power of the Disc of Gates to obliterate his target.

Harry put his hand to his forehead and felt his scar. Then he gasped, "Nothing! There's no pain - he must have gone!"

They could see a number of groups of black-cloaked figures milling around on the valley bottom, but they weren't the ones who were flinging the curses that they could hear - they seemed to be coming from a lot closer.

"They must be directly below us," said Hermione. "We'll have to change our position to get a better view."

"Stay there," said Draco as he drifted quickly out over the ridge and hovered above the valley. He was back in moments. "There's a group of about thirty Death Eaters right below us," he said. "They're laughing and flinging spells at a small outbuilding standing against the side of the valley."

"Come on," said Harry as he moved swiftly to his left and around the rim of the valley. After a few minutes they stood and watched the fight below. The Death Eaters, who were ranged

around the building in a semi-circle, seemed to be intent on dismantling the wooden building bit by bit as they sent curse after curse at the structure. It was evident that there were still some people left in the hut from the spells that were flung back at the Death Eaters, but they were obviously just a futile gesture of defiance, the hastily flung beams flying well wide of the mark, proper aim being impossible amid the heavy pounding that rained down on the hut.

"The sadistic bastards!" said Draco.

"Language, Draco," whispered Hermione as she reached out to hold Harry's hand.

They pointed their palms down at the attacking Death Eaters and shouted, "*QUPPU AMELNAKRU.*"

Draco looked on in amazement as heavy wooden posts, each about eight feet high, seemed to rise directly out of the ground in front of the Death Eaters, who stood and watched in amazed fascination.

The first of the posts rose at the near side, and then popped up just like a line of collapsing dominoes in reverse. The dark-cloaked figures were soon surrounded by the posts, bringing much-wanted relief to the defenders in the hut.

The many Death Eaters further up the valley had witnessed the fantastic event and started to converge on the spot, but they soon veered off, diving towards both sides of the valley as Sirius and the rest started to send spell after spell at them. It was an easy matter for Harry and Hermione to walk around the top of the valley, confining each of the groups in a bubble of suspended time as they went. The Death Eaters could see what was happening, but they found it impossible to make an escape under the heavy fire from above that pinned them down while the Anima Summas did their thing.

Everyone waited for a few minutes before scrambling down into the valley, and Nadine, quickly followed by Charlie and Ginny, raced headlong towards the hut, hoping against hope that Demont was still inside and alive. Ginny stopped suddenly as a bright green beam of light traced across the valley floor and gouged out a large divot of Earth just in front of her.

She turned in the direction from where the curse had come and saw a black-robed figure duck down behind a rock at the far side of the valley. She opened her mouth to shout a warning to the others, but closed her mouth once more as Harry and Hermione stepped in front of her and pointed their palms at the rock.

'*KALU MASKIM XUL,*' they shouted, and watched as the wide-eyed Death Eater floated up above the rock and was wrapped tightly in a glowing tangle of vines. He shouted in fright, but was quickly silenced as he was enveloped, still suspended above the rock, in a bubble of time.

"Thank god you came!" gasped a dishevelled Ann-Marie as she led about fifteen equally dishevelled figures out from the hut and around the line of posts.

Nadine looked quickly around the haggard faces, but Demont's wasn't among them. She held her hand over her mouth as she approached Anne-Marie. "Demont... is he..."

Anne-Marie smiled wryly at Nadine. "No... he's ok Nadine. He's back in the hut with the others who were hurt in the attack."

"What happened here?" asked Sirius.

Anne-Marie shuddered. "There was no warning. We," she gestured around at her colleagues, "were the lucky ones. We were at this end of the valley - we'd decided to come out here for Demont to give a talk on the local Magical Creatures, and then he was going to take us on a tour around the Forbidden Forest just above us. We'd arranged it some time ago, and this was the latest group to be given the tour. Normally, Demont gives his initial talk up at the Headquarters offices, but this time, thank god, the weather was pleasant enough for him to do it outside - you know how Demont hates to be stuck in an office for more than a few minutes, Nadine."

"What happened next?" asked Ceri.

"We heard a shout coming from the top of the valley - over to the left. 'You Know Who' was standing there; pointing a strange disc-like thing at the headquarters buildings. The next thing we knew," she paused as she shuddered once more, "a black light shot from the device and covered the buildings - then they were gone. There was nothing left - you can see for yourselves. After we'd recovered from the shock, we made a dash for the hut. We could hear 'You Know Who' laughing, but that only spurred us on to get to the hut. Then we waited. I looked out of the window and saw him standing there, looking at the hut - I'll never forget what happened next."

She gasped and buried her head in her hands while Nadine gently rubbed her shoulder.

"Two of his devils were holding young Giles Mercourt between them. He said that the Anima Summas were too scared to come after him directly - they could only attack his much weaker helpers. He said that he'd decided to expand his operations into France and into the rest of Europe - we'd all pay the price for the Anima Summas' timidity, and that they wouldn't be able to protect such a wide area. Then... then he pointed his device at Giles and shouted something in a strange language. The next instant, poor Giles was gone, leaving just a smouldering circle of darkened earth where he stood."

She turned when Demont approached quickly around the line of posts, and flung herself at him, crying as she caught around him tightly. He was swamped as Nadine and Ginny added their hugs, and Charlie grasped his hand and shook it vigorously. "Glad to see you're safe, Demont," he said.

Demont quickly eased the girls away from him. "We've got to get those people to a hospital - some of them a very badly hurt."

"We can take them back to the hanging valley," said Snape. "The nurse will soon get them back on their feet."

"Give me a hand with them," said Remus as he directed several of the British ministry people, who had followed the main group to the cabin Portkey, over to the hut.

"This is all that's left of us," whispered Anne-Marie. "The Minister and his heads of department, together with all their staff, were all in the buildings when they were destroyed. I'm the only head of department left. Demont and I are the only two ranking officers left of the Ministry of Magic."

"How did they find us?" gasped Demont, raising his tortured eyes to the sky. "We worked hard to keep this place a secret."

"We knew there were spies in the Ministry," said Anne-Marie, "but we thought we'd isolated them all - moved them to positions that weren't at the heart of the ministry and where we could keep a close eye on them. But we must have missed one of them!"

"You'd all better come back with us," said Sirius, his eyes full of sympathy for the distraught Anne-Marie. "Professor Dumbledore and Cornelius Fudge will know what to do - I can promise that you'll get as much help as you need."

"And we'd better get back as quickly as we can," said Snape. "The first thing we've got to do is to warn every Magical authority in Europe about this development."

The hanging valley of Craig Cerrig-Gleisiad was becoming quite crowded. Mercifully, Professor Dumbledore had enchanted the rough and muddy ground so that it became impervious to the rigors of the weather, and the increasing pairs of feet that now walked around the place no longer churned it into a sticky quagmire.

Fudge had welcomed Anne-Marie and Demont, and had agreed that they could share his Ministry tents and facilities until the conflict was over, directing operations in both the U.K. and France in a joint venture.

As for Harry, Hermione and their friends, they tried constantly to get to Voldemort and the Nephilim, but all their efforts seemed to be thwarted. They found plenty of Death Eaters, and they seemed to be taken to most of the countries in Europe as well as the U.K. and America, but they were constantly frustrated in their attempts to get to the source of the problem.

After several weeks of confining Death Eaters, and listening with increasing horror to the reports of Voldemort's attacks and the evil that was being spread by the Nephilim, it was Ginny and her appetite for looking at maps that finally brought the breakthrough that signalled the beginning of the end.

Chapter 10 - The Final Battle

Nadine shivered as she wrapped her arms around her body and let out a gasp as she turned her head away from the terrible scene below.

"What is it Nadine?" asked Charlie anxiously. "Can you feel anything?"

"No Charlie," she replied, "nothing. It's just the horror of seeing those poor people down there."

Harry, Hermione, the helpers and the protectors had just arrived in the desert region sandwiched between the Red Sea and the river Nile. A special Portkey had been set up for their specific use after Fudge had received a report of yet another attack by the Nephilim. They all watched as the Egyptian ministry of magic people went about the daunting task of gathering the soulless but living bodies of the fifty or so desert nomads together, ready for transportation to a specially constructed hospital on the Saudi-Jordanian border. The hospital had been set up as a joint effort between the Arab states to house the ever-growing number of victims of the Nephilim attacks that were prevalent throughout the region.

"We've got to stop this somehow," said Harry. "This just can't go on!"

Hermione leaned against him and sighed. "What can we do Harry? The spell just won't take us to the Nephilim, nor to Voldemort..." she trailed off, shaking her head.

Sirius frowned as he looked towards Nadine. He and Dumbledore had hoped that by coming to the scene of a recent Nephilim attack, it would trigger something in the minds of the Anima Summas that would lead them to their lair. But Harry and Hermione had felt nothing. Sirius and the others had also hoped that Nadine might have been able to detect some sort of magical vibration. But that hope was now almost dashed as well.

"Do you think you can go down there Nadine?" he asked gently. "I know it's going to be difficult for you, but you may be able to pick something up closer to where the attack took place. We'll all come with you."

Nadine looked at Sirius and frowned, but then nodded. Charlie caught around her as they led the group down the hill towards the jumble of black tents erected on a rocky patch of the desert. She closed her eyes when she got to the edge of the encampment, not wanting to look at the blank stares of the victims, and walked slowly into the centre of the site, where she concentrated hard.

After a few minutes, she shook her head. "Still nothing."

Sirius sighed. "Come on. We can't do any more here - let's get back."

Two days later, Harry, Ron and Draco sat in the dining tent, the two living boys munching their way through a pile of sandwiches.

"That's disgusting!" exclaimed Draco. "I don't know how you two can stick away so much food - you haven't long had your lunch!"

"You're just jealous Malfoy," Ron mumbled as he continued to chew. "Just because you can't eat anything any more."

"I've been meaning to ask you Draco," said Harry. "Don't you get... hungry at all?"

Draco snorted, "Hah! You don't know very much about ghosts do you. Of course I don't get hungry - I haven't got a physical body to maintain."

"No, I suppose not - sorry," said Harry.

Dumbledore and Sirius had insisted that the group take a break from their forays into an ever-expanding area of conflict. They'd been to three places that morning - all in Eastern Europe - and had rounded up quite a few Death Eaters. The first two had been easy, but the last one had involved a fairly lengthy confrontation before Harry and Hermione had been able to confine the scattered enemy forces in a time bubble.

Hermione and Margot walked into the tent after a visit to Alicia and Angelina over at the Weasleys Wizard Wheezes tents. "Where's Ginny?" asked Hermione.

"She said something about going to look at something in the library tent," said Harry.

"We'll go and see what she's doing," said Margot.

When the two girls walked into the library tent, they found Ginny sitting at the desk bent over a large map. She looked up and waved at the pair. "Come in - I'm just trying something out - I've nearly finished now."

The two girls sat either side of Ginny and looked curiously at what she was doing. Ginny looked at the parchment lying on the desk at the side of the map, then poured over the map for a few moments, before carefully making a mark on it with her quill.

"What on Earth are you doing?" asked Margot.

"I've been thinking," she replied. "We can't seem to find out where the Nephilim are, so I thought that if I could find a large enough map of Egypt and the Middle East, and marked down all the places where the Nephilim have attacked, it may show up something. So I went over and asked Minister Fudge for this list of places where the attacks took place. I've marked down nearly all of them now - just one more to go."

She looked at the name at the bottom of the parchment and scoured the Jordanian section of the map. "Got it," she said, and placed a mark towards the top of the map. Then she sat back and looked at her handiwork.

"I thought that a pattern may emerge when I did this," she said. "Does anything strike you as odd about it?"

Hermione and Margot gazed at the map, but shook their heads.

"Well I've had a lot longer to see the pattern," said Ginny. "Look - there's two in the Eastern Egyptian Desert, three more further up towards the Mediterranean coast, five on the Sinai Peninsular, seven in North and East Jordan and another five in Saudi Arabia. So there's ten

towards the western end of the map and twelve to the Eastern end." She reached over and picked up a ruler and started drawing lines, connecting the marks to the East with the marks she'd made on the Western end. Then she sat back and looked down at the pattern.

"I can see what you're getting at," said Margot. "You think that these attacks may have come from a place roughly at the centre of all these places."

"That's right," said Ginny, smiling. "And it should be around the place where those lines I drew intersect."

Hermione nodded. "They don't all intersect at one spot, but they converge on roughly the same area. I think you've got something here, Ginny! Let's show the others - they're in the dining tent."

"Don't tell me they're still there!" she said disgustedly.

"No - we're here now!" said Ron as he led the other two into the library tent.

"Look at this," said Margot. "Ginny's been doing a bit of detective work, and we think she's on to something."

The boys listened as Ginny explained her theory and gazed at the patterns she'd made on the map. "That's brilliant, Ginny," said Draco with a look of respect in his smoky eyes.

"Great job Ginny," said Harry, leaning over to plant a kiss on her cheek. Then he picked up the map and walked towards the tent flap. "Come on - we've got to show this to Dumbledore and the others."

"Extraordinary!" exclaimed Snape as he looked at the map. Draco frowned as he stared at his former housemaster - he couldn't make up his mind whether he was expressing genuine respect for Ginny's efforts or just amazement that she'd been able to think of doing it.

Professor Dumbledore leaned forward and drew a rough circle around the area where the lines converged on the map, then sat back and raised his eyebrows. "This circle is roughly halfway between the Gulf of Aqaba and the southern end of the Dead Sea. Comments anyone?"

"Well it's by far the best lead we've had," said Sirius. "Excellent work Ginny."

Most of the others displayed their admiration, causing Ginny's face to burn with embarrassment, although she had a nice warm glow deep inside.

Remus pointed at the circle. "How big an area would you say that is?"

Ginny did a quick mental calculation. "I'd say, looking at the scale of the map, that the diameter of the circle is about fifty miles, give or take."

"That's still a big area to search," said Oliver.

"And this is still only based on an assumption," added Snape. "Thoth told you in his book that the Nephilim aren't stupid - they may have deliberately set out to pick their targets with this very possibility in mind, and tried to give the impression that their base is somewhere where it isn't."

"You could be right, Severus," said the headmaster, "but I don't think so. These attacks have been frequent and frenzied - it seems to me that they were too intent on sating their desperate hunger to give much time to planning this. And in any case, they may not even care if their base is discovered - they may just be glad that a load of souls come to them rather than having to go and find them."

"I think you're both right," said Hermione, looking at the map and at the list of places on Ginny's parchment. Then she started to number the places that Ginny had marked on the map, starting with 1 for the first attack, 2 for the second and then on up to the last place that was attacked.

"Look at this," she said. "Generally speaking, each attack has been in a different direction, apart from those they did on the same day."

"So it looks like they've made *some* attempt to throw us off the scent," said Sirius.

"But they didn't think it through far enough," added Charlie, smiling at Ginny. "They didn't reckon on my sister and her fascination for patterns on maps."

"So what's our next move?" asked Ceri. "As Oliver said, that's still a lot of desert to search, and you can be sure that they won't be out in plain sight - if Professor Dumbledore is right, they'll be using the City of Pillars as their base - and that's buried underneath the sands somewhere."

"But we've got a secret weapon, haven't we?" said Remus, grinning as he looked towards Nadine.

