

Harry and Hermione Start their Sixth Year

By

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Chapter I

Wednesday, 31 July, 1996
Little Whinging, Surrey

Shortly before 7:30 am, a solitary figure jogged up Privet Drive. Harry Potter, wizard-in-training, was training for his life.

Following his return to Privet Drive in late June, Harry had gone through a week of a condition that was part reaction to the horrible events of the previous year, part depression, and a great deal of guilt and just plain sulkiness. A series of talks with Remus Lupin had helped convince Harry that, as bad as things were, they could easily get much worse for everyone if he didn't pull himself together. Not really fair, having to heavy a burden for a young man just turned that very day sixteen, but it was the truth.

Harry had always valued the truth above nearly everything else, and so decided he should stop fighting it and embrace it instead. He woke up every morning at 6:00 am, and went out from 6:15 to 7:30. At first, he was mostly walking fast, but now he was alternating between jogging, running, and even sprinting.

His run was well-timed. Uncle Vernon left for work at 7:25 and Dudley woke up at 8:15. Harry had just enough time to pound Dudley's heavy punching bag in the unfinished cellar for twenty minutes and take a shower before sharing breakfast with Dudley.

For once, the Dursleys were feeding him almost as they should, although there was nothing extra that a growing teen like Harry really needed, as he had indeed grown that previous year. He wasn't feeling the pinch, however, as every day, from 1:00 until 3:00, a member of the Order of the Phoenix would visit him. No matter who it was, they always brought a small gift of food, usually from Molly Weasley.

Tuesdays and Thursdays, an elderly witch named Mistress Merry came to coach him on some basic wandless magic, which Harry had shown some signs of over the years. Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, one of the Order members who could help him work on Occlumency would visit. Since this had been Snape only once (the look on his face when handing Harry three small meat pies had served as Harry's focus through the lesson, to Snape's disgust), Harry felt he could tolerate the mental exercise. In fact, he was getting fairly decent at it. Harry wasn't certain if it was because of this improvement or because he had so decisively driven Voldemort out of his head at the Ministry, but his thoughts had not been attacked since that night.

Any thought of the Ministry brought back feelings of guilt, anger, and depression. It took all of Harry's basic optimism to drive those feelings away. 'Suppress' might be a better term. Still, his talks with Remus Lupin, and two very long letters of stream-of-consciousness writing that still were full of good advice from Luna Lovegood, had helped Harry turn himself at least partially around.

As Harry pounded the bag on his birthday, he thought about Luna. They had made a connection at the end of the previous term, but Luna had turned down his fairly tentative offer of a relationship. He hadn't realized that Luna 'played for the other team.' They still wrote each other every day, and Harry realized he had found a soul mate, even if things would always remain platonic between them.

Harry was grateful to Luna for writing. She and her father had only spent the first week of the 'long vac' in Sweden, coming back because they had decided Snorkacks were out of season. He wished his other friends were as willing to write, although he had to admit, considering what a poor correspondent he normally was, he couldn't complain too much.

Ron and Hermione had had a huge blow-out of an argument right after the start of the holiday when Hermione had revealed she was finally taking up Viktor Krum's offer to visit Bulgaria. Since she had made it clear long before that Krum was just a friend, Harry didn't see Ron's problem. Whatever chance the pair had once had as a couple was apparently gone, as Ron was now dating Luna's cousin, a Hufflepuff two years behind them, who was staying with the Lovegoods at their Ottery St. Catchpole cottage that summer. Ron had only written two short notes since, extolling the virtues of Henrietta's snogging abilities and physical attributes.

Hermione had responded to his sympathetic note (or what he'd thought had been such) with a curt note telling him to basically stick to his own business. Granted, his sympathy had been part of a general lament about discovering Luna's dating preference, but most of the letter had been devoted to concern for Hermione. Harry had written back saying concern for one of his best friends and one of the most important people in his life should be his business. Hermione had not written back for three weeks. Presumably, she was still in Bulgaria.

Harry had even written to Neville, only to get a note back from Neville's grandmother saying he was doing a garden tour of Europe with her brother Algie.

Ginny's few notes, filled with news of her having one big date in Diagon Alley with Dean Thomas and three others in Muggle London with Justin Finch-Fletchley, had made Harry feel glad for her, while also feeling a little bereft himself. As he finished the work-out, he even thought, 'I bet if I played for the other team, Colin would still be my fan-boy but still prefer to snog someone else. Birthday! Bah!'

As Harry consumed the one fried egg, one slice of dry toast, and small glass of orange juice allocated him, he knew part of his bad mood was the general state of his life, part was that he was feeling lonely without Ron and Hermione (and Luna, Ginny, and Neville, for that matter), part was feeling sorry for himself for not having a girlfriend (even Dudley now had a girl friend, although from the photos he had seen, the 'girl' had looked rather like a constipated Vincent Crabbe in drag), and partly because he had received no birthday presents. Granted, he knew that whomever visited him today could bring them, but he had hoped for something the night before at midnight. Maybe he'd at least get a small cake from Mrs. Weasley.

Harry spent the morning reading his various Defense books. He had expected his O.W.L. results by now, and until then he had no idea what else to study. He knew he had to take five to seven classes for the next two years, but there was a wide range of both N.E.W.T.-level and more practical/vocational classes available.

At 11:15, Harry went down stairs and fixed his aunt and himself a light lunch, the one chore he was still assigned. His aunt was a thin woman who barely ate. On weekends, or days when Dudley was home for lunch, Harry could fix himself a portion larger than his aunt's, but on these days when they were home alone, Harry was only allowed an equal portion -- fine for his now-nearly anorexic aunt, but far from what he needed. Harry decided to hope for at least a mid-sized cake from Mrs. Weasley.

As Harry cleared away the dishes, Petunia reminded him, "Make certain those . . . people are out of the house by three! I need to have everything ready for the bridge club at Four!"

"Of course, Aunt Petunia," Harry answered. Harry knew the club didn't eat anything, that the house was perfectly clean, and the group would drink more sherry than they played cards. Still, he wasn't about to comment on any of that. He shrugged and washed the dishes for something to do, and emptied the dishwasher.

At 12:30, the doorbell rang. Harry hoped his visitor was early, but thought it more likely to be some salesperson.

The woman at the door was middle-aged and unattractive. "Yes?" Harry asked politely.

"I was wondering, young man, if I could possibly interest you or your family in a most wonderful product?"

"I don't believe so," Harry said politely, and started to shut the door. "Thank you anyway."

"Come now!" she said, keeping the door open with unexpected strength, "Every family needs at least one Nimbus Pro-Seeker!"

Harry goggled. "What did you say?"

"Wotcher, Harry, caught you!" Tonks said with a laugh, transforming back to her usual self.

"Tonks!" Harry was so glad to see the young auror he hugged her. He had been terrified at having to deal with Snape on his birthday.

"Cor, Harry, you're getting strong," Tonks said with a laugh, hugging him back. "Didn't know you cared!"

Harry released her, embarrassed. "Sorry; I was afraid it might be Snape today."

"Naw, no Sevikins on your birthday!" Tonks kissed his cheek. "Happy birthday!"

"Thanks!" Harry said. "Coming in?"

"In a mo."

Harry was puzzled. "Is something wrong? Is Remus alright?" Tonks and Remus had just started seeing each other, and there had just been a full moon.

"He's doing alright, tired of course. Now, how would you like to leave today?"

Harry smiled. "If you help me pack, we can go in fifteen minutes!"

Tonks returned the smile. "No, we'll leave at three by Portkey. All your pressies are at our destination. I did bring someone who will help you pack."

"Who?"

Tonks stepped back and signaled. A very shy-looking Hermione stepped into sight.

"Go on, girl," Tonks said to Hermione. "Harry, show her the house. I'll be back in a little more than two hours -- be totally ready to go." Seeing the two still staring at each other, Tonks dragged Hermione to the front door, pushed her in, and shut the door behind her.

Hermione was pushed into Harry, who managed to catch her. "Are you alright?" Harry asked, not really wanting to let her go. "I've been worried about you."

Hermione stopped trying to release herself and looked up into Harry's eyes. "When did Harry get so much taller than me?" she wondered. What she said, however, was, "Worried about me and Viktor?"

Harry smiled. "No, worried about how you're feeling about Ron, worried about how you're dealing with the delay in the O.W.L. results, worried about how your section of the Muggle world might be in danger . . . worried about why it's been so long since I've heard from you, and a little sad that I haven't."

Hermione chewed on her lower lip for a moment, and then looked back into Harry's eyes. "Harry, that letter you sent. . . ."

"What did I say that ticked you off so much?"

Hermione's grip on Harry's shoulders tightened and her eyes dropped again. "Well, when I read it, there was only one interpretation I could think of. . . ."

"And that was?" Harry asked, puzzled.

"That you were at loose ends because Luna is gay, and I was at loose ends because Ron is a prat, so we should go ahead and . . . date."

Harry was a bit embarrassed, but he had resolved to think things through and then take the actions he had decided to take, rather than jumping for answers and improvising when it wasn't necessary. He had thought about having an opportunity like this, and wasn't going to blow it. "I didn't mean it that way . . . but would it be so terrible . . . if we did?"

Hermione looked back to Harry eyes. "Harry. . . ."

"Hermione, we're friends, I mean close friends, aren't we?"

"We are." Hermione hesitated, and then said as she moved slightly into his embrace, "You're my best friend, Harry."

"In fact, even if Ron and I are mates, you're the one who's always there for me, even when I've been a prat, like over the broomstick."

"True," she admitted.

"I admit, I didn't realize how beautiful you were until the Yule Ball, but I've always thought you attractive, even before you changed your teeth."

"Really?" That startled her, but Hermione knew that Harry couldn't flatter a girl if his life depended on it, so what he said must be true.

Harry smiled. "Yes, really. Unlike Ron, I noticed you were a girl right off and have never forgotten the fact. You might have been a fussy know-it-all, but I always knew you were a very cute one."

Hermione snorted, containing her giggle.