"Of course!" said Harry. "If the Nephilim are as evil as their horrible attacks suggest, Nadine should be able to pick up their dark emanations a mile off. What do you think, Nadine?"

"I suppose so," she said, suppressing a shudder as she thought of what those vibrations would feel like.

"How can we get there?" asked Harry, now anxious to start looking for the Nephilim.

"Leave that to me," said Dumbledore. "There'll be a Portkey in place first thing in the morning. But before you go, I want you all to be fully aware of the dangers you'll be facing. We don't know how many of them are out there, but we know that they're very powerful. And for all we know, Voldemort could be there as well with the remnants of his British and American forces. So your immediate task is just to locate where they are - I don't want you all wading in and attacking them - even you Harry - do you understand?"

"But Professor," Harry replied, "they've got to be stopped!"

"I know Harry," he said gently, "but please listen to my advice - when you detect them, I want you all to come straight back here before you do anything. Then we can work out the best way

to tackle them. I'll arrange with minister Fudge for as many Aurors as he can spare to go back with you - I know that his forces have been severely depleted over the last few weeks, but so has Voldemort's forces, so the attacks in this country and the United States have dropped off dramatically in the last few days - I might even be able to arrange for some teams of American Aurors to go with you as well."

Everyone wore serious expressions as they continued to look at the headmaster, who paused for a few moments while he took a sip of water.

"One more thing - this could be the final battle in this war. I'm hoping - banking - on Voldemort being with the Nephilim. If he is, make no mistake that the fight will be fierce and difficult. I will be coming with you for the final conflict, as will Severus and Minerva and as many of our staff that will agree to come with us. But we've all got a very specific job to do - that's to support Harry and Hermione when they face Voldemort and the Nephilim. We've got to keep any Death Eaters off their backs while they face their greatest challenge. I don't want anybody trying to tackle the Nephilim or Voldemort and his Disc of Gates, unless it's in support of the Anima Summas. Is that clear?"

They all nodded. Dumbledore's speech had made them all realise even more the great severity of the task that lay ahead - and for Dumbledore to announce that he'd be there to fight alongside them only served to heighten that awareness. But it also gave them a lot of comfort, knowing that the greatest wizard in the world would be with them when it mattered most.

They were all ready to go early the following morning. The night had been a long one, and sleep had come only slowly as they all wrestled with the dangers of the task ahead. But they all stood outside Dumbledore's tent with a fierce determination as they waited for the headmaster to emerge with the Portkey.

"Don't forget what I told you yesterday," said Dumbledore as he walked across and handed over the Portkey. "This is a scouting mission only! You will materialise approximately at the centre of the search area - Good luck."

Harry looked around at the barren expanse of the desert into which they emerged. He felt the heat from the blazing sun, which was not far above the eastern horizon, and tapped the water bottle inside his robes, knowing that it would be needed as the day wore on. The desert seemed to stretch forever on all sides, interrupted only by a line of cliffs low down on the horizon far to the north. Nothing stirred in the arid desert - not even the few snakes and scorpions that were undoubtedly there - although Harry did spot a small lizard lying on a rock, unmoving as it waited for the sun's heat to stir its body into action.

Nadine stood with her face to the sky, her eyes closed, trying to pick up any sign of magical emissions. Everyone looked on as they waited for her to give her verdict.

"There's something," she said finally. "I can't make out what it is because it's so faint, but there's definitely something here."

"Let's do what we did back in France," said Charlie. "We can walk in each direction for a little way and see if they get any stronger."

"Which way first?" asked Oliver.

Sirius shrugged. "I suppose one way's as good as any other - let's try north, towards that line of hills in the distance."

"Hang on a minute," said Katie as she piled five or six rocks one on top of the other. "We want a reference point to come back to in case we have to check in another direction, otherwise we might easily stray out of the search area."

They walked towards the line of cliffs, forming up instinctively into their protective positions around the six youngsters, always scouring the desert for any signs of movement. They must have walked for several miles before Nadine called a halt and checked once more for the vibrations.

"They're stronger," she said at last. "Still faint, but I can feel them a bit more clearly here, and they're... they're not very nice."

"We're going in the right direction then," said Sirius, looking ahead to the line of cliffs, which didn't appear to be any closer than when they'd started out.

They walked on for another hour and the cliffs started to become more distinct, despite the shimmering haze that made them wobble from side to side disconcertingly. After another few miles, Nadine once more closed her eyes and opened her mind to the emanations.

This time, there was no delay in her voicing her verdict. "Over there," she gasped, shaking her head as if to rid her mind of the evil vibrations. "They're a lot closer now." She pointed over to her right, at the red-coloured cliffs that were now no more than two miles away.

They adjusted their direction and walked towards the cliffs, now being far more cautious as they approached a place that could harbour hidden danger.

"Further to the right," said Nadine, following their arrival at the base of the cliffs. They walked along, looking intently up at the stark red bastions of rock, trying to find a cave or opening - anything that would take them closer to the source of the vibrations.

Without warning, they came upon a cleft in the rock, splitting the cliffs from top to bottom. Oliver and Katie walked slowly inside, wands held to the fore, and peered at the dark passage that led into the rock.

After a few minutes, they came back out. "It's definitely a well-worn path," said Oliver. "It winds about a bit, and we didn't get to the end of it, but it's certainly been in use very recently."

"Stay close together," said Sirius, holding out the Portkey. "At the first hint of trouble, grab hold of this and we'll get out of here."

The closely packed group walked slowly into the opening, following the sandy path as it wound its way through the cliffs. "There's an opening just up ahead," whispered Katie, seeing that the rocky walls were becoming brighter just around a left-hand bend. They cautiously edged forward, and soon emerged into a sandy area.

Remus gasped. "I know this place!" he exclaimed, looking at the impressive Treasury built into the rose red cliffs. "This is Petra!"

"The ancient city of the Nabataeans," added Hermione, looking up at the building, savouring its ancient classical contours.

"Who the hell are they?" asked Ron.

"Later Ron," said Sirius quietly. "Let's take a closer look."

They walked up to the Treasury, and Oliver quickly climbed the stone steps at the front and peered inside for a few moments. "Empty," he said as he walked back down to join his colleagues.

"Where's Nadine?" asked Ginny, her expression anxious as she looked around the group.

"She was right behind me," said Charlie, turning and running quickly back to the opening in the cliffs.

"Nadine!" he exclaimed when he saw his girlfriend leaning groggily against the cliff wall, just before it emerged into the open sandy area. He quickly went to her and put his arms around her shoulders as he helped her stagger over to the rest of the group.

"What happened?" he said, his eyes full of concern.

"I opened my mind to check the vibrations," she whispered. "It was horrible... so evil. I... I think it's coming from right underneath our feet, but I don't want to check any further and experience those feelings again!"

"It's ok, Nadine," said Sirius gently. "You've done your job - all we've got to do now is find a way down. The City of Pillars must be underneath Petra somewhere."

"Hang on Sirius," said Ceri. "You know what Dumbledore said. We've found where they're holed up, so we'd better get back and report."

"But we've got to try to find out how to get to them Ceri," said Harry. "It might take ages, so now that we're here, we might as well dig around a bit."

"No Harry," said Sirius resignedly. "Ceri's right. We've done what we came here to do, now we've got to work out a plan to get at them."

He held out the Portkey and everyone, Harry very reluctantly, grabbed hold while Sirius said the special spell that activated it. Before he did so, however, he walked over to the opening in the cliff face, and placed a small rock just inside, out of view of the Treasury building. He'd been given the special Portkey by Dumbledore the previous evening, with instructions to place it at a suitable spot where they could safely arrive with the main force at some time in the future.

"So they're below the ancient city of Petra?" said Dumbledore, stroking his beard reflectively as he listened to Sirius' report. After eating a late lunch after returning from their scouting trip, the group had joined Dumbledore and the rest of his team in the headmaster's tent.

"But we don't know how we can get down to them," said Sirius. "We thought it better to report what we found rather than risk detection."

"Perfectly correct," said Dumbledore. "But we've got to find a way down there before we commit our forces. We don't want to be caught out in the open."

"Should we go back?" asked Harry, hopefully.

"No Harry," said Dumbledore. "I spoke to minister Fudge earlier this morning, and he's been able to muster together only five full teams of Aurors to help us, and that includes some volunteers from America. I think it might be best if we send one of those teams to spy out the place, and try to see where the Nephilim emerge from below the city. Then we can all join them when they send word back to us."

"I'd like to join that team," said Snape. "As you know, I'm well versed in the techniques of spying, so I could be of great help to them."

"Thank you, Severus. I was hoping you'd say that. I'll see Fudge immediately - the sooner we know how to get at them, the sooner we can attack."

Dumbledore and Snape walked over to the Ministry of Magic tents and walked inside. A few minutes later, they came back out with Marcus Heatherington-Jones, who ran quickly over to a line of tents, newly erected to house the five teams of Aurors.

Sirius and Oliver briefed John Ballot and his team, the one selected by Marcus to carry out the spying mission, on what they would find when they arrived at Petra. John made a final check that all his Aurors were equipped with the Muggle communication devices and then they walked over to stand with Snape, who held out the Portkey for them all to grab. Oliver reflected sadly on all the new faces in the team that had once been his - he had only known John - and he shook his head at the realisation that the rest of his old comrades had fallen victim to the conflict.

After Snape and the others had gone, Sirius and Oliver walked back to the six youngsters and the rest of the protectors, who were waiting to start yet another foray in pursuit of Death Eaters. Dumbledore had consented to one more action, but had then insisted that they rest up ready for the coming conflict in the desert.

"I wonder where we'll end up this time?" asked Ron. "I hope it's the southern part of America - Eastern Europe is even colder than Wales!"

Harry, Hermione and Draco disappeared, followed a minute or so later by the rest of the group.

"This way," said Snape, leading the way into the sandy clearing in front of the Treasury building at Petra.

"What do you suggest Severus?" asked John, happy to rely on the greater spying experience of the Potions Master.

"We checked around this area when we were here earlier," he replied, and then pointed to the wide track leading to the right. "The centre of Petra is most probably that way."

John motioned for his team to split up and hug the sides of the cliffs, and then he and Snape followed them as they all made their way cautiously along the track.

"What exactly are we looking for?" asked John quietly. "Should we expect to find some sort of entrance going down below ground?"

"I very much doubt it John," replied Snape. "Since not even the archaeologists have found a trace of Irem, I'd expect the entrance to be very well concealed, and most probably protected by a magical spell."

"So how are we going to find it?"

"All we can do, I think, is to spread the team out around the city and wait for something to happen - the Nephilim are bound to come out sooner or later. But be sure to tell everyone to remain well hidden, and when the Nephilim appear, not to do anything to give themselves away. We'll just let them go, and then follow them back to their lair when they return."

"I'd better send one of them back to the Treasury building," said John. "For all we know, the entrance could be there somewhere, even though you checked it out earlier."

Snape nodded and walked quietly alongside John. After about three hundred yards or so, the track started to widen, and they came to the centre of the city. John directed several of his Aurors to hide among some of the ruined structures, strategically placed to afford the maximum view of the surrounding area, and then led the remaining team members further. After half an hour, only Snape, John and one other remained, everyone else having been allocated a vantage point.

John left his last Auror at the base of a path, signposted as the way up to 'El-Deir', and then walked with Snape along a rising path up to a monument that stood on a hill overlooking the city centre. There they settled down to wait amid some fallen masonry towards the edge of the hill, looking out over a fairly wide expanse of the city.

For the next two hours nothing stirred down in the derelict city. Snape looked up and saw the sun approach the red cliffs. "It's going to be dark soon," he said, and then stiffened as John caught his arm and eased him further down towards the ground.

Snape followed John's nod and looked in the direction of the path leading up to El-Deir. He shuddered when he caught sight of a large number of ten-foot tall horrors trundling down the path, and listened as John whispered into his radio to warn the rest of his team. The Auror hidden at the bottom of the path tried to push himself further into his hiding place as the monsters streamed past his position, and hoped that they couldn't hear the thudding of his heart as it beat rapidly inside his chest.

Everybody let out a sigh of relief when the Nephilim disappeared from sight, finally filing out through the cleft in the cliff walls and out into the desert.

"Get your men down to the start of that path," said Snape, getting up from his cramped position. "We'll have to find places to hide up there and try to spot where they go when they return."

Just over half an hour later, John and Snape looked down onto the imposing building that was El-Deir from their position high up on the cliff wall. The rest of the team was positioned around the tops of the cliffs overlooking the monastery, and one - a brave volunteer - was actually inside. They had all helped to cover the man with rocks taken from the floor inside the building, making sure to leave a small spy-hole so that he had an uninterrupted view.

It was quite dark when they heard the deep-throated laughter coming from the trail leading into the monastery enclosure. Snape frowned at the evil sound, knowing that it was as a result of a successful raid. He wondered grimly how many poor souls had been taken this night. Again they all hunkered down when they saw the first of the monsters come into sight. They were laughing and remonstrating among themselves, and John hoped that their preoccupation would help to keep his Auror safe inside the building.

For the next five minutes they streamed through the gap in the cliff and walked into El-Deir. Finally, all was silent and they all scrambled down to the lone Auror, who was waiting at the entrance to the building.

"Did you spot where they went?" asked Snape.

The Auror nodded. "They went to a low sort of altar at the back of the chamber. The first was holding a black arrow-shaped thing - he must have placed it somewhere behind the altar. Then the altar rose up to leave a hole in the ground with steps leading down - they went down, five at a time, the ones at the top waiting for a few moments before following on down."

"Let's take a closer look inside," said John.

They went into the chamber and walked over to the altar, where Snape knelt on the floor, holding his illuminated wand low to the ground. "There's a depression here," he said. "That arrow-shaped thing must be some sort of magical key."

"So how are we going to get down there?" asked John. "We haven't got a key!"

"We don't!" exclaimed Snape. "It's as I thought - and there's probably another process they go through after this altar stone is removed. They must have been waiting for that process to be completed before each group of five followed them down. We've found where the entrance to Irem is, but I'm afraid it doesn't help us very much. We'll just have to find another way in, somehow."

"But how are we going to do that?" asked John. "I wouldn't know how to go about finding it!"

"Neither would I," said Snape. "I think we'll have to rely on the special powers of the Anima Summas to do that."

Everyone was relieved when Snape and the team returned to Craig Cerrig-Gleisiad. Dumbledore, in particular, had been very relieved that the Nephilim hadn't been able to detect

the Aurors - he'd feared that they'd be able to 'smell' the souls of the hidden team. But although the entrance to Irem was barred to them, at least they now knew that a large force could remain hidden, provided that great caution was exercised, while another entrance was sought.

They had decided to take their forces into Petra and set up camp well away from the path the Nephilim took from their lair beneath El-Deir down to the cleft in the cliffs. Snape, anticipating the move, had relocated the Portkey away from the cleft to the far north east of the city - in a deep wadi.

The hanging valley of Craig Cerrig-Gleisiad was almost deserted after the last of Dumbledore's force of about 135 left for Petra the following night. The force was joined at the last moment by 'Mad Eye' Moody and several of his best trainees. He said that there was not a chance in hell that he'd miss out on the action. Only Winky and Dobby remained to serve Jules, Fudge and his few remaining staff, together with one or two of the French contingent. Demont, Anne-Marie and most of their French colleagues had returned to France a few days ago, desperate to gather together the remaining ministry employees who were scattered around the country in small outlying offices and facilities. They also wanted to recruit a lot more people from the magical community to build up their depleted ranks of Aurors.