"But at the time, then during that whole Triwizard and Skeeter mess and most of last year, I liked Cho. And, to be honest, after the Yule Ball until last month, you and Ron were dancing around each other and I was not going to get in the middle of that."

"Fair enough," Hermione admitted.

"At the beginning of this summer, I was depressed and angry. I think I'm mostly over both. As I got over both, I thought about a lot of things, including all my stupid behavior. One thing I acted stupid about was girls. Cho was a mistake from the start. Was there anyone I cared to date? Yes. You, Luna, and Ginny. My friends, girls I care about as people first. But you and Ron were still dancing around each other, and Ginny didn't seem interested. So I wrote to Luna. Luna and I have become really good friends; we owl every other day." Harry shrugged. "I'm not explaining this well, am I? What I'm trying to say is not that you were my third choice but that even though I didn't mean it to come across the way it did, maybe that's how I was thinking. I know that if I want to date you I should be declaring my undying love for you or something, but it wouldn't be honest. I really like you, even love you, as a friend, and care about you. And I think you're very attractive. But it wouldn't be honest to try to sweep you off your feet, and when you saw it wasn't honest, you'd hate me."

Harry pulled back a little, but kept his hands on Hermione's shoulders. "We disagree about a lot of things, but if there's one thing we have in common, it's that we both value honesty. I'm not as good at practicing it as you are, but we both care about it more than almost anything else. So, I'm honestly telling you, Hermione, I like you. I value you, and our friendship. I find you very attractive. And I've missed hearing from you so much this month. . . . Would you consider dating me?"

"You're right about the honesty thing, Harry," Hermione acknowledged. "Even though I know I come across as a fussy know-it-all, even I have a bit of the romantic in me. I always thought I'd be swept off my feet by my prince in a grand gesture. No offense, but you're too low-key and shy for the grand dramatic gesture."

"True," Harry agreed.

"In fact, this is about the most articulate I've ever heard you."

"Thanks," Harry grumbled.

"My mum told me last week I was being an idiot," Hermione went on, "that that kind of magnificent, romantic love felt magnificent, but that the feeling never lasts and doesn't usually develop into the kind of love that really matters and lasts. What matters is mutual respect and friendship. Only if you have those as well as passion will the passion last. But then how so you know if the passion is there? I asked. She said I shouldn't dream about being

swept off my feet. Think about who I want to comfort me when I'm sick. Think about whom I would comfort first. Think about whose arms I simply want to be held by. And, when I find that person, kiss him. Then, I'll know if the passion is there."

"Really?"

"Really. And I realized that it was you I nearly always comforted first, like last Christmas. It's your arms I always have received the most comfort from. Ron held me when I threw myself at him, and it felt very good. When I threw myself at you, we both found. . . ."

"We found ourselves," Harry said. "You've always been there for me. Even Skeeter and Cho saw that."

"You couldn't give me up to please Cho last February, could you?"

"Of course not. You've been one of the most important people in my life since we met -- well, since the troll thing, anyway. But how could I say anything when my two best friends seemed to have something?"

"Have we been dancing around each other even more than Ron and I did?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

Hermione smiled, and tilted her face upwards. Harry leaned down slightly, and the pair kissed.

They broke off over a minute later. "Wow," Hermione whispered. 'So that's what a proper kiss feels like,' she thought. 'Compared to Harry, kissing Ron was like kissing the hose of a soft, wet vacuum sweeper.'

"Wonderful," Harry murmured, looking at Hermione. 'So that's what a proper kiss feels like. Compared to Hermione, kissing Cho was either like kissing an elastic band under a waterfall or kissing a lip-sticked emery board.'

They kissed again, and never noticed it was over five minutes before they surfaced.

"Should we repeat the experiment?" Hermione asked in an almost pleading voice as they clung to each other.

"Tell you what. Let's pack and leave the relatives a note, and then spend the rest of the time retesting."

"Sounds very responsible," Hermione said. "Anything else we should agree on or discuss before making this official?" "Why did I say that?" Hermione thought. 'Ron would be yelling at me by now for discussing instead of snogging.'

"We could make some sort of a deal, so that we don't fight about priorities," Harry offered to Hermione's surprise. "I don't want to fight with you."

"That's a good idea," Hermione agreed, knowing they had very different views on what was important. "I have an idea," she offered in an almost tentative voice, at least for her.

"And what might that be?"

"My top priorities will be studying and research; yours will be preparing to fight Voldemort if necessary and Quidditch. If one of us truly gets too obsessive about one of those, we'll give the other a token, which will mean the other has to at least stop long enough to explain why we can't stop. We can also use them to get the other to do something important. We won't use them as an excuse just to snog or anything. We can start off with, say, three. If I use up all of mine making you study, then you'll have six to use, and I'll be stuck. So we'll both be careful about when we use them."

"Alright," Harry said simply.

Hermione stared at Harry in surprise. "You don't think that it's too . . . cold-blooded? Too over-thought out? Too . . . stupid?"

"Is that what Ron said when you suggested something similar?" Harry asked.

Hermione nodded.

"I'm not Ron," Harry said simply, hugging Hermione closely for a second. "I don't want to fight with the most important person in my life. I know we'll schedule some time to be together, right?" he teased.

Hermione was glad she had finally learned when Harry was gently teasing her. He had a very dry, droll sense of humor that had taken her over four years to catch on to. "I promise to include at least fifteen minutes a day and two half-hour sessions every Saturday and Sunday," Hermione said gravely. They both smiled, happy they could tease each other without a fight breaking out.

Harry sighed and released Hermione from the long embrace. "Let me show you around, and we can get packed."

Tonks Apparated into the Dursleys' living room at 2:33. 'I wonder if those two managed to come together,' she thought. 'They both care so much for each other they should at least try to be together.'

Walking out to the entrance hall, she saw Harry's trunk, a shopping bag filled with more clothes, and two more bags that proved to have Harry's old books and notes. Those, and Hedwig's cage, were apparently all of Harry's earthly possessions.

There was no sign of the teens.

'Where could they be?' Tonks thought to herself. An awful idea popped into her head, and she managed to sneak up the stairs without making a sound.

The pair was in bed, just as she had feared. Fortunately, it was clear that the only clothing they were missing were their shoes and Harry's glasses. Harry was asleep, lying mostly atop Hermione with his head between her small breasts -- Harry's 'bed' was such a small cot there was no room for them to be positioned in any other way. Hermione looked up at Tonks, and, moving gently and slowly, eased out from under Harry. She grabbed Tonks' arm and dragged her into the master bedroom.

"Did you know what that damn prophecy said?" Hermione hissed angrily.

"Uh . . . no. What. . . ?"

"It said Harry has to be the one to kill Voldemort, or he has to die trying!" Hermione's eyes were glistening from emotion.

Tonks winced.

"Do you know when Harry was told that? Like an hour or two after Sirius died! No wonder he was in such a state the rest of the term. Why can't anyone trust us with what's going on! I could have helped him! No, he's had to suffer through it for weeks, and he's still suffering. Do you know what he did when we were lying on the bed?"

"Snog?"

"NO! We didn't get back to that!"

'Alright! They're together!' Tonks said to herself, but outloud she said, "Cry?"

Hermione shook her head. "No. He tried to. He needs to cry, and he couldn't. He needs to cry for the years of abuse he suffered here. He needs to cry for Sirius. He needs to release some of that inner anger and angst. He gave what sounded like a few abbreviated snorts and that was it. Even that was so upsetting he fell asleep from the effort."

Hermione's expression went so fierce that Tonks took a step back. "I am never leaving him alone again. Ever. Maybe you and Remus can be trusted, but no one else can!"

'Heaven help any who come between Hermione Granger and the man she loves!' Tonks thought. "May I give you a word or two of advice? From one woman who loves a strong, proud man who is in great psychic pain every day to another?"

Hermione's expression softened, and she nodded.

"One. Love him, support him. Do NOT mother him or coddle him in any way, unless he asks for it. If Harry does have to be the one, he'll need all our support, but he'll need yours most of all. Two. Now, don't take this wrong, but sometimes you can be a bit . . . over-zealous, especially in your work habits. That good for you, but. . . ."

"Not for most other people," Hermione said with a wan smile. Ron had certainly told her that more than enough times. "I need to remember the extra pressures Harry is under, and not be too hard on him."

"Right -- but don't be too easy on him, either." Tonks grinned. "He IS a male, and therefore in need of training."

"Really?" Hermione teased. "And is Remus even paper-trained?"

"You'd be surprised how he's trained," Tonks said with a mysterious smile. "Go wake Harry up. I'll be downstairs."

Harry woke up alone on the cot. "Damn," Harry muttered. He sat up and rested his elbows on his knees and his head on his palms. 'It seemed so real. I thought . . . I might be happy. That SOMEONE might actually . . . love me. That I could finally show I cared about someone.' Then he noticed two pairs of trainers; his old beat-up cast-offs, and a pair of petite new ones. "Hermione?" Harry called.

Hermione came back into the room, and the look of concern on her face changed into a brilliant smile. "I was just talking with Tonks. Are you ready? It will be time to go soon."

Harry returned the smile in full. "I'm ready." His life might have had horrors and abuse. There would be at least one more terrible thing in his life. But he had good friends, like Ron and Luna; mentors like Remus and Tonks; and above all, he might have a partner and lover. That meant, for the first time, Harry had a real reason to want to win, other than survival instinct and a strong sense of duty.

Harry and Hermione left the smallest bedroom in the house together.

Chapter II

"Hogwarts?" Harry was surprised, once he took his bearings. "I figured Gr . . . err, headquarters."

"It's good you've learned a little discretion, boy."

"Professor Snape," Harry said, almost politely, without bothering to turn towards the voice behind him.

"You need to see the Headmaster," Snape stated. "Now. Alone. Go!"

"Wait!" Hermione said to Harry. "There are some things I need to tell you that I didn't have time. . . ."

"If you wasted your time, Granger, that is no reason to waste others'," Snape said firmly. "Go, boy!"

"Snape, you're still tired and cranky," Tonks stated. "Leave them alone."

"I assure you, I am in better shape than your animal," Snape said with a snarl.