The first thing that Dumbledore did was to place powerful wards around their campsite, while Marcus directed several Aurors to keep a look out at the top of the steep sided wadi. Then the headmaster called a meeting to work out their strategy for finding a way down to Irem, and what they'd do when they got there. It was decided that only Harry and Hermione would search for an alternative entrance - it would be less likely that only two roaming around the ancient city would be spotted by any observant Death Eater or Nephilim.

"We can look at the places closest to the campsite first," said Hermione as they all studied the map of Petra, which Ginny had earlier found in the library. "We can check along the north wall of the city - it'll be easy to keep out of sight there - and onto that line of rock tombs leading into the centre. We'll have to be careful when we get there though - we'll be in plain view of anyone watching from the path up to El-Deir."

"Haven't you got a spell to make you invisible?" asked Ron.

Harry looked at Hermione, searching deep within his newly acquired memory of ancient spells. "There might be one," he said. "It's similar to the protective force field we can generate."

Hermione nodded. "I think it should keep us concealed."

They looked up when one of the guards rushed into the tent. "There's movement towards the centre of the city," he said. "It's hard to make it out in the dark, but judging from all the illuminated wands we can see, I'd say there's a large force of Death Eaters out there."

"You stay here," said Sirius, as he nodded for Harry and Oliver to join him. They ran quickly out of the tent and scrambled up the side of the wadi behind the Auror.

"There." The auror pointed to the middle of the city, where a row of moving lights wound their way up towards the start of the path leading up to El-Deir.

Harry clasped his hand to his forehead as he felt the first twinges of pain in his scar. "He's there," he said. "Voldemort's with them."

Sirius counted roughly a hundred and fifty moving lights, and watched until the last of them disappeared up the path. Then the three went back down into the wadi and walked into the tent.

"He's arrived," said Sirius. "Harry's scar started hurting - I counted about a hundred and fifty of them." Oliver nodded in agreement.

"We'd better get some sleep," said Dumbledore. "Tomorrow's going to be a very hard day for us all."

Harry and Hermione started their search just after dawn the following morning. Everyone was there to see them off, except Ron, who was still finishing his breakfast. Before they climbed out of the wadi, they held hands and said the spell they'd thought of the previous night. At first, the familiar silvery blue light shot from their upraised hands and fanned out to cover them. Then it shimmered and disappeared, as did Harry and Hermione.

"Cool!" exclaimed Ginny. "Are you still there?"

"We're still here, Ginny," said Harry, "but not for long. We'll see you later, hopefully with good news."

They walked towards a ruined tower that marked the corner of the north wall of the city, and spent a few minutes checking for anything unusual. Then, not finding anything, they walked along the crumbling wall towards a line of tombs cut into the rock. They looked closely at the wall as they walked, looking for any odd formation or inscription, but they could see nothing of interest.

Hermione checked the map when they reached the first of the tombs. "It's the tomb of Sextius Florentinus," she said. "He was the Roman governor of the city in the second century."

They looked up at the swirling patterns in the red sandstone rock, and the open entrance that led into the dark interior.

"The outside looks like a face," muttered Harry. "And the doorway looks like a gaping maw. Very odd."

They walked slowly into the dark interior of the tomb, and found that they had to end their invisibility spell so that they could use their wands to illuminate the place - the light couldn't escape from the force field. It wasn't very big inside, just a small chamber with a niche cut into the rock wall at the back to hold the body of the ancient Roman governor. Thankfully, he wasn't in residence any longer.

"There's something here," said Hermione. "I can feel it - a sort of tingling sensation coming from the left-hand corner."

Harry caught hold of Hermione's hand and led her over to the roughly hewn corner of the tomb. They raised their wands and closely examined the walls and floor, looking for the source of the magical irritation. Hermione felt her wand being drawn to a spot on the rock

about four feet above the floor, but when she looked at it closely, there didn't appear to be anything there.

She shook her head in frustration. "There's something drawing me to this area of rock," she said, "but I can't see anything!"

She placed her wand on the wall and watched, fascinated, as it started to move under its own volition, scraping over the rock right into the corner to the right and then along the back wall for a few inches, where it came to rest. Harry lowered his arm and placed his wand next to Hermione's, then jumped as the spot where their wands touched started to shimmer and glow. The outlines of two hieroglyphic characters slowly appeared on the face of the rock, shining with a silvery glow against the dark red sandstone.

"Open me," said Hermione, translating the ancient Egyptian.

Harry placed his wand directly on the glyphs and said, "*ALOHOMORA*."

They turned their heads at the sound of rock moving against rock and walked over to the niche in the back wall. The stone slab that had been laid in the niche to support the Roman governor's body had moved into a recess at the side, revealing a dark opening.

"Do you think this is it?" asked Harry. "The way down to Irem?"

"I don't know, Harry," said Hermione doubtfully. "It's all a bit... too convenient don't you think? We've only been searching for about half an hour."

Harry grinned at the sceptical look on his girlfriend's face. "We're not on the quest any longer, Hermione. I think you've come to expect problems to be complicated and difficult to solve - just accept that we've had a bit of luck for a change."

"I don't know, Harry..." she said, still sceptical.

"Look, Osiris and Isis probably left that message when they came here. They probably found this back-door entrance to the city, and marked the place for their helpers to follow them down or something."

"Well if that's the case, there's definitely something fishy about it! The tomb wouldn't have been here in Osiris and Isis' time!" Hermione now had a determined look on her face.

"The Roman tomb might not have been," Harry persisted, "but it was probably a more ancient tomb or cave that was converted into a tomb, and the outside walls decorated."

"I wish I had your optimism," she said. "And we don't even know if it leads down to the city."

"Well there's only one way to find out."

Harry leaned over and lowered his wand into the opening, seeing that it dropped down to a rough rocky path about six feet below, which sloped down to the left. He jumped up onto the lip of the opening and eased himself down, bracing his arms on the sides as he lowered himself down to the floor.

"Come on, I'll help you," he whispered as he looked up at Hermione's face staring down at him from the opening above.

Hermione's head disappeared, to be replaced by her legs as they dangled down into the gap. Harry reached up and caught around her waist, supporting her as she dropped down beside him. They stood looking at each other, their faces very close together, as they held each other tight for a few moments. Then they reluctantly broke apart and held their illuminated wands in front of them to look at their surroundings. Then they shuffled down the rocky path to the left, stopping when it turned to the right and bent back on itself at a 180-degree angle. They followed the path on down, as it doglegged to the left and right several times - always leading lower beneath the ground.

After a few minutes, the path levelled off and turned abruptly to the right. Harry caught Hermione's hand and eased her behind him as he peeked around the corner.

"There's a short corridor about ten feet long," he whispered. "Then it looks like it opens out onto a larger area. We'd better put our wands out."

They walked slowly into the corridor, feeling their way along in the darkness, until they reached the far end, and stopped once more as they peered out into the gloom. They couldn't see very much - it was too dark - although there appeared to be a dull glow far to their right.

"There's something over there," said Harry, pointing in the direction of the diffuse light.

"Shhhh," whispered Hermione, cocking her head to the side. "I think I can hear something."

They both listened intently, hearing the faint sounds of low, guttural voices. As their eyes became more accustomed to the gloom, they could just make out the shapes of two large pillars rising from the floor, not more than ten yards away from where they stood.

"This *must* be Irem," whispered Hermione. "The City of Pillars."

"And those voices must be the Nephilim," added Harry. "I wonder where Voldemort is?" He reached up and felt his scar, which had started to tingle, but not painfully so. "He's here, but he can't be very close to us."

"We'd better get back up, Harry," whispered Hermione. "We've got to tell the rest what we've found."

Lord Voldemort growled at Lucius and Crabbe, "Why are they keeping us waiting so long!"

Voldemort had led his forces into Irem the previous night after receiving a summons from Satani, the leader of the Nephilim. Voldemort had taken the decision to keep his elite Death Eaters by his side wherever he went, hoping that they'd attract the Anima Summas - but so far, it hadn't worked. When they'd arrived, Satani had told Voldemort that he and his followers were needed to open the Gate, so that the Nephilim, now fully sated by the souls they'd devoured, could regurgitate some of them through the portal to their remaining numbers still in the Dark Realm. But he'd sent them to the far end of the city to await his call - he'd said that they had to enact a long and complicated ritual within the Temple of Gates to

prepare for the regurgitation process, which must remain hidden from the eyes of the uninitiated.

Lucius had found a large building built into the far cliff face, suitable for holding their forces, and there they'd waited all night and into the morning. Almost all the Death Eaters had slept, but Voldemort couldn't. He was impatient to open the Gate and then return to his main objective of flushing out the Anima Summas. And when he'd disposed of them, after taking their ancient knowledge and spells for himself, he'd concentrate on the task of dealing with the Nephilim.

Voldemort had no doubt that Satani intended to kill him as soon as his usefulness was at an end, but before that happened, his powers would be enhanced by Potter and Granger - and he still had the Disc of Gates, of course.

Wormtail and Travis, who'd been sent to the far end of the city to spy on what was going on in the Temple of Gates, rushed into the building, panting from the exertions of their long run.

"My Lord," said Wormtail, gasping to regain his breath. "There's a force of Aurors at the far right corner of the city - we saw them file out of a tunnel in the rock wall."

"Who's leading them?" hissed Voldemort.

Travis shook his head as he answered. "They were too far away to get a good look. We saw about fifty of them, and more were pouring out of the tunnel when we decided to come straight back here to tell you."

"We thought that you'd want to know as soon as possible," added Wormtail.

Voldemort grunted, then called for his men to follow him towards the centre of the city.

"They'll be attracted towards all that noise that the Nephilim are making in the Temple of Gates," said Voldemort, addressing Lucius and Crabbe as they walked at the head of the Death Eater force along a wide avenue. "Crabbe - take Travis, Wormtail and half my servants and go towards the far right of the city. When you hear the sound of battle, take them from behind. Lucius, we'll take the rest of the men and aim to ambush them before they reach the temple."

The Death Eaters split ranks when they reached the centre of the city, half branching to the right and half to the left. As they approached the far left corner of the cavern, Voldemort's group moved with a lot more caution - keeping their eyes and ears peeled for movement.

"They can't have come past this spot yet," said Lucius. "Shall I position the men ready for an ambush?"

Voldemort nodded. "When you've finished, come back to wait by my side. I want you to relay my orders to the others when the fighting starts."

A little earlier, Marcus Heatherington-Jones had been the first one to emerge from the tunnel, closely followed by John Ballot and three teams of Aurors. Marcus had insisted that his men enter the city first to make sure that it was safe for the rest to follow on behind.

"It seems to be all clear, Professor," John whispered as he went back into the tunnel and spoke to Dumbledore. "But there's strange noises coming from the far end of the city, and we can see an odd greenish glow coming from the same direction. It's not very bright, but at least it gives off enough diffuse light to just make our way in the gloom."

Dumbledore nodded and turned to Sirius, gesturing for him to lead the others out into the City of Pillars. The protectors emerged from the tunnel, surrounding the six teens and Professor Dumbledore. Then came Fred, George, Alicia, Angelina, Lee, Snape, Flitwick, McGonagall, 'Mad Eye' and his three trainees, the ministry staff and the last two teams of Aurors bringing up the rear.

Marcus held up his hand before they proceeded into the city and quietly called for the team-leaders, Sirius and Dumbledore to join him at the head of the column. "These buildings and avenues look to be very tightly packed," he said. "I think we'd better not use the automated capabilities of the Relocators - it'll cause as much confusion to our men as it will to the Death Eaters. Pass the message that they should be used in manual mode - like the original Relocators."

Marcus sent John Ballot and his team to scout ahead along the path that skirted the right-hand wall that enclosed the city, and another team further into the ruins and along a parallel path, protecting their left flank. They proceeded slowly, exercising great caution, hearing the noise made by the Nephilim become louder with every step they took.

"Whatever they're doing," said Dumbledore, "seems to be building to a crescendo."

"What about Voldemort?" asked Harry. "Do you think he's with them?"

Dumbledore shook his head. "There's no way of knowing that, Harry. How's your scar?"

"It's tingling, Professor, and it seems to be getting worse."

Hermione reached out and held Harry's hand, sending soothing thoughts into his mind, trying to ease his discomfort. Harry grinned at her - it certainly seemed to be helping. His mind was working overtime now, anticipating the coming conflict and trying to work out how he and Hermione could best deal with the evil forces that were so near at last. He sent his thoughts to his girlfriend, feeling her own mixture of excitement and fear. Three years - three long years on the quest. And now, all they had learned and accumulated on those quests would very soon be put to the ultimate test. They felt confident in their newly acquired abilities - but they hoped that they would be up to the task when it came down to the bottom line, as it inevitably would.

They walked on - the light from the far end of the city was now making it a lot easier for them to see the path ahead. They passed a broad avenue to their left, leading into the depths of the city, but they ignored it and carried straight on, keeping the cliff wall to their immediate right. The group was spread out over a distance of about a hundred yards along the path.

At the front of the group, John Ballot could just make out, in the distance, where the path came up to the far wall. The noise and glow was now over towards their left, coming from a building set against the back wall. He stopped, and held up his hand. Some instinct born of long experience in the field was telling him that all was not well. He turned and led his men back towards the main group following on behind and walked up to Sirius and Marcus.

"There's something wrong," he said. "I don't know what exactly, but I can feel it in my bones - I think we should branch off into the city and find another way."

"Do you think there's a trap..." Sirius started to say, but dropped to the floor, pulling Ceri down beside him when he heard and saw curses flashing towards them from the building on the left of the path about fifty yards ahead.

"Get down, all of you," he shouted, but needn't have bothered - they'd all already followed Sirius' lead and flung themselves down, watching the beams of energy whiz harmlessly overhead.

"We've got to get off this path," shouted Marcus. "You and your team cover us John - we'll get further into the city and try to take them from that side."

John's team laid down a barrage of spells, aiming in the general direction of the ambushers, allowing Marcus and the rest to crawl across to the cover of the buildings on their left, and then through the narrow alleys to the next walkway where they met up with the flanking team of Aurors.

John then directed his team to ease their way across to the comparative safety of the buildings, and not before time as a large group of Death Eaters came charging up the path behind them, peppering their position with powerful spells that flung showers of masonry down just in front of where they lay.

Marcus, hearing the sounds of spells from their rear, sent two teams to help John and his men, while he led the remaining two teams into the jumble of structures towards their first attackers, leaving the rest sheltering amongst the ancient buildings. The sounds of curses and spells filled the air, as the two opposing sides came to grips with each other. A loud explosion rocked the city as Voldemort unleashed an incredibly powerful spell from the Disc of Gates towards the buildings flanking the path, destroying two of the structures and burying ten of John's group beneath a jumble of masonry.

Another explosion buried five more Aurors beneath falling rubble, forcing John and the remaining Aurors further back into the city, where they joined up with Dumbledore and his group.

"Voldemort's using the Disc," gasped John. "We haven't got a hope."

"The Nephilim!" shouted Sirius, seeing several huge shapes moving quickly towards them from behind.

"Do what you can to hold off the Death Eaters here," said Dumbledore, piercing John Ballot with a determined stare. "I'll see what I can do to keep those monsters at bay."

Ten huge Nephilim emerged from the gloom, not forty yards away, their slobbering mouths and low growls indicating that they were out for more than just blood. The six friends and their protectors joined up with John's men, lending their support to the beleaguered Aurors. Harry and Hermione joined hands and sent spell after spell at the attackers, immobilising several groups, while at the same time staring intently into the gloom, scouring the area for any sign of Voldemort.

Dumbledore stood alone against the ten Nephilim, who roared as they approached his position. He stood up straight, pointed his wand at a spot just in front of them, and spoke the spell that sent a bright green beam, which hit the ground five yards from the leading ogre, who took two steps forward and three back as he collided with the powerful force field that rose from the ground.

The Nephilim roared with frustration as they tried to break through, but they were effectively blocked. The monster on their left flank grunted and called for his colleagues to abandon their efforts to break through, hearing the sounds of fighting over towards their left. They quickly turned and faded into the alleyways, heading towards Marcus and his group.

"Harry, Hermione!" shouted Dumbledore. The pair ran quickly over to the headmaster - their powerful spells had held up the attacking Death Eaters and forced them to take cover, giving Sirius and the others time to regroup and find better cover.

Dumbledore pointed in the direction where the Nephilim had disappeared. "Help me contain those Nephilim - they've gone after Marcus and his Aurors."

The three moved swiftly, listening to the sounds of spells to guide them, but glanced at each other worriedly when the sounds started to ease, only to be replaced by the heartrending sound of terrified screams and shouts. They redoubled their speed, and soon came upon the terrible scene - the Nephilim had taken the Aurors unawares from behind, and had decimated their numbers. The empty shells of almost thirty of them lay on the ground, their souls ripped from their bodies, while Marcus and his remaining men huddled together behind a low wall, trying to keep the huge shapes at bay by laying down a barrage of spells - most of which bounced harmlessly off the beasts. Their Relocators had been completely ineffective against the unconventional attack of the Nephilim.

Dumbledore once more sent the spell that erected a barrier between the Nephilim and the Aurors, while Harry and Hermione joined hands and pointed their palms at the slobbering attackers, who turned and started towards them.

"NAHU DUGU ISTEN." They watched as the silvery-blue beam covered the Nephilim and then faded. The Nephilim stopped in their tracks and a glazed expression entered their eyes. Then they turned and walked slowly back in the direction of the temple.

Lucius and the other Death Eaters had watched the action unfold from the windows of the buildings in which they were hiding. Initially, they laughed as the Nephilim started to eat the souls of the Aurors, happy to be cast in the role of mere spectators, but shrank back in fear when Dumbledore and the Anima Summas had appeared. Lord Voldemort, who had made a brief foray to help his men attacking John Ballot's group, returned to Lucius' side just as the Nephilim were banished back to the temple.

"Potter!" he hissed, and raised the Disc of Gates, ready to send the spell he'd been reserving for the Anima Summas. But he was frustrated when he found that Marcus and his remaining ten Aurors obscured his aim as they ran swiftly towards Dumbledore and the two teens, and then followed them back towards their main group.

"Follow them!" shouted Voldemort as he led his men out of the buildings. "Some of you try to flush out Potter and Granger. Get them to chase you back here so that I can get one good shot at them." Then he put his hand on Lucius' arm. "Wait here with me, Lucius."

Meanwhile, Dumbledore and his group had rejoined the others, who had arranged themselves behind cover in a rough semi-circle to repel the Death Eaters attacking from the direction of the path that skirted the boundary cliff walls of the city. The defensive circle was completed with the arrival of Marcus and the others, and Harry and Hermione moved from building to building trying to join back up with their four friends.

But some of the Death Eaters had started to disperse around to the sides, making the Aurors constantly adjust their positions to keep them at bay. Wormtail, Travis and two others crept silently around the side of a tall building. Travis held up his hand and grinned when he spotted Ron, Margot and Ginny crouching behind a low wall about ten yards away, their backs fully exposed to their fire. He gestured for the other three to follow him from behind the building, and then they pointed their wands, ready to send the three teens into oblivion.

But they never managed to say the spells - the ghostly form of Draco Malfoy flew down from his vantage point overlooking his friends and moaned eerily as he drifted towards the attackers, moving right through the astonished Wormtail and Travis, causing them to yell with fright as they felt the cold enter their bodies. Ron turned and sent a stunning spell, which whizzed past Wormtail's head, but Ginny and Margot were more accurate as their spells caught the other two Death Eaters, sending them to the ground, unconscious. Travis and Wormtail turned and rushed behind the cover of the building and made their way back to the safety of the main Death Eater force.

Harry and Hermione arrived to hear the three thank Draco for his timely intervention, and sank down beside them.

"Ten of those Nephilim attacked Marcus' group," said Hermione. "We managed to calm them down and send them back to their temple, but not before they sucked the souls out of thirty Aurors. If the rest of them join the fight, I dread to think what will happen."

"We're going over there to try to stop them coming out," said Harry. "You stay here with Sirius and the others." He pointed to a low building about fifteen yards to the left. "They're in there."

"We'd better go towards the centre of the city and approach the temple from that side," said Hermione. Harry nodded and caught her hand as they moved quickly, ducking low to the ground, back towards the main thoroughfare they'd spotted earlier.

Ron glanced at the two girls and whispered, "I'm not letting them face those things on their own - I'm going to follow them in case they need some help. Coming Draco?"

Ron moved swiftly in the direction that Harry and Hermione had gone, not waiting for Draco to answer, but turned when he heard footsteps behind him. "You two stay with Sirius," he gasped when he saw Ginny and Margot following him.

"Ron's right," added Draco. "It'll be too dangerous where we're going."

"Bog off!" exclaimed Ginny, turning towards Margot and winking. "We've stuck together all this time, and we're not splitting up now!"

Ron sighed, but knew better than to argue any further - not only would it be a complete waste of breath, it might attract the attentions of any lurking Death Eaters. He turned and ran quickly after his two friends, not wanting to let them get too far in front. The sounds of fighting gradually diminished as the four moved towards the centre of the city, always keeping the Anima Summas just within their sight.

Alicia nudged Fred and nodded her head over towards the right. She leaned close and whispered in his ear, "I saw movement over there - I think some of them are trying to get around behind us."

Fred likewise nudged George and Lee, while Alicia whispered into Angelina's ear. George told the ministry employees what they were going to do, then the five moved out from behind their cover and crept quietly in the direction of the flanking Death Eaters. Fred held up his hand and stopped when he heard the scrape of a shoe against the rough ground just around the corner of the building they were standing behind.

He turned and whispered quietly into George's ear, "Take the others around the other side of the building and come up behind them - I'll keep them busy on this side."

Fred waited until the other four disappeared around the back end of the building, and smiled at Alicia, who looked worriedly at him, and then took a deep breath. He ran quickly from behind his cover onto the rough path that ran alongside the building, and stared at the eight Death Eaters as he poked out his tongue, while at the same time jamming his thumbs into his ears and wagging his fingers at them in the age-old gesture of contempt.

The Death Eaters were initially taken aback, but soon recovered and sent eight powerful beams towards Fred, who Relocated safely five yards to his right. Again the Death Eaters sent their curses, and again Fred's Relocator moved him back to safety behind the cover of the building. The black-cloaked figures went to follow, but were sent reeling by the volley of spells that hit them from behind. Fred stepped back out from behind the building and added his stunning spells to those that continued to be flung by his friends.

They all looked down with satisfaction at the eight unconscious Death Eaters, and Alicia hugged her boyfriend. "You're a stupid git!" she hissed. "You didn't have to expose yourself like that - we could have taken them without that performance!"

Fred just smiled, the adrenalin pumping through his veins, and led the group back to their original position.

Harry and Hermione approached the temple from the left-hand side, recoiling from the hideous form of the petrified Plonger, the oblivious sentinel gazing out onto the city from his frozen pose beside the temple entrance. The pair averted their eyes and concentrated on the eerie glow issuing from the doorway, but turned quickly when they heard footsteps approaching from behind.

"Don't look at that!" hissed Harry as he saw Draco and his three friends come into view. Of course, all four glanced up and just caught sight of the right side of Plonger's face before staggering against the wall of the temple, feeling sick. Draco, obviously, didn't feel sick, but he still felt some of the horror that the unfortunate Death Eater must have felt before his death.

"What the hell are you doing here!" said Harry. "We told you to stay with the others!"

"We came just in case you need a bit of help with that lot," said Ron, looking towards the temple entrance.

Hermione gasped, her eyes full of worry. "Stay outside!" she said pointedly. "And if they get past us, just run for it!"

Harry held his girlfriends hand and they edged towards the doorway, peering inside at the demonic scene. They both gasped when they saw the horror of what was going on. The circular chamber was filled with the huge, prancing forms of the Nephilim, although ten of them stood quietly at the back, seemingly unaware of the furore that was going on around them. Just above the top of a black altar at the centre of temple floated a shimmering, sickly green mass - a roughly spherical jumble of writhing light. Within the light, the pair could see the agonised undulations of what must have been the souls that the Nephilim had captured. One of the Nephilim stood at the top of the steps leading up at the altar, looking back down at his colleagues, an evil smile on his face, as he addressed them.

Harry and Hermione moved further into the doorway, trying to get a better view of the features on the ugly face of the Nephilim at the top of the altar. "Satan!" breathed Hermione, her face twisting in distaste.

The four friends moved to stand behind Harry and Hermione when they heard the dreaded name, wanting to see what the fabled devil looked like. They watched and listened.

"It is done!" said Satani, his powerful voice filling the chamber. "The soul food is now ready to be sent to our colleagues who wait impatiently in the Dark Realm. Soon, our number will be sufficient to impose our will on this realm. Dark times, the like of which these puny beings have not seen for thousands of years, will soon be upon them."

He paused, raising his hand and pointing at the doorway. "We have more guests," he said, smiling evilly at Harry, Hermione and their friends. "It is not too late for them to join the food sphere."

The Nephilim stopped their prancing and turned to face the doorway, their eyes gleaming evilly as they saw the youngsters standing there. They started to surge forward, but stopped when they heard the command from Satani. "Hold for a moment! There is one that I wish to feed on myself. Her aura of innocence fills me with great longing."

Satani's evil gaze had alighted on Ginny. He pointed his finger at her and spoke several unintelligible words. A thin green beam emerged from his fingertip and alighted on the terrified redhead. Then, her face contorted in agony as she felt a terrible wrenching deep inside her very being.

Draco, seeing what was about to happen, flew swiftly into the room and swooped up to the altar, swirling around Satani's ugly head. The Nephilim, distracted by the unexpected attack, broke his concentration and the thin beam of light faded. Ginny staggered back against the side of the entranceway, gasping as she tried to recover her senses. Satani roared and reached out towards Draco, trying to grab hold of the ghost and suck him into his gaping maw.

Draco stopped for a moment and blinked. Then he grinned and spoke. "What's the matter Satan? Can't you eat me? No - of course you can't - I'm a ghost already!"

Again Satani roared, realising that the Nephilim could feed only on souls freshly extracted from the living physical body, but he again extended his hand and sent a broader beam of green light that surrounded Draco in an eerie green glow. Draco's eyes flew wide and he tried to drift back to his friends, but he couldn't move, held firm in the strange green force field.

Harry and Hermione joined hands and pointed their palms at the green glow surrounding Draco. "*WUSSURU*," they shouted. The green glow sparked for a few moments and then dissipated, releasing Draco from its hold and allowing him to float back towards his friends.

Satani's eyes narrowed, looking intently at Harry and Hermione. "The Anima Summas," he whispered, more to himself than to the other Nephilim. Then he raised his head higher and pointed at them. "Take them!" he shouted.

Harry and Hermione turned and pointed their palms at their four friends, saying a spell that enclosed them in a shimmering silvery-blue light and out of harm's way. Then they turned back to face the Nephilim hoard that was quickly approaching, listening with distaste to their joyous shouts of anticipation.

The situation was becoming very grim, but despite their backs being firmly pressed against the proverbial wall, little Professor Flitwick and Professor McGonagall seemed to be enjoying themselves. They'd worked out a ploy and were putting it into practice with great vigour and enthusiasm.

They were crouched behind a mound of rubble, but Professor Flitwick needn't have bothered - his diminutive form would have been hidden even if he'd stood up straight. McGonagall stood on tiptoes and peered over the top of rubble. Then she ducked back down when she saw a curse coming from the corner of a building twenty yards to her right.

"Over to the right, Filius. Just at the corner of the large building," she whispered.

Flitwick nodded and jumped up into the air, spotting his target the instant his head popped up over the top of their cover. He quickly aimed his wand and sent a charm at the corner of the building. As soon as his feet landed back on the ground, McGonagall stretched up once more and held her wand towards their target.

A loud shriek could be clearly heard and a terrified Death Eater rushed from behind the building, staring wide-eyed at the huge dragon that was stalking him. McGonagall took more precise aim and sent a stunning spell, which hit the Death Eater on the side of his head. He sank down to the ground, unconscious, while the dragon just popped out of existence.

"Did you get him Minerva?" asked Flitwick.

McGonagall grinned and nodded. "That was a very impressive dragon you conjured up Filius."

The little professor grinned in turn and pointed to the top of the mound of rubble, wanting McGonagall to spot the next target.

Further along the defensive line, Sirius ducked instinctively as a powerful curse hit the top of the wall behind which he was standing, showering him with bits of debris. He stood back up and sent a spell in return, but the Death Eater had already ducked down behind his cover out of harm's way.

Sirius had led the protectors over to Marcus' position, helping to bolster his depleted forces against the chasing Death Eaters. The fight was furious and deadly - no quarter was asked or given. Both sides knew that this was the definitive battle in the conflict - and the future of the world hung in the balance. But the balance was tipping in the Death Eaters' favour.

Sirius looked around their defensive position, quickly assessing their remaining number. "Fifty left - only fifty!" he breathed. Then he turned to Ceri and Remus who stood at his side. "Where're Harry and the others!"

Ceri shook her head. "They went over to the other four when we came back with Marcus' group," she said, "but I haven't seen them since."

Sirius gasped in frustration, and then ducked once more as a portion of the wall above his head was once more reduced to rubble. He wasn't to know that Voldemort's forces had also been decimated by the battle - mostly by the Anima Summas who had effectively isolated several large groups so that they could no longer take part in the fight. Even Voldemort was unaware of his losses - only eighty Death Eaters remained, but they still outnumbered the Aurors and their supporters, and still held the upper hand.

Voldemort stood back from his front-line troops, taking a position at the corner of a ruined temple where he could keep a look out for the Anima Summas. He held his ultimate weapon in check - wanting to reserve it for the moment when he unleashed the curse that would end the Anima Summas' existence on this Earth. For the moment, he was content to let his followers whittle away at the defenders.

Snape and Dumbledore crawled over to crouch beside Sirius, Remus and Ceri. "Severus has a plan that might just work," said Dumbledore.

Sirius nodded, but couldn't help pouring out his worries to the headmaster. "Professor - we've lost sight of Harry and the other five!"