In a flash, Tonks had Snape's wrist twisted around his back and his face was slammed flat against the corridor wall. "Tease and insult me all that you want, Severus Snape, but if you DARE insult Remus in my hearing again, you'll find out the difference between a Dark Magic practitioner like yourself and the powers of an auror." She gave Snape a shove to separate them.

Snape sprang up and glared at Tonks, who glared back. Hermione and Harry just stared; they knew Tonks was an auror, but they had always taken her rather lightly. They wouldn't do so again.

Snape stalked off, and Tonks turned to Harry. "The password is 'kit kat.' Hermione, go with him, but make any explanations very very short."

They nodded and walked off. They heard Tonks drop Hedwig's cage, and her "Bloody 'ell."

"Harry, I meant to tell you this and, well lots of things, but we got. . . ."

"Involved?"

"Exactly," Hermione agreed. "My family is all fine, but there were a number of attacks last night. One was on us. I'm not certain where my parents are. I was brought here just before dawn, while they went with Mister Weasley. I'm sure Professor Dumbledore will mention it. I don't want to keep anything from you again, Harry, but there's just too much to tell you now."

"I'm sure there's more I should tell you, too," Harry said.

"We'll have time, I'm sure," Hermione said. After a quick glance up and down the corridor which showed them to be alone, Hermione gave Harry a quick kiss and went back to see to their baggage.

Harry took a deep breath and went up to the Headmaster's office.

The portraits made no pretense of sleep; they looked at Harry very warily. He sneered back at a few he didn't like.

"Ah, Harry; happy birthday!" Dumbledore said, coming in from an inner room.

"Thank you, sir," Harry said simply.

Dumbledore sat and gestured Harry to do so as well. Harry sat, and greeted Fawkes, who trilled at him.

"I'm afraid I have mostly bad news today. Miss Granger told you about last night?"

"Just that her house was attacked, and that she and her parents weren't harmed."

"A number of homes were attacked. We knew at least three would be -- but only the Grangers and Weasleys by name." Harry sat up straight, but didn't say anything at Dumbledore's raised hand. "The aurors defended the Grangers quite well. Minister Fudge's attitude has become . . . fairly reasonable. Six of the eight Death Eaters attacking the Grangers were captured, although Bellatrix Lestrange escaped."

Harry looked puzzled for a second, then realized the other escapee had been Snape.

Dumbledore smiled as Harry figured it out. "All nine of the Death Eaters who attacked the Burrow were also captured. All the Weasley children except Charlie were there to help defend it. Arthur is a very capable wizard, and Molly is as formidable as you might imagine."

"Even Percy?"

"Yes, even Percy was there, although I believe they are still estranged to a degree." Dumbledore's expression went even more serious. "Alas, we were not as successful defending the three other residences that actually were attacked, although Azkaban repelled an assault as well. The Lovegood's cottage has been destroyed, although they are all safe. Only one of the attacking Death Eaters was captured there. Although he is safe, Dean Thomas' Muggle family was killed."

Harry swallowed and asked, "And the third?"

"Voldemort himself was at the attack on the Creevys'. The attack started an hour after the full moon come out. He sent six werewolves in. The trick is to give them just enough Wolfsbane potion to make them easy to command, but not enough to make them preserve their mind entirely. Fortunately, the Order had three representatives there."

Harry thought about that word choice. "Remus?" he asked.

"Exactly. The werewolf's physical shape depends in part on the human's physical appearance and in part on their magical power. Four of the werewolves seem to be Muggles or squibs; the

fifth an unfortunate recent bite victim who barely left here after his Fifth year with enough qualifications to be considered a wizard. The sixth was no match for Remus. While Tom and I fought to a draw, Remus mostly intimidated the other werewolves at first. Moody . . . disposed of three of them while Remus killed two. We captured the sixth, a Muggle, who will likely be . . . destroyed. Unfortunately, Denis, his parents, and his sister were killed."

Harry winced, but asked, "And Colin?"

"Colin was bitten."

Harry closed his eyes.

"For various political reasons, which alas I do not have time to explain, I think it best if you and your friends, and Remus, leave the country for a month," Dumbledore went on.

"Meaning who?"

"Yourself, Ronald and Virginia Weasley, Hermione Granger, Dean Thomas, Colin Creevy, Luna Lovegood, and Henrietta Trowbridge."

"Won't that be hard on Dean and Colin, sir?"

"Yes, it will. It will be harder for them, especially Mister Creevy, to stay, however. His first transformation will be his hardest, especially if the Ministry is supervising him. It would be best to have his friends with him, and I understand that Mister Thomas and Miss Weasley are close friends."

"Really?" Harry knew Colin and Ginny were friends, but not that he and Dean were.

"You can probably figure out where I send you, but will ask you all not to pinpoint it. The safe house may be necessary later on. Only I know its location. Tonks is on detached duty, and will be the one traveling back and forth for supplies via portkey."

"Will we at least be able to fly?" Harry asked, standing.

"All of you may fly and practice your magic. Your O.W.L. letters will either be delivered before you go or they will go with you -- there has been some argument about how to grade the Astronomy practical. Dobby and Winky will also be going with you, and I will ask them to transport your broom with the rest of your luggage and supplies."

"Is everyone in Gryffindor, or are Luna and Henrietta in their Houses?"

"They are staying with Miss Weasley. Mister Creevy is in the Infirmary, but should be released before dinner. We will talk briefly again before dinner as well. The Gryffindor password is orange."

Harry nodded and left.

Entering the common room quietly, Harry saw Ron and Henrietta cuddled on a sofa near the unlit fireplace. Ginny and Luna occupied another sofa and were in a similar position. Hermione was nowhere to be seen.

Luna nearly leapt out of her seat and hugged Harry tightly. "We were so worried about you," she said.

Ginny hugged Harry from the other side. "We're glad you're safe."

Harry looked at them, puzzled for a moment. "Ginny," he finally said slowly, "do you. . . ."

"'Play for the other team', too? No," she said with a smile, "I play for both teams."

Harry was speechless for a few seconds, and then asked, "But what about Dean? And Justin?"

Ginny frowned. "Justin is nice, but had roving hands. I think he'd want to go too far too fast. I was helping Dean pick out something for his boyfriend."

"I'd always wondered about him," Ron said, coming over. He gave Luna a dirty look, which she ignored. "Hi, Harry."

"Hi Ron, Henrietta. Who's Dean's . . . boyfriend?"

"Colin, if you can believe that!" Ron said, shaking his head.

"He's in the infirmary now, trying to convince Colin his condition doesn't matter," Luna said simply.

"It doesn't?" Henrietta asked, surprised. When the others stared at her, she squeaked and hid behind Ron.

"It doesn't matter, because at worst it only affects Colin once a month," Luna stated.

"And if you make one remark about monthly cycles, Ron Weasley, you'll regret it!" Hermione said, marching into the room from the girls' dorms.

"So you two are a couple?" Harry asked Luna and Ginny.

"Yes," Ginny said. "I've been fighting it for months, but to heck with it." Ginny reached up and pulled the slightly taller Luna down to her and gave her a passionate kiss. Ron looked torn between anger and embarrassment. "Get used to it, Ron," Ginny said when it was over.

"Kiss Henrietta; it will make you feel better," Luna suggested.

Ron looked torn, and then glanced at Harry. Harry and Hermione exchanged a look, and Harry embraced Hermione in another soul-searing kiss.

"Wow!" Ginny said.

"It almost makes me wish I were straight -- or at least dating Hermione," Luna agreed.

"Now THAT'S passion," Henrietta said, and pulled Ron into an embrace.

About two minutes later, the three couples split apart at the sound of a throat being cleared.

It was Dean and Colin.

The two made an odd couple. Dean was slightly taller than Ron's six foot one, and built along the same trim but muscular lines. Colin was about the same height as Ginny and Hermione, between five foot one to two, and his manner had grown slightly effeminate over the previous year. Dean had been the darkest student at Hogwarts the year before; Colin made the blond Malfoy look dark. There was no mistaking their affection for each other, however, as Dean stood holding Colin up. It was clear Colin's left shoulder was still bandaged.

Harry walked over and spoke to Dean first. "I'm sorry about both your families. If there's anything I can do for either of you, let me know."

Dean said, "Thanks, Harry."

"Colin, I hope you know this doesn't change how we feel about you?"

"Being outed as gay or becoming a werewolf?" Colin asked bitterly.

Besides his workouts and Defense reading, Harry had been doing a lot of reading about leadership and thinking about his role. He might hate it, but he was a leader. That meant taking care of his people, supporting them when they needed it.

"You're both Gryffindors, and you're both my friends," Harry said. He looked into the deeply-pained eyes of Colin, who had had a crush on him for nearly four years, and knew what he had to do. He couldn't deal with his own pain; if possible, he wouldn't allow others to suffer as he did. Harry embraced Colin (careful of Colin's torn shoulder), and whispered, "I mean it, Colin. We all care for you."

Colin wrapped his arms around Harry and cried. After a few minutes, Harry drew Dean into the hug, and then helped the two to a sofa, where they cried together. Soon, the only dry eyes were Harry's; even Ron was tearing somewhat.

"You all know what happened last night?" Harry asked, and five of the seven managed to nod. Colin was still too upset, and Ginny was the one currently comforting him the most.

"Dumbledore told me they're going to send the eight of us away for the month, along with Remus, Tonks, and two elves. I don't know why; perhaps he'll explain tonight. Whatever it is, we can face it together. Alright?"

All seven nodded. "Ron, may I talk with you?"

Ron and Harry went up to their room.

"What?"

"How serious are you two?" Harry asked.

"Why do you care?"

Harry was a bit surprised at the angry tone, but he merely weighed in. "In part because we're going to be spending a month in close quarters. Hermione and I hope to be a long-term couple. Dean and Colin seem to be. I don't see Luna going for a fling, and I doubt Ginny would, either."

"Remember that embarrassing lecture we all went to right before Hermione was petrified?"

"Why Witches must Wait, and Why Wizards Should?"