"I wouldn't worry too much about them," said the assured voice of Dumbledore. "They can look after themselves - I suspect they've gone to tackle the Nephilim."

Sirius stared at the headmaster and gasped, but he was powerless to do anything about the situation. "What's your plan, Snape?" he asked.

"I've spotted a chink in their ranks," he said, pointing over his shoulder in the direction of the path that flanked the boundary wall of the city. "After Harry and Hermione took out a large part of their forces, I've been keeping an eye on that spot - and there hasn't been any activity there ever since. If some of us can sneak over there, we can come up behind the Death Eaters attacking from the edge of the city and even up the odds a bit. What do you say?"

"Let's try it," he replied, indicating for Ceri, Remus, Oliver, Katie and Flitwick to follow them. They kept low to the ground, running over to the right-hand side, where they found Fred and his group huddled behind a building. "Fred, George - come with us," he said. "You others had better stay in case our little surprise doesn't work out."

The nine moved swiftly to their right, down narrow alleyways and around buildings, most of which bore the signs of recent fighting, and into the gap spotted by Snape. As they moved closer to the path skirting the cliff that marked the edge of the city, they proceeded with great caution, their eyes and ears trying to detect where the attacking Death Eaters were. Snape stepped out onto the path and waved for the rest to follow when he saw that it was all clear. Soon, the sounds of curses and spells become louder and they started to walk into the jumble of buildings flanking the path, seeking out targets for their surprise attack.

Sirius stopped and held up his hand, directing his colleagues to either end of where he stood. There, their backs exposed to their full view, crouched more than twenty Death Eaters, rising from their cover every so often to fling curses at the defending Aurors further inside the city. Sirius held up three fingers and silently counted down for the attack to begin.

In the skirmish that followed, all twenty-four Death Eaters were stunned or otherwise immobilised, while in return, Oliver, Flitwick and Ceri sustained superficial cuts from the flying debris as the Dark forces panicked and flung wild, inaccurate curses at their attackers.

Sirius and Snape were congratulating themselves when a Flipendus curse came searing through the air and caught Remus low down on his ankle, twisting his foot around into a painful and distorted position. Sirius spun around and saw another ten Death Eaters emerge from behind a large pillar, flinging curses that sent everyone flying for cover. Sirius roared with anger when he saw Wormtail among the attackers. Sirius rose from behind a fallen chunk of stone and stared fixedly at his archenemy, pointing his wand at him as he put sixteen long years of pent up anger and frustration into the spell.

A bright beam of light shot from his wand and caught Wormtail in the middle of his stomach, the powerful Flipendus sending him reeling backwards until his progress was stopped by one of the massive pillars. Wormtail's eyes flew wide as he stared with disbelief at Sirius - then his eyes rolled up in their sockets as his life quickly drained away. He slid down the pillar to flop onto the ground, leaving a trail of blood from the back of his crushed skull.

Travis and Crabbe stared at their colleague in horror, as did the other seven Death Eaters, giving Snape and the others the opening to send them to the ground, stunned. Sirius continued to stare at Wormtail's body, not believing that at last the cruel betrayal of James and Lilly had been avenged.

He blinked as Ceri shook him, bringing him back to full awareness of his surroundings, and dragged him after the others, leaving Katie to do her best to ease Remus' agony with a temporary repair to his smashed ankle.

Sandwiched between the Aurors in front, and Sirius' group behind, the remaining twenty Death Eaters on that side of the battle stood no chance. Ten of them were stunned into unconsciousness, and the other ten quickly surrendered.

As Snape had hoped, the tide had turned. Voldemort looked on with horror when he saw the enemy run across to join the forces facing his remaining Death Eaters, correctly surmising that his forces on the other flank had fallen. He began to get desperate, realising that he was now outnumbered, and raised the Disc of Gates, sending out powerful beams of energy. Most of the defenders managed to avoid the terrible power of the Disc of Gates, but four of them weren't so lucky. 'Mad Eye' and his three trainees had been crouching inside one of the buildings when it took a direct hit from one of Voldemort's energy beams, reducing it to rubble. Dumbledore and the others looked on in horror when they saw 'Mad-eye's walking stick poking forlornly out from several huge chunks of masonry. Nothing else could be seen amid the destruction, and nothing stirred in its midst. Dumbledore quickly called the pitifully few Aurors and supporters together and covered them with a protective force field - it wouldn't stop the full force of one of Voldemort's powerful spells, but it would protect them from the flying masonry and debris they created.

The Death Eaters weren't so lucky - Voldemort didn't stop to think about protecting them from collateral damage as his spells whizzed around them, burying some under falling buildings. One errant curse crushed the base of one of the pillars, sending it tumbling to the city floor, and bringing down tons of rock and sand from the weakened ceiling above. Another ten Death Eaters were buried, but Dumbledore's spell saved his own remaining forces from inevitable death.

Roaring with frustration, Voldemort broke off his attack and gestured for Lucius and his remaining ten servants to follow him back towards the Temple of Gates, with the intention of seeking long overdue help from Satani and his fellow Nephilim.

Dumbledore waited for several minutes before lifting the protective force field, making sure that no more debris was left to fall from the heights above. Then he led the way across the city in pursuit of Lord Voldemort.

Harry and Hermione looked on in horror at the approaching hoard of Nephilim. They could see that the Nephilim were too numerous and spread out over the temple area for their 'normal' spells to be effective in the scant seconds they had left before they were overwhelmed.

They glanced at each other, each sending the same thought, 'Things can't get much worse than this! The special spell!'

They made sure that their rings touched as they held hands and spoke the spell that Anu had placed in their minds in Atlantis. They were entering new territory - each ancient spell they'd used up to now had been with their full knowledge; their full understanding of what would

follow. But this was different - neither of them knew what would happen when they invoked the mysterious spell.

"ANKIDA SHI"

Their four friends, protected inside their force field, saw what happened next, but didn't really believe what they saw. Neither did the Nephilim as they stopped and stared at the amazing event that unfolded before their eyes.

Harry and Hermione stood immobile as a glowing silvery-blue light rose from their joined hands, and covered their bodies. The glow increased in intensity, becoming so intense that Harry and Hermione faded from view inside the blinding light. Then, in a flash of released energy, the light suddenly faded. But Harry and Hermione were no longer there.

Standing where they'd stood only moments before, was a single figure - a single glowing entity. The entity turned slowly, looking down at its body, scrutinising its arms as it held them before its gaze. Then, it spotted the four friends in the protective cocoon, and smiled, recognising them for what they were - its friends.

Ginny's mouth gaped open, staring at the glowing being with open admiration and awe. She saw long brown hair, a cute slightly upturned nose, deep green eyes and a scar at the side of its forehead. She saw Hermione and she saw Harry - merged into a single fabulous entity. Like her three friends beside her, she also saw and felt the incredible feeling of goodness that oozed from the entity. They weren't sure if it was an Akh - a Shining One - or something new, something completely beyond their ability to comprehend. They could only look on in wonder as Harry-Hermione turned once more and faced the Nephilim.

Satani recovered his composure, and ordered his Nephilim to attack. But he couldn't keep the deep-rooted fear out of his eyes. This was the very thing that he'd been afraid of, the reason he'd wanted Voldemort to kill the Anima Summas before he arrived from the Dark Realm. Now he could only hope.

The Nephilim crowded around the shining being, extending their hands to exert their evil power to get at its soul. But they couldn't even touch it. Their hands came up against an invisible barrier that defied their best attempts to break through. They slowly retreated into the temple, towards their leader, followed closely by Harry-Hermione.

"You must return to your own realm," said the voice of Harry-Hermione. "You threaten the harmony and well-being of the Physical Realm. You must go now."

Satani roared his defiance and sent a powerful beam of energy, which just dissipated harmlessly in the shining aura given off by the entity. The other Nephilim, taking the lead of Satani, also flung spells, but they too were completely ineffective.

Harry-Hermione looked sadly at the Nephilim and raised its hand. No spell was spoken, and no beam of light issued from the extend palm. But the Gate beyond the black altar suddenly opened in a flash of energy, its black core widening to form a shining portal of light.

Then, Harry-Hermione pointed its palm at the Nephilim hoard. Again, nothing was seen or heard, but the huge satanic forms were raised above the ground, and sent slowly towards the open gate. They cried out in fear and frustration as one by one, they were pulled through.

Finally, only Satani remained in the Physical Realm, still silently staring in defiance at the shining being. Then, he too was sent through the portal, after which it closed in a blinding burst of white light.

The four friends watched as Harry-Hermione turned once more to face them. They marvelled as they saw it approach - it didn't walk - it just drifted serenely over the ground. It then lifted its hand once more, and the protective force field covering the friends dissipated. The entity smiled benignly at its friends, and then looked beyond them as Dumbledore and the others arrived, panting from their fast approach.

"Voldemort's still out..." began Dumbledore, but was struck dumb when he saw Harry-Hermione floating just beyond the four youngsters.

"Who... who're you?" asked Sirius, looking wide-eyed at the entity as he walked over to stand beside Ginny, but then just stared as he began to recognise the amalgamated features of Harry and Hermione.

"What... how?" asked Ceri, breaking into a smile when she saw what was before her, and felt the marvellous goodness radiating from it.

Then, without warning, the light surrounding Harry-Hermione started to flicker, and finally dissipated in a blinding flash of light, causing everyone to shield their eyes from the glare. When they looked once more, Harry and Hermione, now their normal two selves were sitting wearily on the ground. Their four friends and Sirius rushed up and hugged them closely - even Draco.

"That was something else!" exclaimed Ron.

"How are you feeling?" asked Margot.

"Tired," replied Hermione, smiling at Harry. "So tired."

They reached out their hands and made contact, smiling as they relived the incredible experience. Ever since becoming the Anima Summas, they'd each known what the other thought and how the other felt. But this was different - to actually *be* the other was something to be savoured.

Dumbledore had a tear in his eye as he looked at the pair, and beyond them into the empty temple. Then he spoke softly to them. "Voldemort and a few of his men are still here somewhere, and in your weakened state, you'll be no match for him if he gets close. We'd all better get out of this city - there'll be another and a better time for you to confront him."

Sirius bent down and put his arms around the pair. "Let me help you up," he said. Then his eyes opened wide as Harry clasped his hand to his scar, and saw that his eyes were screwed shut with pain. He quickly stood back up and stared as Lord Voldemort emerged from a small annex that stood at the side of the temple. His eyes shone with a maniacal fire, brighter than the dark glow that covered him in a protective shield. He had listened to the battle in the temple, and the useless attempts of the Nephilim to subdue the Anima Summas. Now he'd have to finish the job himself.

He held the Disc of Gates before him as he stood in the doorway of the annex, and sent a powerful beam of dark red light that seared a fiery path between Dumbledore's group and the six youngsters and Sirius. A bright red sheet of shimmering light rose from the ground where the beam had struck, effectively isolating Dumbledore and his group.

Voldemort grinned evilly as he surveyed Sirius and the six teens, laughing hysterically as the spells flung by Sirius and Ron bounced harmlessly off his protective shield. Then his eyes narrowed as he looked intently at the weary Anima Summas sitting on the ground.

Harry reached out and held Hermione's hand, sending his thoughts, 'We've got to try to protect the others.'

They slowly raised their free hands and whispered, "*DADEX MER.*"

The silvery blue light shot from their hands and hovered for a few moments, and then the protective green light cascaded down to cover both themselves and their friends. But they were very weak after using the special spell - just as Anu said they would be - and the green protective force field didn't seem to be as bright as when they'd used it in the past.

Voldemort sneered. "Your pathetic magic won't save you or your friends Potter. Nothing can stand up against me and the Disc of Gates."

He pointed the disc at the group and shouted a spell. The dark crystal at the centre of the Disc flared and a powerful beam of energy emerged, slowly at first and then gathering momentum as it approached the green protective shield. It hit the shield towards the top, smashing its way through and gouging a deep hole in the ground behind. The protective shield vanished in a flash of energy, flinging Sirius and the youngsters to the ground beside the prostrate Harry and Hermione.

Voldemort raised his head and laughed loudly. Then the laughing suddenly stopped, and he snapped his head forwards, his thin lips curving into a contemptuous sneer as his red eyes stared pointedly at the Anima Summas.

He once more raised the Disc of Gates above his head, pointing it directly at Harry and Hermione. "Now I'll finish it!" he hissed. He then focused his mind on sending the special spell he'd reserved for just this moment - the spell that would suck the souls out of the Anima Summas and send them into the Dark Realm, where Satani and his followers could extract their full revenge.

"*ABATU SHI DUGA KADINGIR,*" he yelled.

Dumbledore had tried almost everything he knew to break down the red barrier that isolated him and his group. His eyes were full of anguish as spell after spell failed to break through. Then, finally, his last gasp spell caused the red light to shimmer and then disappear. But he knew that it was too late for him to do anything to save Harry and Hermione. And he could only watch with the rest of them as they witnessed the horror.

Everyone stood frozen to the spot, shocked by the sudden appearance of the Dark Lord, and their inability to stop him. They could only stand and watch in horror as the black beam of energy issued from the Disc of Gates and sped towards the exhausted and defenceless Harry and Hermione.

Chapter 11 - Into the Light

"NNNNnnnooooo!" everyone shouted as they stood and watched the black beam of energy speed towards the exhausted Harry and Hermione. The heart-rending cry was full of the helplessness they all felt at that particular moment in time. Their spells had been deflected by Voldemort's protective shield and now there was no time left for Dumbledore to send the spell that would weave a protective cocoon around the two shattered youngsters.

Harry and Hermione stared in horror as the powerful black beam approached them. They both regretted not carrying Relocators into the City of Pillars - after all the success they'd had in capturing Death Eaters in the last few weeks, they'd come to rely on their special powers to evade any curses. They'd thought that there was nothing they couldn't handle - but how wrong they were! In that instant, they both recalled the prophetic nature of the silent conversation they'd had the previous night...

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Sleep had been a long time coming as both Harry and Hermione anticipated and yet dreaded the coming conflict. Hermione, not wanting to wake her two friends by her constant tossing and turning, had donned her robes and stepped outside her tent into the chill desert night, hoping that it would clear her head of confusing thoughts.

Harry sent thoughts of comfort towards his girlfriend, and also silently put on his robes and walked out of the boys' tent. Ron opened his eyes as he watched Harry step outside, and then closed them again, trying to shut out the worrying thoughts that had plagued him ever since they'd come to Petra. He just couldn't help but think of what had happened in the past, when the Anima Summas had come up against the evil threat of the Nephilim and Dark Wizards. One or both of them had lost their lives in those distant conflicts, and he hoped and prayed that the same thing wouldn't happen to his two friends.

Harry looked around and spotted Hermione sitting outside her tent. He slowly walked towards her and sat down at her side, reaching out to enclose her cold hand in his.

Draco watched Harry walk from his tent from his position at the top of the wadi. He'd volunteered to keep watch over the camp - after all, he didn't need to sleep, and it gave him something positive to do. Draco was also worried - he couldn't help feeling that the following day would decide his ultimate fate - whether he'd be accepted into the Light Realm, or be condemned to roam the Earth forever more. He started to drift down towards Harry, wanting to talk, hoping for a sympathetic ear, but he stopped when he saw him sit down beside Hermione. He drifted back up to the top of the wadi and stared out into the night.