"That's the one. So, we'll wait to do that. But we've done everything else."

"Everything?" Harry was surprised.

Ron shrugged. "Everything a boy and a girl can do without actually doing . . . it. When did you and Hermione get together?"

"Just today, actually."

Ron smiled. "She's a great kisser, isn't she?"

Harry wasn't going to be jealous. "She is; certainly a lot better than Cho." Harry turned serious. "Was anyone hurt last night at the Burrow?"

"It was scary," Ron admitted, "but the wards held and we had them on the run." Ron paused in thought. "They weren't very good. I mean, Wormtail might have been the most competent."

"He was there, huh?"

"He was; he seemed to be second-in-command." Ron's eyes glistened. "It was frightening, but we all came through without anything more than a few slight burns. I can't imagine how Dean and Colin feel."

"I'm surprised they didn't attack Neville, too."

Ron snorted. "His family aren't active in the fight against You-Know-Who any more, except for Neville himself. And they are Pure-Bloods. . . ."

"So are you," Harry pointed out.

"True. But everyone mistakes Dad for a lightweight and Mum as a simple witch. Well, they won't after last night! Anyway, Neville's grandmother is a pretty grand lady. There are a number of very snobbish and powerful wizarding families that hold themselves aloof from the rest of us. Make families like the Blacks and Malfoys look open and liberal. They usually don't even send their children to school; they're privately tutored! Dame Longbottom has a lot of connections with them. Torturing Neville's parents was one thing -- they were active aurors, after all. Hit at Neville at home, and those families, the entire noble wizard community in Europe, might easily come into the fight. Understand?"

Harry was about to answer when Hermione knocked at the door. "Sorry to intrude, but Professor McGonagall asked to see us." The two boys shrugged and followed her down the stairs.

"Ah, there you all are," the Professor said. Dean and Colin were just sitting down as the trio entered the room. "We are all sorry about the delay in your O.W.L.s, but there was some discussion about the scoring of the Astronomy practical." Nothing betrayed McGonagall's participation in the 'distractions' that night. "So, here are the O.W.L. results for the four of you, as well as your Hogwarts letters. If Mister Potter would see me in fifteen minutes, followed by the others at about fifteen minute intervals, with Miss Granger last? Thank you."

The four students stared at the O.W.L. envelopes while the other four stared at them. After nearly a minute, Ginny couldn't hold back any further. She tore open her Hogwarts letter, and let out a shriek. "I'm a prefect!"

The group congratulate her, and Luna, Colin, and Henrietta opened their letters as well. Neither of the other two Fifth years had been named prefects, to no one's surprise.

Ginny gestured at the O.W.L. results. "Well! Open 'em!"

The four were startled, but Harry merely handed his over to Hermione. Dean and Ron did the same. Hermione picked up a letter opener from a nearby table and read the form letters, starting with the

Ordinary Wizarding Level Results for Harry J. Potter:

Required:

Astronomy	. . . . .	.A
Charms	. . . . .	.O
Defence	. . . . .	.O*
Herbology	. . . . .	.A
History	. . . . .	.T
Potions	. . . . .	.E
Transfiguration	. . . . .	.O
Theory I	. . . . .	.E
(Potions, Herbology, Defence)		
Theory II	. . . . .	.O
(Transfiguration, Charms, Defence)		

Optional

Arithmancy	. . . . .	.Not Attempted
Care of Magical Creatures	. . . . .	.E
Divination	. . . . .	.P
Muggle Studies	. . . . .	.Not Attempted
Runes	. . . . .	.Not Attempted

***Superbly Outstanding on the Practical**

"So that's nine O.W.L.s! Including the special notation! Well done, Harry!" Hermione exclaimed, leaning over and patting his arm.

"But not good enough for the aurors," Harry pointed out. "I would have needed an O in Potions."

Required:

Astronomy. . . . .	.O*
Charms . . . . .	.O**
Defence. . . . .	.O**
Herbology. . . . .	.O*
History. . . . .	.O
Potions. . . . .	.O**
Transfiguration. . . . .	.O**
Theory I . . . . .	.O**
(Potions, Herbology, Defence)	
Theory II. . . . .	.O**
(Transfiguration, Charms, Defence) Optional	
Arithmancy . . . . .	.O**
Care of Magical Creatures. . . . .	.O*
Divination . . . . .	.Not Attempted
Muggle Studies . . . . .	.E
Runes. . . . .	.O

*Superbly Outstanding in Theory
 **Superbly Outstanding in all areas

"Wait a minute! You snuck in Muggle Studies!" Ron accused. Hermione shrugged, modestly.

"So that's thirteen O.W.L.s, twelve of them 'Outstanding'! Well done!" Harry said, leaning over and kissing Hermione lightly on the cheek, which made her blush.

Harry then stood up. "I guess I'd best see McGonagall, and see what I can do with my life," he said. His expression suddenly looked very burdened. Hermione knew he was thinking, 'If I have a life.'

Hermione stood and took Harry by the arm, leading him from the common room. As soon as they were beyond the portrait, she flung herself into his arms, kissing him soundly.

When she released him, Harry said, "Shouldn't I be kissing you? You're the genius, conqueror of the O.W.L.s."

"I saw that look, Harry. We all have to die sometime, but in your case it will be after you set a record for longevity. I am NOT going to lose you now. Understand?"

Harry smiled a smile that made Hermione's heart melt. "As long as you believe in me, and are with me, how can I doubt?" He kissed Hermione lightly, and went off to see McGonagall with a much lighter heart.

Chapter III

"Well, Mister Potter; hopefully we will be able to have an uninterrupted discussion today." Professor McGonagall was behind her desk, looking very composed, and yet satisfied.

"Yes, Ma'am," Harry agreed, again slightly depressed.

"Problem, Mister Potter?"

"Well, Professor," Harry answered, "I didn't get the O in Potions, and Ron missed the O in both Potions and Transfiguration. I guess that means auror training is out for both of us."

"I believe I was unable to fully explain the qualifications for auror training the first time we met," McGonagall said with a sniff. "The requirements are five N.E.W.T.s. All must be E or O. One must be in Defense, and at least two must be in Charms, Transfiguration, or Potions. Preferred optional fields include Basic Medicine, Muggle Studies, and either Arithmancy or Runes, but not both. You may also have one of the five N.E.W.T.s in any field. Now, Arithmancy and Runes are certainly outside your current knowledge range."

"True," Harry admitted.

"If your only acceptable choices were Charms, Defense, and Transfiguration, that would leave you two short. You have a sufficient academic background to take the Basic Medicine however, and, with some help, the personal background to make up the material for Muggle Studies. Both will be difficult, but I think you capable enough to try."

Harry smiled with relief. "Thank you, Professor."

"Don't thank me yet!" McGonagall warned. "There is a certain student who, somewhat surprisingly, received only an A O.W.L. in Transfiguration. I have agreed to take him on if Professor Snape accepted you in Potions, which he did this morning with rather less grace than, well, never mind that." She waved the problem away. "That will give you six chances to earn the five N.E.W.T.s, and an extra chance to earn those in the required fields. You may feel it better to try Creatures instead of Potions, or even Muggle Studies, or Creatures. That would still give you six chances to earn the five required in total, but just five to earn the three in required fields." She hesitated and said, "No offense, Mister Potter, but I do not think it wise for you to take seven classes."

"I agree, Professor!. Doesn't the Basic Medicine include most of the auror material on potions, other than the actual making of poisons?" Harry asked. He had read the course descriptions many times. "Even more so than the Advanced Potions?"

"It does," McGonagall replied, glad he had looked over the material "Still, I am willing to tutor you regularly in any class other than the Muggle Studies."

"Could I ask you a really large favor instead, Professor?"

"If Miss Granger, and especially you, are willing to work with him, I will admit Mister Weasley to the class. He will NOT be eligible for Advanced Potions."

That made Harry pause. He realized McGonagall wanted HIM to help Ron because it would help Harry stay on top of the material, and so that Hermione wouldn't be too burdened. She, of course, would take the full seven courses. "Thank you, Professor." He thought a moment. "When do I have to decide?"

"Ideally, now. I understand, however, you might wish to confer with Professor Dumbledore and Miss Granger before any final decisions."

Harry blushed slightly. which made McGonagall smile. While she had no objection to either Ginny Weasley or Luna Lovegood, she thought Hermione a better match for Harry, and Harry a better match for Hermione than Ron Weasley. She was very glad that Cho Chang was out of the picture. This pair were her favorite students in over a generation.

"I will of course take Defense, Transfiguration, and Charms," Harry finally said. "And I think I should take Basic Medicine and the Muggle Studies. Do you know if Professor Snape is going to be coaching me on Occlumency this year?"

"He is not," McGonagall said firmly. "The Headmaster and the new Defense professor will be. I wish I could tell you who it will be, but you know the Headmaster enjoys his little surprises."

"Other than the fact it gives me a very unlikely fall-back chance at a N.E.W.T., why should I take Potions instead of Creatures? Especially considering my, well. . . ."

"Usual academic performance? Or your rocky history with a certain member of the staff?"

"Both," Harry admitted.

'There's the honest Harry that makes him one of my favorite students,' she thought. "You are NOT to repeat this to anyone, not Miss Granger, Mister Weasley, Remus Lupin, or even the Headmaster. Understand?"

Harry nodded. "Yes, Ma'am."

"If you take Potions, I must take Mister Malfoy. Professor Snape's treatment of you will partially determine Mister Malfoy's continuation in my class. Other than that . . . may I make a personal observation?"

"Of course, Professor."

"You are . . . now seeing Miss Granger?"

"Yes, I am."

McGonagall smiled at Harry's defiant look. "I do not disapprove as such, Mister Potter. Miss Granger is the most outstanding student I have seen at Hogwarts since . . . well, we don't talk about a young man a few years behind me, do we? At least not by name?"

"Not usually by title, anyway," Harry agreed, realizing she meant Riddle/Voldemort.