'Harry, do you...are you feeling nervous about tomorrow?' Hermione sent her thoughts to her boyfriend.

Harry nodded slowly. 'Yes. I feel confident about facing Voldemort and the Nephilim, but it's the power of the Disc of Gates that worries me. I just feel very uneasy about it - not only for ourselves, but for everyone else as well.'

Hermione frowned and squeezed his hand. 'The thing that bothers me is whether we can stop both the Nephilim and Voldemort before they can use their awesome powers. I just don't see how we can do it.'

'We've got to try Hermione. Everything we've done - all we've gone through over the last three years - has prepared us for this confrontation. We just can't afford to fall at the final hurdle. We've got to be positive - we've just got to keep thinking that victory tomorrow will bring a new dawn - a fresh start for everyone in the world.'

'And the price of failure will bring Armageddon,' she added sadly...

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"NNNnnnooooooooooo..."

Harry and Hermione closed their eyes, waiting for the terrible impact that would shatter their bodies utterly. In their exhausted state, they were powerless to defend themselves. They needed more time to recharge their energies - time they just didn't have. But the impact didn't come. They opened their eyes to see what had happened - and felt a terrible rage born of agonising anguish and utter disbelief rise within them.

While their friends and colleagues were frozen to the spot, two figures - the ones standing closest to Harry and Hermione - launched themselves through the air in a selfless act, intent on protecting the Anima Summas with their bodies - their lives.

Sirius braced himself to take the hit as he put himself directly between Voldemort and the Anima Summas - but the impact didn't come. He stared in horror as Ginny flung herself in front of him, her slim form taking the impact of the deadly black beam.

Ginny's eyes went wide and her mouth gaped open in a silent scream as she felt the terrible power of the Disc of Gates. Within the blink of an eye, she slumped to the ground - her eyes staring sightlessly at the stark rocky ceiling above.

Inside the Temple of Gates, the portal to the Dark Realm opened once more; ready to accept Ginny's tortured soul on a one-way trip to purgatory. Everyone watched in horror as slowly, ever so slowly, Ginny's ghost - her Ba - started to emerge from her body.

Even Voldemort was taken aback by the unexpected turn of events. He just couldn't comprehend how or why the girl would deliberately sacrifice herself - how anyone could do that. It was completely beyond his understanding, and he hesitated for a few seconds - a fatal few seconds - before again aiming the Disc at the Anima Summas and sending the same spell at them once more. But this time, the outcome was different.

The awful spectacle of their redheaded friend giving her life for theirs had raised a terrible rage in Harry and Hermione - a fury that gave them the energy to once more call the Shining Entity into being.

"ANKIDA SHI"

Like before, a glowing silvery-blue light rose from their joined hands, and covered their bodies. The glow increased in intensity, although not quite as intense as it had previously been. Then, in a flash of released energy, the glowing entity - Harry-Hermione - appeared once more, just before the black beam from the Disc of Gates struck.

The deadly spell hit the entity in the centre of its chest - and dissipated harmlessly around them, the blackness soon fading from sight. Voldemort stared in disbelief at the apparition before him, and once more sent the deadly black beam. Once more it hit the Anima Summa and faded harmlessly from sight.

A look of terror entered the Dark Lord's eyes. He not only felt terror at seeing the ultimate personification of the Anima Summa standing, seemingly invulnerable, before him, he also felt the terror of not being in control and not being able to influence the events that went on around him.

Harry-Hermione lifted its arm and pointed it at Voldemort. Again, no word was spoken - the force generated by an incredibly powerful mind pushed through the Dark Lord's protective shield and wrenched the Disc of Gates out of his hands, sending it crashing to the floor to the side, just inside the annex doorway. Voldemort tried to turn, intending to retrieve the Disc, but found that he couldn't move an inch - he was held rigid in the grip of the mind force that surrounded him.

"Lucius... Lucius, help me," hissed Voldemort through the side of his mouth. "Pass me the Disc - hand it to me now!"

Lucius Malfoy, hidden from view behind the Dark Lord's body and just inside the entrance to the temple annex, just sneered. He'd seen the ghostly form of his son, and he'd relived the moment when Voldemort had snuffed out the boy's life without so much as batting an eyelid.

"Lucius - help me!" hissed Voldemort.

Again Lucius just sneered, turned and walked into the darkness to find a suitable hiding place - his revenge had been sweet.

Harry-Hermione looked into the mind of the evil figure before them, and saw his vision of a dark future. They also saw the warped mental processes and knew that there could be no remorse or sorrow felt by this man - only regrets that he hadn't prevailed. Harry-Hermione looked sadly at Voldemort as they did the only thing that they could to make the world a safer place.

Voldemort looked wildly around as he felt his body rise from the ground and float into the Temple of Gates, towards the Dark portal that his diabolical spell had earlier opened. His screams were suddenly cut off as he disappeared into the blackness. His screams were well founded; he knew what fate awaited him at the hands of Satani and the vengeful Nephilim. Later, Snape told them that he'd looked into the chamber just as Voldemort disappeared, and swore that he'd seen several large arms reach out to drag Voldemort through the portal.

The shining glow quickly faded from Harry-Hermione, and in a flash of light Harry and Hermione appeared once more in its place. They slumped to the ground, their exhaustion even more severe than before.

"Harry! Hermione! Please!" shouted Ron, his face streaming with tears. "You've got to help her!"

The pair looked on with a terrible sinking feeling of helplessness as they watched Ginny's Ba slowly float ever closer to the temple door. Her face was a mask of terror, and she reached back her ghostly hand towards her friends, silently imploring them to stop her drift towards the still open portal to the Dark Realm.

"Hermione," gasped Harry. "We've got to try!"

Hermione nodded and for the third time they said the spell that would invoke the Shining Entity. But this time, nothing happened - their energies were completely spent. Harry silently cursed and had to muster all his willpower to drag himself up from the floor, and then reached down to help Hermione back to her feet. Ron and Margot helped them stagger over to Ginny's Ba, and the four stood just inside the temple entrance, blocking her way to the Gate.

As Ginny drifted towards them, Ron raced back outside and scooped Ginny's limp body up into his arms and carried her into the temple, where he gently laid her down in front of his friends. Harry and Hermione joined hands, making sure the rings touched, and whispered the only remaining spell that was left to them - the one that had resurrected little Clare Bryant after the attack on the school two years previously. But they both knew that it was futile - a last, useless gesture in an attempt to save the soul of their friend.

Ginny floated straight through them, the speed of her drift starting to increase as she neared the Gate. The four could only stand and stare in disbelief as she drifted towards an existence of eternal torment. Charlie, Nadine, Sirius, Ceri, Fred and George rushed into the temple, past the four youngsters, and reached out to grasp Ginny's Ba, trying to stop her inevitable passage, but Ginny just floated through them.

Charlie sunk to the floor, covering his face with his hands as he sobbed unashamedly. He couldn't bear to see his sister go to a fate worse than death. Fred and George just stood and stared - too numb with shock to show any sort of reaction.

Then, Sirius suddenly shouted, "She's stopping!"

Everyone looked and saw that she had, indeed, stopped her drift towards the gate, and was looking back to where her body lay. They all turned and saw Draco shielding his eyes as he bent over the pathetic form of the girl he'd come to love, sobbing uncontrollably, his ghostly tears falling onto her pale face, where they slowly faded into her skin. All his anguish and love for Ginny were held in those psychic tears. Then he lifted his head and cried, "Take me instead - leave her alone!"

Ginny, her ghostly features showing the enormous mental effort she was bringing to bear, gasped as she stretched out her hand. "Draco!"

Draco looked across at Ginny and floated towards her, his tortured face showing a trace of hope. He reached out and caught around her, his ghostly form seeming to merge with hers.

Then he slowly helped her to drift back towards the temple entrance and away from the gate, which disappeared with a loud rushing noise. The Gate to the Dark Realm had closed for the last time.

As it closed, Ginny's Ba staggered forward. She let out a gasp, and then her features became more serene when she felt the terrible wrenching suddenly cease. They all now stood outside the temple, the two Bas surrounded by their friends, protectors and the remnants of the Auror forces and ministry employees. No one spoke for a while; no one knew quite what to say. They were all relieved that Ginny had been spared a terrible fate, but were still trying to come to terms with her death.

Hermione let out a strangled gasp of anguish and dropped onto her knees beside her dead friend's body, lifting her cold hand gently in both her own. Her head bowed as she silently sobbed, her shoulders shaking with the intensity of the grief she felt.

The others turned when they heard a noise from behind, and saw Remus, his face screwed up in pain, hopping towards them on his good leg and being supported by Katie.

"What's happening?" asked Katie, but then her face fell and she stifled an anguished cry when she saw Ginny's body lying on the ground.

"Oh no!" cried Remus, his pain forgotten, and then stared in confusion when he spotted Ginny's ghost floating beside Draco.

Finally, Professor Dumbledore cleared his throat and spoke. "We must never forget what happened here today - the whole magical community must be told what happened. The Dark Side must never be allowed to rise again; never be allowed to bring such evil into the world. We have been victorious and the prophecy has been fulfilled." He looked sadly down at Ginny's body and then at the ghostly forms of Draco and Ginny. His voice broke with emotion as he said the next few words. "But not without paying a heavy and terrible price. Come, all of you - we'd better get back up to the surface - this place fills me with dread."

They all walked slowly back across the city towards the tunnel that would take them back to the surface and into the ancient city of Petra. Ron, Charlie, Fred and George carried Ginny's body between them, while the rest helped to levitate the injured and those of their dead that they were able to find - they didn't want any of their number left down in that place. Marcus and John walked behind the ten tightly-bound Death Eaters they'd rounded up in the temple annex, but there was one who'd evaded capture, one who still remained down in the city.

Lucius Malfoy slowly pushed open the stone chest, which had once held the four black ritual torch holders, and peered into the gloom of the temple annex. The sounds of movement had long since stopped and he felt reasonably sure that he was safe - at least for the moment.

He stepped out of the chest, looked out into the city to make sure that he was alone, and then sat down on the cold ground. Before going back to the surface, he'd wait for a while to make sure that everyone had gone. He sat deep in thought, thinking about his future - or lack of it. But he soon found solace in the first stirrings of a plan than crept around inside his head. He couldn't return to Malfoy Manor, of course - that was lost to him now - but he could still make Voldemort's cave reasonably comfortable to live in. Nagini would have to go, of course, but he'd keep Voldemort's Dark Library. He grinned as he anticipated the dark secrets he'd be able

to read about, and in time, he'd be able to assemble his own army of Death Eaters. But he wouldn't make the same mistakes as Voldemort - he'd do things differently.

All was dark in the ruined city of Petra as Professors Flitwick and McGonagall led the dishevelled band out of the Roman governor's tomb. They'd lost all track of time during the battle down in the city of Pillars, and they were all surprised to find it was the dead of night.

They walked over to their camping place at the bottom of the wadi and waited at the end of the line of tents that still stood there while Ron, Charlie, Fred and George gently placed Ginny's body on the ground. Marcus and John Ballot walked slowly up and covered her with a white sheet.

Ron, unable to contain his grief any longer, let out an anguished moan and buried his head in his hands. Margot, Harry and Hermione caught around him and held him close while Draco and Ginny floated just to the side.

Oliver and Katie were the first ones to become aware of the change - they were the ones who were facing in the right direction. Low down in the eastern sky, a small bright spot of light, which Oliver had first thought was a star, started to expand.

"Look - there!" shouted Katie, pointing at the growing sphere of light. Everyone turned and faced the light, which had now grown so bright that it cast an eerie glow over the desert city.

"It's not getting bigger," gasped Oliver. "It's just getting closer!"

The orb of light moved across the city and came to rest directly over the group. Night was transformed into day and they had to shield their eyes against the glare. A serene smile slowly spread over Professor Dumbledore's face as he whispered, loud enough so that everyone heard him, "It's the Light Side - they're here."

Then, out of the brightness of the glowing orb, a figure started to take shape as the brightness slowly faded. Then the bright orb of light was gone, to be replaced by a single figure surrounded by shimmering radiance that seemed to come directly from its body.

"It's Thoth!" gasped Hermione, looking around at her friends with excitement.

His features were unmistakable - he was exactly as they'd remembered him in the secret chamber beneath the great pyramid of Giza. He drifted down to the ground and walked over to stand before the four youngsters, his eyes kind as he smiled at them. Everyone could feel the aura given off by his immense intellect and goodness.

Thoth turned and surveyed the scene, looking at everyone in turn, and then he spoke with a soft and kindly voice.

"You have done well, children of the Light. The prophecy has been fulfilled."

Ron slowly approached the radiant Thoth and pointed down at the dead body of his sister lying beneath the white sheet. "My sister... Ginny... she..."

Thoth reached out and placed his hand on Ron's shoulder. "I know, Ron. It was known for some time. At such pivotal times in the history of the Physical Realm, there is always a sacrifice - it is inevitable."

"Can you... can you bring her back?" asked Ron, gazing at Thoth anxiously.

Thoth smiled and slowly shook his head. "I'm afraid that I can't. The power of the Disc of Gates was too much - the spell destroyed her body utterly before releasing her Ba."

Ron gasped and stepped back into the comforting arms of his friends.

Thoth looked directly at Harry and Hermione. "Your task is done. You have done everything that was asked of you, and you showed great courage and skill in the way you did it. But just as one door closes, another opens - read me."

Harry and Hermione glanced at each other in confusion, but then looked back at Thoth as he walked over to the ghosts of Ginny and Draco. Draco's eyes went wide when Thoth stopped just in front of the pair. "I know you - you're the shining being who came to me after I died, and told me I had to do a selfless act."

"That is correct Draco," replied Thoth. "It was foreseen that Ginny would be the one who would give up her life to save the Anima Summas. You were given the chance to redeem yourself by preventing her soul falling into the Dark Realm. You see - you were the only one that could save her. The Anima Summa could have done it, but they were too weak to call the shining one into being. It needed an act of self-sacrifice, like the one that Ginny did, to prevent her fall. Your tears of love slowed down the terrible spell, caused it to become confused, but it was your cry offering to sacrifice your own soul in place of Ginny's that finally stopped the spell. It became even more confused by the hard fight that Ginny started to put up, and your offer of an easy solution to its dilemma. The spell couldn't take you, of course - you hadn't been hit by it. So it just gave up and dissipated."

Thoth stood up even taller and pointed over to the three rows of bodies lying beneath their white sheets - the bodies of those who had been killed by the Forces of Dark in the battle below. "Those too made a sacrifice. And they too will join you in the Realm of Light."

A bright silvery light shot from Thoth's outstretched hand and settled over the pathetic forms lying on the ground. Then there was movement. Ghostly forms started to rise from beneath the sheets - shining beings of light - Akhs. They stood and looked around with some confusion for a few moments, and then smiled when they spotted Thoth.

"Go into the Light," said Thoth, pointing his arm into the air. The air above their heads started to swirl and distort, and then finally stretched and expanded to form a shining vortex that slowly revolved. Everyone could see into the vortex. Whether they were standing to the front or behind it didn't matter - it appeared exactly the same from whatever angle it was looked at. The bright interior of the portal seemed to stretch into some unfathomable place, reaching out to a point that was hidden from view by the shining radiance that was there.

The shining beings of light reached up, led by 'Mad-Eye' Moody, and entered the portal, the joy on their ghostly features being clearly visible. Then they were gone, but the portal still remained. Then Thoth turned once more and smiled at Ginny and Draco.

"It is now time for you to join us in the Realm of Light." He stretched out his arm and covered them in the silvery light. "Your time is short, but you may ease the anxiety of your friends before you come."

The dim ghostly forms of Draco and Ginny slowly transformed, slivers of light shooting through their substance until they glowed with the same radiance as Thoth. Ginny and Draco looked deeply into each others eyes and smiled, and then drifted over to stand in front of Harry, Hermione, Ron and Margot. Ginny looked over their shoulders and beckoned for Charlie, Nadine, Fred and George to join their little group.

"Don't grieve for me - for us," said Ginny. "We are safe and happy." She turned and looked at Draco. "I'm exactly where I want to be now."

Harry, Hermione and Margot smiled - they knew that things were as they were meant to be. But the other five still found it hard to accept the loss. Ginny and Draco drifted closer.

"Reach out and touch us," said Ginny.

When contact was made, Ginny sent her thoughts and feelings into their minds. And then, all too soon, she broke the contact and stepped back. "You know what I feel now. Tell Mum and Dad, Bill and Percy not to mourn my passing - tell them how I feel, and that I've found love at last."

"Draco," said Ron quietly, looking at the shining form of his former enemy, "you... will you look after my sister? Make sure she's all right?"

Draco grinned and nodded. "Of course I will Ron. But it may be more appropriate to ask Ginny to look after me - after all, I've only just joined the good guys. Your sister has spent her whole life being good, so she's likely to find her feet in the Light Realm a lot quicker than me."

"Come - it is time," whispered Thoth, reaching out to the shining pair. The three intertwined their hands and they drifted up to the portal. Ginny turned just before she entered, and smiled as she looked down at her friends for one last time. Then she turned and went into the Light with Draco and Thoth.

The vortex seemed to expand outwards, then disappeared soundlessly, leaving everyone staring at the dark night sky.

Ron sighed for what must have been the hundredth time since he saw his sister go into the Light. He sat with Harry, Hermione and Margot at the top of the wadi while the remaining Aurors and ministry employees packed everything up and prepared to go back to Craig Cerrig-Gleisiad.

Several other small groups sat down in the wadi, talking quietly among themselves. Professors Dumbledore, Snape, Flitwick and McGonagall were discussing plans to reopen Hogwarts and resume the school year.

Nadine sat captivated as Charlie, Fred and George recalled better times, back before Ginny had started her Hogwarts schooling, when their lively little sister would terrorise them early in the mornings, bursting into their rooms and jumping excitedly on their beds. But the smiles soon disappeared when they started talking about when and how they'd break the news to their parents and two brothers.

Sirius, Ceri, Remus, Oliver and Katie kept glancing up to the top of the wadi where the four youngsters sat. They'd gone over and over the action back at the temple, agonising that they just may have been able to do something - anything - to have saved Ginny. But Remus had reminded them all that there was absolutely nothing they could have done to hold back destiny.

"Harry knew that something like this would happen," said Sirius. "I remember him speaking to me a while ago about it - something that Trelawney had seen in the Tarot." Sirius shook his head slowly. "He was very worried about that - he said that she hadn't predicted Harry's death like she normally did, she predicted *A* death - a sacrifice that would have to be made. Harry was worried that it could have been any one of us - and he was right. And if I'd been just a little quicker, it would have been me."

"Margot saw it as well," whispered Ceri. "She had a nightmare when we were at The Burrow back last summer. She saw a death too - but she couldn't see who it was."

They all sighed and looked back up to the four youngsters, wondering how they were coping with the loss of their sister and friend.

Ron sighed once more and Margot leaned against him and caught around his arm. "It's going to be so strange without that redheaded little firebrand," he said, wiping away a rogue tear that escaped from the side of his eye.

"You felt her thoughts Ron," said Margot gently. "You know that she's going to be all right."

"I know, Margot. But it's not the same as actually *seeing* that she's ok. Thoth said that there had to be a sacrifice. But why couldn't it have been me? Why did it have to be her? She was the most innocent, the most compassionate, the most caring one of us all!"

Hermione reached out and stroked her hand along his shoulder. "It's not for us to try to figure out how these things work Ron. But perhaps it was just that - what you said about Ginny being the most caring one of us all. It was that very selflessness in the face of great danger that made her react quicker than anybody - even quicker than Sirius."

Harry, who had been strangely quiet as the four friends talked among themselves, let out a gasp and dropped his head down onto his chest, not wanting Ron see the tears rolling down his cheeks. "I lost a sister too, Ron," he finally managed to whisper. "I... we're all going to miss her. We were four to start with, and now we're four once more - but I wish we were still six."

The four reached out and held each other close. They stayed that way for what seemed a long time before Margot broke the spell. "What... what are you going to do with that... that thing?"

"The Disc of Gates?" asked Harry, pulling the object out from his robes. "Like Osiris and Isis before us, we'll have to hide it. But this time, we're going to have to think of a place where it can never be found again."

Margot nodded. "That was a strange thing that Thoth said to you," she said. "What did he mean?"

What... about one door closing and another one opening?" asked Hermione.

"That's right," said Ron. "And he said 'read me!'"

"The book!" exclaimed Harry. "He must have meant the Book of Thoth!"

"It must be complete now," said Hermione. "Catch my hand Harry."

They closed their eyes and concentrated, willing the Book of Thoth to appear. The sand in front of them shimmered, and then the dark red leather-bound book appeared. Hermione quickly opened the cover and turned to the final few pages that had previously been blank.

"They're still blank!" exclaimed Margot. "I thought..."

She suddenly stopped talking when the blank page started to shimmer, undulating waves of light spreading out from the middle of the page towards the edges. Then they all gasped when a tiny figure appeared at the centre of the page, rising up and growing to a height of about a foot. A kindly smile lit up Thoth's wrinkled face.

"How... but we just saw you go..." gasped Harry.

Thoth held up his hand to ward off further questions, and then he spoke. "Yes Harry. You saw me go into the Light. And I am there with your friends - but I am also here. Do not worry yourselves with the whys and wherefores - just accept that there are things of which you are still unaware and will not come to know until it is your turn to join us in the Realm of Light."

"But... but why are you here?" asked Hermione. "Why weren't the final few pages filled in?"

"They will be filled in, Hermione. As we speak, the script is being fixed to the page." Sure enough, several hieroglyphs had already appeared at the top of the blank page.

"The final pages of my tome are important - not only to you but for everyone in the physical realm. I have come in person to deliver my last message both to make sure you fully understand the importance of it, and to answer any questions you may have."

Thoth paused and looked at each of the four youngsters in turn. "This is the last time you will see me in this realm. The Book of Thoth has come to an end and I must take my place in the Realm of Light for the rest of time. My task is done, but yours is just beginning."

"But... but I thought that our task was completed when we banished Voldemort and the Nephilim back to the Dark Realm!" exclaimed Harry.

"Have patience Anima Summa," said Thoth, smiling benignly at Harry. "It is true that the prophecy has been fulfilled and your task is completed, but there is a far greater task that you

must now undertake. Let me tell you of the history of the last days of Nibiru - the place you know as Atlantis - the history that has been hidden from you until this moment. I felt it necessary to withhold these details until after the final conflict with the Dark Realm for fear of distracting you from your purpose. But now there is no distraction - now you must hear the things that were revealed to us before the destruction of Nibiru and the rest of the world so many years ago."

Despite the gravity and solemnity of the situation, the four friends couldn't help but grin as Thoth sighed and sat down on the page, making himself comfortable before continuing with the message.

"The path of humankind through the ages has been, and still is, a very precarious one. You have read in my book how Nibiru was destroyed and sank beneath the ocean, and that the event was foreseen by our seers. Only a pitiful few within the scientific community took heed of the warning and, under our leader Anu, sought out a safe place to ride out the destruction. That place was, as you know, beneath Mount Mashu in the Garden of Eden. But during our earliest days in the garden, we undertook a crash program to monitor the destruction, in an effort to determine the cause. This is the history of those findings. Every 9,600 years, the Earth undergoes a change. It is related, in part, to the phenomenon known as the Precession of the Equinoxes."

Thoth looked up at Hermione, who nodded to show that she understood.

"At that time, the Earth's magnetic polarity changes - it flips so that north becomes south and south becomes north. At the last change, when Nibiru was destroyed, the magnetic changes were accompanied by a displacement of the Earth's crust, plunging some continents into the Polar Regions, and others into warmer climes. We weren't able to determine why this happened, or if it is a regular feature associated with the magnetic shift. That, children of Light, is for you to determine. Full details of our research and findings are contained in this book to aid your future efforts."

"Do... do you know when the next destruction will take place?" asked Margot.

Thoth looked sadly at the four and nodded his head. "Yes - it will happen on 21st December 2013."

"What!" exclaimed Ron. "But that... that's only a few years away! Are you sure?"

"Quite sure, Ron. One of our scientists, like me, left the Garden and went to help rebuild civilisation in South America. I, as you know, went to Sumer, Egypt, Greece and Rome. That scientist encoded our calculations into an ancient calendar - now known as the Mayan Calendar. Your archaeologists and scholars are well aware of the predictions in the calendar, but they have, of course, confined the facts to myth and fantasy. They don't want to believe what is in front of their faces - that the Mayan Calendar stops on 21st December 2013 - nothing is beyond that date."

"Bloody Egyp... uh, archaeologists!" exclaimed Hermione.

"My sentiments exactly Hermione," said Thoth, smiling. Then his features became sombre once more. "It was also discovered that towards the end of each age is a great struggle between the forces of Light and Dark, and the victor will dominate the start of the next great

cycle. At the end of the last cycle, and this one, the Light prevailed, but we weren't able to find what happened in previous cycles. It is Anu's opinion that the Dark prevailed in the cycle before ours - that is why the miracles of Wizard-kind were not discovered until the end of our cycle was almost upon us."

Thoth got up and stood on the page once more, drawing himself up to his full twelve inches. Again he pierced all four friends with his benign gaze. "You are charged with leading humanity through the destruction that will soon descend and into the next great cycle. You are the next great civilisers, the patriarchs and matriarchs of a new age. It falls to you and your friends and helpers to do what we failed to do - find a solution - a cure - for the destructive cycles that forever hold back the evolution and true destiny of our species. Like we before you, you must cultivate the Shem-an-na and benefit from its powers of magic, longevity and goodness. You must extend your lives and oversee the rebuilding of a world and a great civilisation that will rise to the challenge of curing the ills of a troubled Earth.

"The gods of the old world are no more - we have completed our task and have returned to the Light. You will be the generation of new gods who will guide and advise a helpless and confused remnant of humanity. I am content that this great task is in good hands. Now I must go."

"But wait," cried Harry. "How can we save all the billions of people in the world?"

"You can't Harry. I fear that your experiences in the few years that remain of this cycle will mirror our own. You will not be believed - they will not want to believe what you tell them. All you can do is gather together a band of those who accept your word. Most of your colleagues who took part in this victory will believe you, for they saw and experienced things that have been hidden from Muggle and wizard alike. Their minds are open and receptive - they will be the core of your support in the great venture that lies before you."

"But time is so short!" exclaimed Harry. "How can we find a place that will be safe?"

"You will find it, Anima Summa. It is in your nature, and that of your companion Anima Summa to prevail. Start with the Fabled Garden - that can be your starting point. And feed on the wisdom of your mentor - Albus Dumbledore will be the steadying influence in the early days. Make him your leader - this will free you to further your research and uncover great mysteries that will enable you to prevail. At his passing, you will be better prepared to take the mantle of joint leadership of your community."

"But... but if there's to be all this destruction," said Hermione, her face full of concern, "what will happen to all the souls if you and the other Shining Ones are not here to guide them into the Light?"

Thoth smiled enigmatically. "Do not concern yourself with that, Hermione. Provision has been made. Now I must go. For the last time - farewell, Children of the Light, and good fortune."

The figure of Thoth dimmed, and then shrunk back down into the final page of the book of Thoth. Then he disappeared from the Physical Realm for the last time.

The four stared at the page, which was now covered in script, and stood silent for several minutes. Then they glanced at each other, each seeking everyone's initial reaction to the revelations they'd just heard.

"Well bugger me!" exclaimed Ron. "If that doesn't beat all!"

The other three grinned briefly, but their expressions then turned serious as they all felt the weight of the great responsibility that had been placed on their shoulders.

"We'd better go down and tell Professor Dumbledore and the others," said Margot.

"I wonder how they'll react to this little lot!" said Ron.

"You two go on down," said Harry. "Don't say anything yet, but tell them all to wait for a few minutes. We'll be down a little later to tell them all about it, but now," he gazed into Hermione's eyes, "we just want to be on our own for a little while."

Ron and Margot nodded in understanding and walked, hand in hand, slowly down to the bottom of the wadi. Harry stretched out his hand and Hermione reached out and held it. They stood looking at each other for a few moments, both realising at the same instant that the calming influence of the rings was no longer present. They looked longingly into each other's eyes.

Then Hermione flung herself into Harry's arms. They held each other tightly for a few moments before breaking apart slightly. Harry gently smoothed the cheek of his girlfriend and slowly placed his lips on hers. They both savoured the moment as they kissed - a gentle and loving kiss - before Hermione drew in a deep breath and crushed her lips against Harry's. They broke apart once more, gazing deeply into each other's eyes. Then Hermione squeezed her eyes tightly shut, clutching Harry fiercely to her as she sent her thoughts and feelings - feelings that were many and varied - the terrible pain she felt at losing her friend Ginny, the anxiety of the forthcoming task, the dread at the sudden responsibility that had been thrust upon them, relief that the fight was all over, and love - love that only the Anima Summas could share.

"I know, Hermione," he whispered into her ear, stroking the soft hair lying at the back of her neck. "I know."

Hermione raised her head and gently kissed Harry's lips and then gazed lovingly into his eyes.

After a few minutes, they looked up to see the first streaks of light coming over the eastern horizon. They turned and faced the budding light, and then walked hand in hand, slowly over the sand and into a new dawn.

Epilogue - And so it Ends

"Please Mummy... please," the little eight year old red-haired girl pleaded as her mother tried to get her settled down into bed for the night.

Margette Potter glanced at the clock on the bedroom wall - the little hand pointed to 'bed-time'. "It's too late Ginny - it's time you went to sleep."

"But Mummy, I'm not tired. And I want to know about the painting," whined Ginny.

Margette sighed - she could see that her daughter's brain was far too active for sleep to overtake her any time soon. 'Just like her ancestors,' she thought, smiling wryly. 'And me too, if it comes to that.'

Margette glanced at the clock once more. She really needed to get some work done. She was due to give her report to the Academy in just under a week's time, and it would be a big day for her - the culmination of two years research into the effects of Shem-an-na on Welsh Greens. The Magical Creatures fraternity at the Academy awaited her report with great excitement and interest. Ever since the colony of Dragons had chanced upon the Ma-na tree, seeded when a spore was carried into the Forbidden Forest by the wind, and hidden from sight until it was discovered by the keeper following some very peculiar behaviour by the huge magical reptiles, every Magical Creatures expert in the world had waited on her report with bated breath.