McGonagall smiled. "There is only one thing I worry about when it comes to you and Miss Granger. Should your relationship . . . blossom, I worry you might both be lost into the Muggle world. I am a Pure-Blood, Mister Potter, but I do NOT believe any of the nonsense the various anti-Muggle prophets have spouted about blood. But heritage is a bit different. I worry that when any two Muggle-raised children fall in love that they are losing something -- the heritage of the wizarding world."

Harry had heard much the same, even in strident members of the DA the year before. He didn't totally agree, but even he and Hermione had some sympathy with the problem. "Maybe there should be a one year course, done during the Second year, for people like me, then. That's not my idea; Hermione has mentioned it a few times. Percy Weasley did, too." He hesitated.

"Yes?"

"Not meaning to bad-mouth a professor. . . ."

"Go on. I shall keep it in confidence."

"Shouldn't Professor Binns be doing this in class anyway? And lecturing the Pure-Bloods and such on how dependent the wizarding world is on Muggle manufacturing and food?"

"Miss Granger again, no doubt?"

"And Mister Weasley," Harry acknowledged.

"Professor Binns will teach as he thinks best," McGonagall said, although she didn't look terribly pleased by having to say it. "However, the idea of a Second year class, split to help both types of students, has merit. I shall discuss it with Miss Granger. However, we have gone off subject." She paused for just a moment. "All things considered, I think I shall advise you NOT to take Potions after all."

"Thank you, Professor." Harry suddenly smiled a devilish smile. "Would it be so bad having Professor Snape owing you a major favor?"

McGonagall returned the smile. "As a matter of fact, no. It would not. Just one more matter before you run off and see the Headmaster."

"Yes, Professor?"

"You are restored to the Quidditch team as seeker. Miss Weasley has requested to move to chaser, if you have no objection?"

"No, I don't. She's brilliant."

"Now, that means you, Miss Bell, and Mister and Miss Weasley are returning. The two temporary beaters have both indicated a preference for not playing if anyone better can be found. That will be the responsibility of the captain. Miss Bell does not want to be captain, as she will be the next Head Girl. Should I consider you?"

Harry thought a moment. "No, I think Ron would do a much better job."

"I thought so, too, but the Headmaster thought I should consult with you." Harry looked very embarrassed. "Do you agree it might be best if Mister Weasley doesn't know about this?"

"You might mention you asked me my opinion of him as captain and I said I thought he'd be the best person for the job."

"Very well. Off with you, then."

"Thank you, for everything, Professor," Harry said as he left.

After Harry had greeted Fawkes, refused three different types of sweets, and sat down, Dumbledore got to the point.

"Harry, we now have evidence that Voldemort's plan is currently three-fold. one) to draw you out into the open where he can kill you; two) to free his followers in Azkaban; three) to force his followers to declare themselves. Your telling Mrs. Lestranger about Tom Riddle's heritage was a move I hadn't thought of. Six Death Eaters have turned themselves in and nine have been killed before they were able to surrender. His best hope for drumming up support in the near term is to kill either you or myself. He failed to kill me last night, and that news will be in The Daily Prophet tomorrow, along with the news that you are out of reach, where only I know. This may cause a split within the remaining Death Eaters, it may not, but it is worth the chance. While the protections you had at your Aunt's would still protect you, it is possible that if he is desperate, he might figure out a way for hired Muggles to harm you."

"What?"

"The subject has been raised," Dumbledore said. "This should cut such an idea from being pursued. Needless to say, your relatives will be protected from Muggle attack while you are gone and at school."

"I see. Thank you for telling me, sir."

"You are welcome, Harry. I shall try to earn back some of your trust this year." Harry wasn't certain how to answer that comment, but fortunately Dumbledore went on. "Are you willing to run a Defense Association again this year, Harry?"

"If Hermione has the time to help me. It wouldn't work, otherwise."

"Very true. If so, we will discuss the details the afternoon you come back for the start of term. We will find you a good space in the dungeons. Now, Remus needs to talk to you. He is in his old office at the moment. He has been trapping bogwarts for the new Defense teacher next year."

Harry thanked the headmaster, and went off to find Remus.

"Come in!" Remus called out in response to Harry knock. "Good afternoon, Harry."

"Dumbledore said you wanted to see me?"

"Yes, just a moment." Remus went over to the mostly bare desk and opened his shabby briefcase. "Sirius has been officially cleared, and his last will has been approved. You and Tonks split the real estate, stocks, bonds, and such of the Black holdings in half. You, Tonks, and I split the liquid assets. You receive eighty percent, Tonks and I receive ten each. Now, I can't tell you where we're going, because I'm not certain myself. Tonks and I will be able to leave via an open portkey to shop -- that's one that may be reused. I hate to ask it, but. . . ."

"You need to use some of that money?"

"No, I don't HAVE to use your money. However, I think it's time you have decent clothes. I know you have enough money to cover it in your current account, and it will take a week or so for us to access Sirius' cash."

"True." Harry clearly hesitated, so Remus didn't suggest anything. Finally, after looking at how he was dressed in Dudley's cast-offs, Harry said, "What about the others? Did Dean and Colin lose everything?"

"Just about. They at least have last year's school clothes and their wands."

"Get me whatever you want. Ask Hermione for suggestions if you need any. I need three good pairs of trainers for running and some sweats. Beyond that, go crazy. Get. . . ." Harry paused while Remus picked up a quill and parchment. "I think it's time to make at least a small dent in that huge pile of gold. Get Colin and Dean everything they need. Get all of our school things, even for Henrietta. Books, parchment, quills, ink, et cetera. Get Hermione lots of extra parchment and ink. Get Ginny a Cleansweep like Ron's. Get the other's Cleansweep All Weathers if they need a broom, and include yourself, if that awful thing you rode last year is all you have."

Remus's ears flushed a little. "Alright. Anything else?"

"Ron and I need owl treats; Hermione will also need supplies for Crookshanks. Does Henrietta have a pet?"

"A puffskein, so that doesn't require much."

"I really need new glasses, but there's not much we can do about that, is there?"

Remus shrugged. "Perhaps. I'll look into it."

"I need everything. Underwear, socks, trousers and jeans, shirts, uniforms, robes, a new hat, a new cloak, new Quidditch gear, a few jumpers. . . ."

"Alright, I get the idea! I need your measurements. Where we're going the sizes are a bit different." Harry stood still for several minutes while Remus took measurements.

"Remus?" Harry finally asked.

"Yes?" he asked, scribbling down more ideas.

"Could I ask you to get some things . . . that are special?"

"Of course, Harry. What?"

Harry took a scrape of parchment and wrote down his ideas. Remus took it, and smiled. "I'll take care of this. Now, sign these forms. The first acknowledge your taking possession of the inheritance, the second add the liquid assets to your Gringotts vault. The third gives you access to part of the money for bank drafts, and I'll have to ask you to sign for the costs."

"That's alright." Harry looked at Remus. "I need to make a will."

"If it's simple, I can help. Since you're underage, it does need to be witnessed by four adult wizards or witches who do not directly benefit."

"Fine. I'll jot down some ideas."

"I'll get the other boys' measurements. I'll see you at dinner shortly."

"Is Tonks getting the girls'?"

"Yes; they should be up in Gryffindor."

"See you later." Harry went off to find Tonks.

Dinner was very light that evening. "I'm sorry if you feel this isn't our usual fine dinner," Dumbledore explained, looking with amusement at Ron's very disappointed expression. "You are going to a very different time zone. You'll take a small draught of a potion, and after a short nap it will seem like it is much earlier in the day. You will all have opportunities to fly, exercise, practice house-hold magic, and any other type of magic your supervisors, Mister Lupin and Miss Tonks, deem appropriate. This will remove all of you from danger for the month. You will return before the afternoon of the first of September. You may or may not receive mail, but you will not be allowed to send any." He looked at them. "I trust you will keep your two owls under control?" Harry and Ron nodded.

Dumbledore raised a cautionary finger. "As you are four boys and four girls, I ask you all to remember the lectures you received during your Second year." All eight rolled their eyes in near unison. "Very good. Please stand up." The eight students stood, as did Tonks and Remus. "Off you go."

And the ten found themselves in a meadow.

"Wow," Harry and Ginny said.

"Wicked," Ron agreed.

Then they turned around. "We're all going to live in that!?" Harry stated in shock.

"I would think it's enchanted," Hermione said. "But I admit, that would have to be . . . majorly enchanted."

It was a small log cabin, perhaps thirty feet long and eighteen feet wide, with a small loft over it and a chimney at each end. There were a few small out buildings -- a woodshed, what appeared to Hermione as a food cache on stilts, and, most disturbingly, an outhouse. Entering -- all that they saw was an open space with a fireplace at one end and a wood cooking stove at the other. A sleeping loft ran most of the way above the center of the room, a ladder at each end. A table with four chairs and a stuffed chair and a sofa completed the decor.

All eight students stared at Remus and Tonks, and then Harry asked, "Where does that door lead?"

"Just a cellar," Remus answered. "Dirt floor and storage."

"Where ELSE does it lead?"

"Why look there, if anywhere, for a magical entrance?" Remus asked.

"All the wood in here are plain logs," Harry retorted. "Even I can see that there are symbols or something carved into the door frame."

"Really?" Remus asked, puzzled. He turned, and saw nothing. "I don't see anything."

Neither did anyone else. Harry went over and when the rest got close enough, they didn't see symbols, but they did see what Harry meant. To the others, they looked like natural curves and depressions in the wood. Harry easily traced them, and Luna picked out the last few, once she knew what to look for.

"Well, it's supposed to be impossible for anyone to see like that, but Harry's right. There are three hidden levels, one in the basement and two above us." He pointed out where to touch. "The basement has a small gym and some storage, plus rooms for the elves. The first level has a kitchen, living room, and library, plus a master suite. Tonks and I will be there. The second level has four smaller suites -- bedroom with two beds, two desks, two closets, and a large bookcase, plus a large bath. Here are the adjustment potions. Use the bathroom if you have to, then get on your beds and drink the potion. In five to ten minutes, you'll fall asleep. When you wake up, it feel like just after noon. The elves will have everything arranged by then. Off you go."

Ron grabbed Henrietta's hand and they charged up the stairs, giggling. "Ron!" Hermione scolded, chasing after him. "What the devil do you think you're doing!" The other students laughed and followed them up the stairs.

"Hermione!" Ron was trying to say, but he made no headway against Hermione's diatribe on responsibility and maturity.

"I rather think now would be a very good time to find our room, dear heart," Luna said to Ginny, ignoring Hermione. Luna held out her hand, which Ginny took. They chose the furthest bedroom.

"Looks like an idea worthy of a Ravenclaw," Dean said gravely. He smiled and picked Colin up in his arms. Colin wrapped his arms around Dean's neck. "Why, Rhett," Colin said in a poor Southern accent. "What ever could you be thinking?" He batted his eyelashes.

"Frankly, my dear, I know you'll give a damn." He carried Colin into the nearest bedroom and kicked the door shut.

Hermione had paid no attention, but continued to lecture Ron. Harry came up behind her and whispered in her ear. Hermione stopped in mid-sentence. "What did you say?"

Harry whispered in her ear again, picked Hermione up in his arms, and carried her to the other further bedroom.

Ron turned to Henrietta, turning a very bright red. "Err. . . ."

"No you don't, Ron Weasley," Henrietta said firmly. "You chose the bed, now we're going to lie in it." She grabbed his hand and dragged him into the remaining bedroom.

Chapter IV

Hermione woke up feeling warm and secure. This puzzled her drowsy mind, for she had the distinct feeling that she should be cold and she knew, even in this state, that she had not felt secure since before Christmas.

She tried taking a deep breath, and the pain on her left side told her she was not dreaming. The agony of early June was down to a dull throb whenever she breathed too deeply, but it was still there.

A slight movement brought her up against a solid warmth, far too large to be Crookshanks. Finally opening her eyes, she was confronted by the sleeping form of Harry Potter. Hermione gave a little jump, and blinked. Memories of the previous days crowded through her mind. Tonks, leading a troop of aurors into the Granger house during the early evening of July 30. Standing guard in the bathroom, wand out, while her parents sat on the edge of the tub, as sounds of a fight drifted in shortly after midnight. Her parents' amazement at being portkeyed into Hogwarts (Sir Nicholas had not helped matter much with his introduction). Saying goodbye to her parents after they had had a brief consultation with Dumbledore and Mr. Weasley shortly after dawn. Being dragged by Tonks on 'an errand of mercy' after at most two hours sleep, which turned out to be moving Harry from his awful relatives.

Harry. Harry saying she was "a fussy know-it-all, but I always knew you were a very cute one." Harry; the one person she needed to comfort and be comforted by. The one whose arms made her feel safe and, yes, loved.

Hermione closed her eyes, trying to think about their first shared kisses. Instead, the Prophecy imposed itself, but then resolved itself into Harry falling asleep in her arms, his head nestled between her breasts on his narrow hard cot.

Hermione was not a very sentimental young woman, and as yet had few maternal instincts. The exception were her feelings for Harry. Just as Harry wanted to protect her (and, it seemed, everyone else on the planet), she needed to help and protect him.

Why was it she could resist anything except Harry? That had been true as early as their First year. Anything Harry might want to do, she might object to, but in the end, she would go along if it was what Harry really wanted.

Like sharing a room with him for a month.

On one level, Hermione believed this to be wrong, or at least both too soon and that it would appear wrong. No doubt Harry had been right; Dean and Colin needed to be together, considering their recent bereavement and Colin's condition. Yes, it would then be difficult to separate Luna and Ginny.

Henrietta was not any of her concern, but no doubt she and Ron would be spending time in one room or the other, and if they took over the boys' room Harry would end up with Hermione anyway. And she did want to spend every second possible with Harry.

Harry. The boy that she had been in love with all along, despite a flirtation with Viktor and an infatuation with Ron.

It seemed so reasonable when Harry had whispered it in her ear. And Hermione knew she could trust Harry not to take advantage of her. Remus and Tonks wouldn't object. Society would never know.

What was the problem, other than a slightly old-fashioned middle-class Muggle up-bringing?

Hermione opened her eyes, and looked at the boy, no young man, she loved. She acknowledged that perhaps the main problem was that she didn't fully trust herself. She had kissed Harry more passionately, and probably for a greater total time, in one day than she had Ron and Viktor in total. The time adjustment potion had taken less than ten minutes to work, and they had spent that time in each other's arms. When Harry had kissed her neck, she had felt like the heroine of one of the cheap romances her mother (and she) read in semi-secret.

She should stop this right now, Hermione decided. She took a deep breath and focused on Harry.

And his green eyes were looking back. They showed the pain, the burdens, that Harry carried. Hermione had grieved over the previous years as she had seen that haunted look grow in his expressions. But then she saw Harry focus on her as well, and the pain and burdens disappeared. Instead, Harry's new expression was one of total commitment and tender love. Feelings for her.

Harry had always been the most guarded person she knew. Occasional flashes, shown only to her and Ron and perhaps Luna, showed how Harry would have been without the abuse and pressures. And now, Harry was, just slightly, lowering his defenses to let her in, if she would lower hers and let him fully into her life, into soul. Perhaps, even, into her body.

Hermione Granger thought fast. She filled a logic tree in her mind, and made what she decided was the best decision for herself and for Harry.

Hermione reached over and wrapped her right arm around Harry's shoulders and urged him forward. Their lips met, and then their tongues. Harry's arm stroked Hermione's back through her jumper.

Hermione broke the kiss. "Harry," she whispered, "if we're actually going to do this, especially this fast. . . ." She chewed her lower lip and looked at him.

"I love you, Hermione," Harry said simply. "I'm yours, if you will have me. If you make the same . . . pledge, then I'll leave it to you to set the pace. We can stop where we are, we can go forward as fast or slow as you want. As long as we'll be together, the details don't matter to me."

Hermione saw the unspoken thought, 'I need you, but I can't ask.' "I love you, Harry Potter. I am yours. I accept your pledge." They kissed for ten minutes, until Ron pounded on their door, telling them it was lunch and he was hungry.

Lunch was a grave disappointment to Ron, since it was just bowls of French onion soup. "Did we go forwards or backwards through the time zones?" Harry asked.

"Why does it matter?" Remus asked.

"Because if it was backwards, it's still my birthday. Tonks and Dumbledore promised presents."

Remus smiled. "Good point. They're behind the far sofa."

Harry made a bee-line for the sofa. "You might as well go, too," Remus told Ron. "No cake until after dinner."

"Here, if you're still hungry have a fairy cake" Harry said, tossing Ron one of the dozen cupcakes he had just unwrapped. Ginny rolled her eyes, which clued in Hermione and Luna.

Ron suddenly turned into a tall version of Ginny. "What the . . . ! AAAARRGGH!"

"Ah," Harry said simply. "I thought that was George's handwriting."

"Fairy fairie cakes," Ginny said. "Turns you into the other gender for thirty minutes. 'Experience the other team,' price, two Galleons."

Harry gave one to each person. "Don't ask; don't tell," he said simply. He opened Ron's present next. "Thanks!" Harry said. "I can't wait to fly again." Ron had given him refills for his broom care kit.

"No need to polish your broomstick now, is there?" female Ron said in a mid-range alto.

"Colin?" Harry asked. He had noticed the boy had been handed a box by Remus, and sure enough, Colin again was armed with a camera.

"Let's see some cleavage, Ronnie," Colin teased, snapping a picture.

"Cad," Ron growled.

"Beautiful!" Harry said, holding up a small crystal figure. It was a flyer on a broomstick. "Thank you, Luna." Harry smiled as he looked at the figure; it was easy to see he saw himself in the slim figure on the broom.

Hermione leaned over and kissed Luna's cheek, whispering, "Brilliant!"

"Lips off, she's mine!" Ginny teased. She turned to Harry. "I helped bake the fairy cakes, Harry. They're a lot of fun!"

"They certainly are," Luna agreed.

Ron buried his/her head on Henrietta's shoulder. "I don't want to know!"

There was a box of fudge from Hagrid that looked almost edible for once, cards from the Weasleys and Mrs. Figg, a long multi-colored muffler from Dobby, books on defense from Remus, Tonks, and Hermione, and the official notification on the lifting of his flying and Quidditch bans from the Ministry.

"Sorry we didn't get you anything," Dean said at one point.

"Not a problem," Harry assured them.

Fred and George had also sent along a day-time firework, which turned out to be a red dragon that lasted five minutes, cavorting around the sky. It was while they were outside that Ron reverted to himself.

"Sure all the bits readjusted?" Dean teased.

"All the little bits?" Ginny added.

Ron made a 'Hurmph' sound and started to march around the corner of the cabin with Henrietta, presumably to check on things.

"Wait a moment," Remus said. "First, take a good look around."

The group was in a largish valley, some 12 miles long and two to five miles wide. The mountains around it were high, and two were actually snow-capped. The northern and southern thirds of the valley were heavily forested, as was the eastern side. There was an open grassland and shrub-land extending some four by three miles, with the cabin off towards the western edge. Part of it was flat and the vegetation was cut short, making it look like a rough landing strip to the Muggle-raised.

"Have your wands with you at all times. There are both black and brown bears in the forests; do NOT go in there. There is a small river on the western edge of the valley; don't try and cross it or the stream to the east. As you can see, the clouds are moving in; it should rain most of today and tonight, but it should be over by morning. It actually doesn't rain too much here this time of year, so with a little luck, we'll have nicer weather the rest of the month. So let's go in for today. With luck, part of your purchases will be here tomorrow, the rest tomorrow or Sunday."

"Can't we stay out until it rains?" Ron asked.

"Alright, but this should be a thunder storm, so no flying." Ginny, Luna, Dean, and Colin followed Remus and Tonks in, while Ron took a direct path to the wood shed, pulling a teasingly resistant Henrietta behind him.

Harry hesitantly held out his hand. Hermione considered briefly, and then took a hold of it.

"Feels a bit odd, doesn't it?" Harry asked as they walked away in an expanding spiral.