She sighed once more, but gave in to the pleading emerald green eyes of her daughter - how could she refuse? She should have known that the little girl's first visit to the Grand Museum would spark a flood of questions, especially when she saw her gazing rapturously at the magical painting of the Anima Summas just inside the museum hallway. She'd been fascinated by the many twists and turns inside the museum, the moving staircases, the dark and mysterious corridors and the Great Hall, and she'd spent some time reading the plaque on the entrance hall wall, which gave a brief history of the museum and how it had been modelled on an ancient school called Hogwarts, in the land of Britain, now long buried deep beneath the Great North Ocean. But it was the painting, most of all, that captured Ginny's imagination.

"Well all right, Ginny. But only for a few minutes."

Ginny grinned and sat up, turned and fluffed up the pillows behind her, and then settled back contentedly. "The rings, Mummy. I want to know about the rings that they were wearing on their fingers."

Margette started to relate what she knew about the rings but stopped when she heard the thudding of feet just outside the bedroom door. Then the door burst open and two grinning bundles of energy burst in.

"We want to listen too, Mum," said Fred.

"But you've both heard it before!" exclaimed their mother.

"But we want to hear it again!" said George.

Margette shook her head in resignation and told the ten-year old red-haired, blue-eyed twins to make themselves comfortable. They jumped up onto the bed beside their little sister and waited expectantly.

"The painting was made a long, long time ago, before the Great Destruction when the Anima Summas were still in the middle of their great quest."

"How long ago was that Mum?" asked Fred.

"Well it's 2003 AD now, and it was painted even before the start of our calendar - that's before year zero AD."

"What's AD mean?" asked Ginny.

"Everybody knows that, stupid!" exclaimed George.

Ginny pulled a face and stared angrily at her brother. "I'm not stupid, George!"

"George!" said Margette. "Don't speak to your sister like that - she's younger than you and doesn't know as much as you yet."

Ginny poked her tongue out at her brother and turned to face her mother once more.

"AD means After Dumbledore, Ginny," said Margette, trying hard to suppress a grin. Her spirited 8-year old was far from stupid.

Ginny nodded and remained silent - even she knew who Dumbledore was.

"Great Matriarch Hermione wrote about the rings in her 'Histories of the World' - she called them the 'Rings of Joining', although no one quite knows what she meant by that. She and Great Patriarch Harry wore them throughout the three years of their quest, and they were sworn to return them to the one they'd received them from. But they weren't able to - he'd returned to the Light with all the other Guardian Spirits of the Old World. The Rings held a strange power, but exactly what it was we don't know, which melted away not long after the final conflict. They wore them throughout the first hundred years of their married lives, and then hid them away in a secret place. She wrote that she hoped they'd never be needed again, but no one knows why. And to this day, no one knows where they are hidden."

"Mummy?" asked Ginny. "The final conflict - that was when they won the war against the Dark Wizards wasn't it?"

"That's right Ginny," Margette replied. "The leader of the Dark Wizards - Lord Voldemort - was banished into the Dark Realm and he hasn't been heard of since."

"But why were those wizards so bad?" asked Ginny. "There aren't any evil wizards now are there?"

"No there aren't, thank goodness." Margette let out a sigh. "Early on in their experiments with the Ma-na, Great Professors Snape and Sprout found a way to alter it very slightly, so that if a person with a highly developed Dark side ingested it, the Darkness would be banished in

favour of his lighter side. Ever since then, there have been no Dark Witches and Wizards in the world."

"Tell us about what happened after the great destruction," said Fred. "Before Year Zero."

"I'll just tell you the short version of what happened," said Margette resignedly. "It's all written down in 'Histories of the World', and you'll be studying it in great detail when you go to New Hogwarts next year - and you two years later, Ginny."

Margette settled herself down at the foot of the bed and felt the familiar glow build inside her. She felt it whenever she was badgered into telling her children about the start of their new civilisation - perhaps it was because she was a direct descendant of Harry and Hermione, Ron and Margot, and she never failed to be amazed by their astonishing exploits.

"After the great destruction, the world was completely different from what it had been before. Whole continents sank below the sea and others were raised in their place. The country where we live now - Hermland - was once far below the sea, where it had lain since the last great upheaval consigned it to the deep nearly 12,000 years ago. When the Patriarchs and Matriarchs left New Eden they came here - they called it Nibiru then, like it was all that time ago."

"Why did they change its name to Hermland, mummy?" asked Ginny.

"Well after Great Matriarch Hermione, of course. It was she who undertook the task of writing down the history of the world, so that all who came after would know. She wrote that her own time had been cloaked in secrecy and ignorance, and she wanted to make sure that the same thing wouldn't happen in our time. She was a very great witch." Margette sighed - she would have loved to have met and known Hermione.

"Grand old Professor Dumbledore was the first leader of the colony that survived the destruction. They sheltered in the place called New Eden, where they waited for five years until the convulsions that raged in the world outside the valley started to subside, and the great floods started to abate. Dumbledore split the community of New Eden into four groups, initially.

"There were the Teachers, led by Great Professor McGonagall, who undertook to complete the schooling of the younger members of the community, and to plan for the education of the very young and those who would soon be born into the new world. Then there were the Cultivators, led by Great Professor Sprout. The great Manna Gardens were started by Professor Sprout, helped by the six Great Cultivators who were later to expand the seeding of the Shem-an-na trees to several sites around the world - Neville, Lavender, Parvati, Seamus Dean and Kristen. They laid the foundations to make sure there was enough Ma-na for everyone, and as you know, it is now a part of our staple diet.

"Then there were the Scientists, the branch of society to which your father and I belong. They were led by Great Professor Snape, and they experimented with the Shem-an-na and refined the process of production of the Ma-na. And finally, there were the explorers, led by Great Explorer Sirius Black. He and his helpers, which included Harry and Hermione in the early days, planned the expeditions and then went out into the new world when the time was right, seeking the few survivors who'd been lucky enough to live on high ground in the lands that hadn't sunk beneath the oceans. They also looked for clues that would eventually lead to us

finding a solution to the Earth's ills and correcting the terrible cycles of destruction that blighted it.

"The others of the community either joined one of the four groups or helped Dumbledore with the general running of New Eden. Even the few Muggles who'd joined the group lent a hand."

"What are Muggles?" asked Ginny, drawing exasperated stares from her two brothers.

"People like Millie and Arbuthnot Granger - Hermione's parents - and Ceri's Muggle relatives from Wales - and Harry and Hermione's friend Lara. There aren't any Muggles now, of course, but they were people who didn't have any magic."

Ginny gasped, "People without Magic? That's terrible, Mummy!"

"Back in the old world, there were a lot more Muggles than Magical People, Ginny," said Margette. "Rhian thought it was terrible too - she was Ceri's little Muggle niece - but they soon developed their own magic after being put on the diet of Ma-na.

"Then, exactly one hundred years after the start of the New Eden Colony, Grand old Professor Dumbledore decided that it was time for him to rest. He had worked tirelessly, as had all the others, to ensure the new world got off to the best possible start, but before passing into the Light, he handed over the reins of leadership to Harry and Hermione. A lot of the older colonists from the old world joined Dumbledore at that time, and joined him in the Light. George and Molly Weasley - they were Great Patriarch Ron's parents - decided to go into the Light at that time - they were anxious to see their daughter Ginny once more.

"Hermione didn't concern herself too much with leading the colony though - she wanted to start on her great project to produce the Histories of the World, and also to share some of her vast knowledge with the young people who attended New Hogwarts School. So it was left to Harry, aided by their great friends Ron and Margot, and to a lesser extent Colin and Clare, to give leadership during the critical time when the first outlying colonies started to flourish.

"They were good times, but they were also cruel sometimes. More than once, the communities built in the wider world would be destroyed by the remnant volcanic eruptions that persisted for over four hundred years, but they would be built up once more. During those times, the Magical Weasley Company sustained the people and kept up their spirits - Fred, George, Alicia, Angelina and Lee made regular trips to the outlying colonies and provided entertainment and amazing tricks and pranks. The survival of many of the communities have been attributed to the exploits of the Great Troup as they were to become known.

"Another nice little side story of the early years was one of the bi-products of the experiments with Ma-na. Working with Fred and George Weasley, under the direction of Professor Snape, Remus Lupin was able to come up with an antidote that completely cured the werewolf curse. There were great celebrations in New Eden when that happened - Remus and his girlfriend Sioned, also a werewolf, were married as soon as they were cured, and had four lovely children."

"Tell us about the Magical Creatures, Mum," said George.

"Many of the Magical Creatures were saved from the destruction, and were later released into the great forests that sprung up on several of the new large islands. Many ordinary creatures

were also saved, although there were some problems initially with the migrating birds. Charlie, Nadine, Demont and Anne-Marie led the group that cared for all the animals, and managed to repair the damage when the surviving migrating birds flew in the wrong direction - north into the cold instead of south into the warm. They magically altered their internal sensors to reverse their north-south directional instincts after the earth changed its magnetic polarity. The most dangerous magical creatures were confined to the forbidden island in the middle of the southern ocean - even now, very few people dare to go there and then only to check on the creatures' progress for research purposes. When they were first settled on the island they were cared for by Great Half-Giant Rubeus Hagrid and his wife, Great Half-Giantess Olympe Maxime.

"Sirius and Ceri eventually settled down on an idyllic island near the equator, and founded a Welsh community there - Gwlad Cymru. They had three children and lived out their lives alongside their great friends, Remus, Sioned and their family. Bill Weasley was a frequent visitor, but made his home in ancient Egypt, one of the few lands to survive the disaster."

"What about Harry and Hermione? What happened to them?" asked Ginny.

"They had three children - two boys and a girl. The two boys married two of Ron and Margot's four daughters, and the girl married one of Fred and Alicia's sons. But you'll read a lot more about the genealogy of the new world in *Histories of the World*. And at New Hogwarts, there's a special room, called the Chamber of Ancestors, where you can trace the family trees of the first colonists. You'll be able to trace your decent right back to Harry, Hermione, Ron and Margot.

"Like the other original colonists, Great Matriarch Hermione and Great Patriarch Harry lived for a very long time, and they didn't leave the Earthly Realm until they were certain that the new civilisation was well on the way to fruition. But before they left, they made sure that there would be no Gods in the new world - they were determined that their memories, and those of the other patriarchs and matriarchs would not be elevated to the status of deities. Hermione's *Histories of the World* made sure of that! But there was a risk that that very thing was about to happen almost three hundred years ago, when some misguided Grand Council members decided that Harry and Hermione should be worshiped. They even went as far as drafting a religious text for the people to follow. But that was stopped when a marvellous thing happened - their shining Spirits of Light appeared to our very own ancestor and ensured that corrective action was taken. They said that over time, if a religion were created in their names, it would eventually cause great rifts among the people and would lead to terrible things."

"But I thought they'd gone into the Light," said Ginny. "How could they come back?"

Margette smiled. "They are our Guardian Spirits. They told our ancestor that they had volunteered to keep watch on the Physical Realm to ensure that guidance could be given in special dire circumstances. Every so often, they leave the Light Realm and visit us to make sure that all is well - not that anyone sees them of course - only your long-removed ancestor was privileged to see them three hundred years ago."

"When will they appear again?" asked Ginny tiredly, her eyes now drooping.

"I don't know, Ginny. No one knows. But there's one thing you can be sure of - they're still keeping an eye out for us." Margette looked up to the skylight in the ceiling, her eyes misty as

she gazed at the sparkling stars in the cloudless night sky. Ginny, Fred and George looked up as well, trying to see if they could see the spectral forms of their two famous ancestors in the star patterns.

"Mummy," whispered Ginny, "when did Harry and Hermione go into the Light?"

Margette smiled. "She wrote about that at the very end of her *Histories of the World*. It was the very last chapter. It wasn't a very long chapter - in fact, it was only a few lines, but ever since I read them when I was at New Hogwarts I've never forgotten them. They were burned into my memory, and I can see them now - exactly as she wrote them..."

Chapter 3023.

And so it ends...

It ends for the last eight of the original founders of New Eden. But for you, dear readers, it is just the beginning. At whatever point in time you read these words, it is still the beginning - it is for you to experience the great adventure. And never doubt that it is a great adventure.

For whatever you do in life, whatever path you take, be assured that it will contribute to the well-being of this Brave New World.

That which was started so long ago is now in good hands, and it is time for me and my friends to leave the Earthly Realm. Today, we decided to stop taking the Shem-an-na, and wait for the time when we will be reunited once more with all our friends in the Light Realm.

Harry, Ron, Margot, Katie, Oliver, Clare, Colin and I have no regrets and we are content. We look on it as the last great adventure, and we feel truly excited that we will soon see our dear and sorely missed friend Ginny once more. It was she, who gave up her earthly life to save the Anima Summas, who gave us the chance to start this great new civilisation.

And so it ends...

These are the Histories of the World.

Hermione Potter

Professor of Magical History

New Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

August 500 AD."

Margette wiped a tear from her eye as she spoke the last words that her ancestor had written all those years before. Ginny, too, wiped the tears from her eyes. Fred and George just stared solemnly at their mother.

They all jumped when they heard the front door close loudly, and a voice shouted up the stairs. "Margette? Are you up there?"

"Yes, Haroth," shouted Margette. "I'm trying to get these kids to get to sleep!"

There was a loud pounding on the stairs and Haroth burst in, grinning as he saw the scene before him. "Don't tell me - story time?"

Margette grinned. "History of the World time."

"Well now it's sleep time!" said Haroth, bending down to kiss his daughter goodnight. Then he picked up his two sons, one under each arm, and rushed them out from the room struggling and laughing into their own bedroom.

Margette tucked Ginny up in her blankets and then leaned down to kiss her goodnight. As Margette left the room and quietly closed the door, Ginny settled down with a smile on her face, looking up through the skylight - fighting to stay awake in case Harry and Hermione chose that very night to pay a visit. Her eyelids started to droop and she let out a contented sigh as she hovered on the very edge of sleep.

In the corner of the room, hidden behind their protective invisibility shield, two Shining Ones smiled as they looked fondly at their distant relative. They were content - they knew that the future was in good hands. Harry and Hermione nodded and lifted their shield of invisibility just before the little girl drifted off to sleep - just at that moment when she was neither awake nor asleep - leaving her with a shining image of the Anima Summas, exactly as they were portrayed in the entrance hall of the Grand Museum.

They knew, of course, that Ginny would probably think that she dreamt it all when she awoke the next morning, but they also knew that a small part of her would also wonder if her ancestors really had been there to watch over her that night. They wanted to be there that night to witness the event that would mark a turning point in the already excellent fortunes of the new civilisation - they knew that she would grow up to be one of the greatest witches of the age, and they also knew that it was on that very day, when Ginny had become so fascinated by their magical portrait in the museum, that the change had taken place in her that would set her on the path to great discoveries in later life - discoveries that would lead the new civilisation onto an even greater plain of existence.

Then, keeping their eyes firmly on the sleeping little girl, they slowly faded until finally, the room held only little Ginny.

The Anima Summas had returned to the Light - back to their many friends once more.

END