"Holding hands with me?" Hermione asked.

"Not with you, just . . . feeling free enough to hold hands in the open."

"We're not ones noted for PDA's, are we?"

Harry was puzzled. "PDA's?"

"Something of an American term, I think. It's so hard to keep up with Muggle slang, let alone telly-talk," Hermione said, somewhat wistfully. "Anyway, it means Public Displays of Affection. We are both . . . reserved."

"I would say that we should have tried to keep . . . us a secret," Harry said, "but nothing could make you much more of a target, could it?"

"No," Hermione agreed. "Professor Dumbledore told my parents that someone, probably Malfoy, had put tracking spells on our trunks. They should be fairly safe for now . . . as long as I stay away from them."

"I'm sorry, Hermione."

"It's not really your fault in any way, Harry," Hermione pointed out.

"I can still be sorry you can't see your parents," Harry answered.

"True," Hermione acknowledged. "And I have good friends, like Ginny, Luna, and Ron. And best of all, I have you, Harry."

Harry stopped them. "Yes, you do. Are we going to fight our inhibitions or struggle against PDA's?"

Hermione chewed her lower lip. "Holding hands, light kisses?"

"And how do we define 'public'?" Harry teased.

"Out amongst strangers, I guess," Hermione said. "I hate to remind you, Harry, but you are a public figure. No matter what you do, you're news." She grimaced. "Skeeter will be awful, if she has the chance."

"True." Harry glanced up. "I guess we should walk back. There are some things we need to talk about."

Hermione took Harry's hand. "Alright. Let's go."

The wind had picked up drastically, the temperature had dropped more than ten degrees from the mid-70s it had been, and the thunder was approaching as they entered the cabin. Harry led Hermione to the tattered sofa.

Harry checked to see if there was a flue to open (there wasn't) and laid a fire. A flick of his wand set the small fire going. He sat on the sofa, and pulled Hermione to him.

"What did we need to talk about?" Hermione asked.

"N.E.W.T. classes and the DA," Harry said.

"Professor Dumbledore said that we should do the DA as a club, Fourth years and above, with you and me in charge," Hermione said. "I agreed, if you agreed as well."

"I said pretty much the same," Harry said. "We'll have to decide how to get it to work."

"We'll work it out," Hermione said in a serene voice that would have done Luna credit. "What classes did you decide on?"

"Defense, Transfiguration, Charms, Basic Medicine, Muggle Studies, and Care. You?"

"Defense, Transfiguration, Charms, Basic Medicine, Arithmancy, Runes, and Care of Magical Creatures," she said simply.

"Why Creatures instead of Potions?" Harry asked.

"I looked over the curriculum," Hermione told him. "There are no new techniques I actually need to learn, and none of the potions seem terribly interesting, since I doubt I'll ever have the time to brew them. I prefer Creatures, in case I can use the information for S.P.E.W."

"Hermione, you have GOT to change the name. I know Ron came up with the idea first, but why not E.L.F.? Elf Liberation or Liberty Foundation, instead of Front? Set it up as . . . as, what-do-you call them? those Muggle groups that just study political and economic questions?"

"Think Tanks?" Hermione asked.

"Exactly. Lots of those are Foundations. It sounds more . . . solid and respectable than Front." Harry smiled. "Even Uncle Vernon says there's nothing like impressive stationary to make people think you're respectable."

"Good point," Hermione conceded. "Elves' Liberty Foundation? Maybe. What position can I put you down for?"

Harry grinned. "Patron, of course. Use my fame; for once I won't complain. From the papers I got from Remus, I'd say I can easily afford a ten to twenty-five thousand Galleon donation upfront and at least five thousand a year for staffing and such."

"Meaning me?" Hermione asked.

"If you mean to do it full time. I rather think it will be more part-time. If so, you'll need a mail drop if not an office, and at least a part-time secretary."

"I'll think about it," Hermione said, turning away from Harry and leaning back against him. Harry put his arms around her, and they sat in silence, watching the fire until it was time for a late dinner.

After an evening of exploding snap, the couples shyly (except for Remus and Tonks, who were more eager than shy) went to their rooms. Luna and Ginny went giggling, which was fairly out-of-their-usual behavior for them. Dean was the most quiet, Colin was the most obviously embarrassed, and Ron the most nervous. Henrietta was more giggly than Ginny and Luna combined, and nearly as embarrassed as Colin and almost as nervous as Ron.

Harry seemed the coolest and most at ease. Hermione seemed the most normal. Both were excellent facades. Compared to a Quidditch match, putting on a show here was easy for Harry. Inside, his stomach was twisted into knots. Hermione's mind for once was blank -- unwilling to think what decisions she might soon have to make.

The group broke up at 7:30, and Harry shut the bedroom door and turned to face Hermione. Both had dropped their masks of assurance, and looked terrified. They looked at each other for several seconds, and then Harry burst out laughing. Hermione followed.

"Do you want to shower first?" Harry asked.

Hermione saw the unexpressed question, and saw Harry was as afraid she was that she would say, 'No, let's take it together.' Instead, she said, "That might be best, tonight." Harry smiled.

"I wonder where my new pajamas are," Hermione said. Winky had merely announced that some of the clothes had arrived and were already put away. She saw that one of the elves had exchanged one tall dresser for a vanity dresser, and she went to it. She paused when she got close to the mirror. She eyed it carefully, but it made no comments.

Hermione opened a drawer and drew in a deep breath that really hurt. "Harry . . . did you have anything to do with this?"

"Do you mind?" Harry asked, now worried. "I knew you had lost nearly everything."

Hermione pulled out a translucent dark orange silk teddy, a pair of dark green long silk pajamas, and a pair of light lavender silk summer pajamas (shorts and loose pull-over top). "Everything . . . everything I didn't have in my two charmed trunks." Hermione teared up. "I didn't lose any of my Hogwarts things, thank goodness, but I . . . I lost all my Muggle books, and photos, and . . . and. . . ." Hermione started crying.

Harry quickly moved to hold her. Hermione cried for several minutes. Over the last 42 hours, Hermione had had two hours of sleep and the time adjustment potion. The stresses of the attack, leaving her parents, acknowledging her love, deciding her classes, and having to live in hiding for a month came home to her.

"Did I do something wrong, or is it just all that's happened?" Harry asked.

"Just . . . everything," Hermione sniffled. "And you're so thoughtful." She smiled. "I love silk, but I've never really owned much." She kissed Harry. "Which should I wear?"

"It should be warm enough for these," Harry said, pointing to the lavender. Hermione shook her head, and ducked into the bathroom. She came out a mere fifteen minutes later, her hair dried with a spell that made it even wavier and fuller than usual.

Hermione regarded Harry's open-mouthed stare and thought, 'I hope that's good shock, not bad,' she thought.

"You're incredibly beautiful, but you're too thin," Harry said.

"You should talk; this is the first summer you haven't been emaciated," Hermione retorted.

"Seriously, Hermione," Harry said, concern in his voice, "please, come running with me in the mornings. You're brilliant, but you need more exercise. You can do every spell there is, but you know how exhausting a fight can be. We all need to be in good shape. You need to eat more protein, too. You are beautiful, but we need to get a little more muscle on you. It might help with those pains you have when you take a deep breath."

"How . . . who told you?"

"No one told me," Harry told her. "I can hear you suppress a groan every time you take a deep breath. We're luckier than Muggles, Hermione. Instead of sixty or seventy more years, with luck we might have a hundred and sixty more years together."

"Alright, alright; I'll exercise. Tomorrow morning, I'll make out a schedule for the month. Half an hour. Okay?"

"Half an hour for you, a full hour for me, plus a half hour workout in the cellar afterwards."

"Alright," Hermione said, refusing to argue. "Go shower."

When Harry came out, just wearing plain boxers, he found all the candles and lamps off, except for one small candle on Harry's taller dresser. "Hermione," Harry started to ask tentatively, when he saw she had moved the pillows from the nearer bed to the one she was in. That answered his question.

Harry slipped in under the sheet, and flowed right into Hermione's embrace. Coming out of the deep kiss, Harry said, "I love you; you bewitched me slowly over the years. I can't live without you."

A few minutes later, Hermione said, "I don't know why, but you make me throw caution away."

Several minutes later, Harry reluctantly moved away from Hermione. "If we don't stop now. . . ." Harry warned.

Hermione reached down into Harry's shorts. "I intend to stay a virgin until we leave Hogwarts," she said, "but other than that, like I said, with you I throw common sense and caution away."

"If you're going to keep doing that, we need a handkerchief or something."

Hermione kissed Harry's ear. "No we don't." She licked down Harry's neck and then lower.

Chapter V

Thursday, August 1, 1996

Hermione woke up to a hand gently rubbing her silk-covered back. It seemed to instinctively find the small areas of tension and rub them into relaxation. "I like that," Hermione said softly.

"We have about twenty minutes before we have to go running with Tonks," Harry said equally softly. He flung the sheet off them, and moved to rub and massage Hermione's thin thighs and calves. Hermione had gown two inches over the previous two years, most of it in her legs. She was small-boned, ate enough but no more than she needed, and was not keen on exercise. Still a shade under 5 foot 2, she weighed in at a mere 6 stone 9 (93 pounds). While not unhealthy for her very small-boned frame, she knew Harry was right, and that she could stand to add some muscle to her body. While finally happy with her teeth, she still felt her mouth was too wide, her eyes too brown and large, her nose too short, her hair too frizzy and wild. Nearly any one else would simply look and say, 'Adorable!'

Harry knew all that, and had always thought Hermione attractive. As much as he appreciated her beauty, however, he had always cared more for her personality, intelligence, sympathy, and friendship.

"Oh, Merlin!" Hermione groaned as Harry moved to massage her feet.

"You have perfect feet," Harry remarked objectively.

"Really?" Hermione asked.

"Must be those sensible shoes," he teased.

"Git!" Hermione said, sitting up and kissing him lightly. "Do you want the bathroom first?"

"I'll be out in less than five minutes."

They were downstairs a little before 6:30, where they found Tonks and Remus waiting. "You too, Hermione?" Remus asked, grumpily.

"You're the one who claims to be in perfect shape," Tonks teased.

"Well, I'm not," Hermione admitted. "Or at least I'm not in training. I think I'm going to hate this."

Remus ignored them. "You two have your wands?"

They did, in sleeve holsters. "Good. First, we'll do our stretches. Then you two take off. Hermione and I will follow at a more . . . decorous pace."

An hour later, Hermione had long since gone down to a walk, and then sat on a log near the woodshed. Remus had done the same not long after. Right at the hour point, however, Tonks gave up. Harry jogged in place and teased her, "So, another fifteen minutes and then half an hour in the gym, or forty-five minutes in the gym?"

Hermione forced herself up, "Slow jog, Harry, very slow jog."

Harry smiled, "No, let's try out the gym." He held out his hand, and they walked towards the cabin together.

"Damn; he's worked harder this last month than I thought," Tonks said as they went in.

Harry only worked out in the gym for fifteen minutes, punching the heavy bag while Hermione mostly watched. They ducked into their shower for brief separate showers. Everyone was at breakfast at 8:10. Hermione found herself eating a second rasher of bacon. Her legs and side ached, but she also felt alive, and slightly closer to Harry.

"May I do anyone else's work schedules?" Hermione asked towards the end of the meal.

"I don't think so," Ron said. "I know, I wouldn't have done as well as I did on the O.W.L.s without your help, but I know now I'm not going to make auror, so I'm not even going to try."

"You turned down McGonagall's offer?" Harry asked.

"She offered to let you in, and you turned it down?" Hermione asked, shocked.

"You and Harry would have had to nurse me along," Ron said somewhat angrily. "The odds were so against my making the required N.E.W.T.s, it wasn't worth trying."

"So what are you taking?" Harry asked in such a natural, neutral tone that Ron was diverted. Harry had placed a restraining hand on Hermione's arm, and she decided that any intervention she made would only set Ron off.

"The N.E.W.T classes in Charms, Defense, Creatures, Herbology, and Divination," Ron said. "My O.W.L.s will get me into the Ministry. Any N.E.W.T.s will just help me start at a higher level. I'll also take that course on Ministry regulations. It'll be boring, but any N.E.W.T. there will help me get a really decent job. And no, I'm NOT following Percy; I'm following Dad."

"I don't know a finer man to follow," Remus said. "What about you, Dean?"

"I really want to go to art school," Dean said. "If I get my Muggle degree, and manage any N.E.W.T. level in Charms, I can apply for an apprenticeship within the magical art guild. I'm going to do Defense and Charms, and I'm thinking about several others. Mister Johnston -- he's a guild member in Hogsmeade -- has agreed to take me on for drawing lessons, and I might be taking the Household Potions class."

"How about you, Harry?" Colin asked.

Hoping it wouldn't set Ron off, Harry said, "Defense, Transfiguration, Charms, Basic Medicine, Muggle Studies, and Care."

"Does that give you a shot at auror training?" Ron asked. "I mean without the Potions?"

"A shot," Harry said. "It would have been better to do the Potions instead of Care of Creatures, but Snape would have been unbearable."

"I agree," Hermione said quietly. "I'm doing Defense, Transfiguration, Charms, Basic Medicine, Arithmancy, Runes, and Care," she added.

"So you're all taking Defense?" Henrietta asked.

"Absolutely," Dean said. He looked at Harry. "Harry won't fight alone."

"But . . . the Ministry is involved now!"

There was a collective snort from all around the table.

"If the Ministry was really efficient, we wouldn't be here," Ginny almost snarled.

Luna placed her hand on Ginny's shoulder to calm her. "The burden is on Harry. It is our duty, and our honor and pleasure, to support him." She said it with a warmth and conviction that no one could doubt she meant every word.

Harry stayed to talk with Remus and the rest of the group broke up. Hermione went back to the bedroom to start working out schedules and to write in her diary. Harry came in over an hour later.

"What were you and Remus doing?" she asked, looking up.

"Going over the holdings of the Potter Trust and what I inherited from Sirius," Harry said, "and then making out my will."

"Oh, Harry!"

"Hermione, Voldemort or one of his followers might just kill me, in which case it won't matter. Or I might kill him, in which case it won't matter, hopefully, for many decades. But we might both die, or I might kill him and one of his followers could still manage to kill me. Then, it matters."

"Oh," she said. Hermione understood. If Voldemort triumphed, all arrangements any of his enemies made would be moot. "Well, I know you'll win, so it doesn't matter."

Harry smiled at her faith. "What are you doing?"

"Writing in my diary, and no, you may not read it."

"Enchanted, is it?" Harry teased.

"Actually, yes," she said, scribbling a few words and closing it. She held it out to him. "Go on, you can't read anything without the password."

Harry took it and looked at it. "You've had this since First year, haven't you? I knew you were keeping a journal of some sort; I didn't know it was enchanted." He arched his eyebrow. "You do know where its brain is, right?"

"In the back of a shop in Diagon Alley," Hermione replied. "No worries there! So what are you up to now?"

"I need to do my Occlumency meditations."

"Can you explain it to me? I mean, there must be more to it than just clearing your thoughts."

"That . . . Snape just threw me into deep water and watched me drown," Harry snarled. "There are a bunch of easier ways to get started, although the blank slate is the ultimate goal." Harry smiled. "Let's see if I can teach you something for once!"

Harry was startled out of his meditation when Hermione cried out in pain. Her right calf had a severe cramp, part of the muscle spasming. Harry quickly had her foot flexed and was massaging it. He pulled down her sock to get at it better.

"I wish I had some massage oil," Harry said when the cramp had finally eased. "I should do both your legs, and then do them again tonight."

"Go ask Luna," Hermione said. "I'm sure she has some."

"What kind would you like?" Luna asked. "I mean, is it for entry lubrication or to massage her. . . ."

"Just to massage Hermione's legs," Harry said, very red in the face. "Honest!"

Luna smiled. "Oh, Harry! I didn't mean to embarrass you." She went over to her dresser and hesitated between a number of bottles.

'I really do NOT want to know,' Harry thought. 'If Ron knew about this, he'd like as not have a tantrum.'

"Lavender or rose?" Luna asked.

"Rose," Harry decided.

"You may keep this," Luna said. "We didn't like it, but it should work well for Hermione's . . . legs."

"You should all really come out running with us," Harry said, trying to divert the conversation a bit.

"And will you massage our legs after?" Luna teased gently.

"You'll have to ask Hermione if I can," Harry answered, refusing to be drawn.

"That's probably your best, or least safest, answer," Ginny said, coming into the room.

Harry gave them a wan smile and fled the room.

Harry brought up the idea of group running again at lunch. Colin and Dean agreed quietly, while Ginny and Luna did so with a bit more teasing. Henrietta, however, had no interest what so ever, and Ron flat out refused to get up that early.

After lunch, they all went out to fly. All, except for Harry and Hermione, were soon engaged in a rousing game of quaffle tag. Harry had Hermione sit on her new, and very stable, broom, and then climbed on behind her.

With fifteen minutes of Harry's coaching, Hermione had regained what form she had had at the end of her first year. The All-Weather was a much more stable broom than the school brooms, which often listed to one side or the other at inopportune times. As Madam Hooch often ruefully said, if a student could master a school broom, they should have no problem flying.

Within the hour, Hermione had mastered flying with one hand (flying alone), although she still was too nervous to fly without hands long enough to play tag. Harry was sure she would be able to play tag within a few days.

Coming in, Winky told the students that the rest of their supplies were in their rooms. Harry was not surprised that Hermione ignored the large pile of bagged clothes and headed straight for the books. He kissed the top of Hermione's head, and left her to organize both their books for the year. Having observed Hermione for five years now, Harry knew that since he would likely go along with most of her ideas in any event, he was best off letting her have her head now. He went off to see if Remus or Tonks would help him practice his shielding spells.

At dinner, Hermione was full of texts and schedules, which everyone pretended to pay attention to. It was clear to Harry that everyone else was casually flirting with their partner. After dinner, everyone felt compelled to sit for a few minutes, but Hermione was the only person talking, even if Harry, Colin, and Remus occasionally made affirmative grunts. Ginny was the first to break, standing and simply holding her hand out to Luna. Luna gazed at her friend and lover, slowly smiled, stood and took her hand. On their way out, both passed by Harry, touching his shoulder.

Ron made such a lame excuse that it even drew Hermione's attention away from her chatter about the entire Medical syllabus and the differences between Muggle and magical medical training, to which Remus and Harry were half listening to. Henrietta rolled her eyes but seemed to gain enthusiasm as the pair left the room.

Hermione paused to gather her thoughts about which subject to tackle next. Before she could dissect the logic tree which had led her to decide not to take History, Remus saw his opportunity to escape, a snickering Tonks trailing behind him.

Hermione looked from Harry to Dean to Colin in puzzlement. "Weren't you going to show me the magical way to develop photos?" Dean asked.

"Oh . . . right!" Colin said, standing.

"Have fun in the dark room," Harry teased. Colin blushed and Dean sent Harry a friendly two-fingered salute.

"Is it me, or was everyone else . . . not themselves tonight?" Hermione asked a few moments later, when she realized they were alone.

"Hermione, do you love me?" Harry asked.

"Yes," Hermione stated firmly, but then asked, puzzled, "but what does that have to do with tonight?"

"Are the others also in love with their partners?"

Hermione pondered that, as usual taking the question very literally. "I do wonder if Ron and Henrietta aren't more in lust than in love," she said very softly, "but generally, I'd have to say yes. Why?"

"So why do you think everyone wanted an early night tonight?"

Hermione looked puzzled for a few seconds, then, "Oh!" She sat back. "And I suppose I missed everyone flirting with each other, while they all ignored me?"

"Remus didn't, and I didn't."

"Really?" Hermione asked drily.

"I didn't follow it all," Harry confessed, "but I didn't ignore you or tune you out."

Hermione smiled ruefully. "Mum and Dad do the same." Hermione's mouth twisted a little. "So, you promised me another massage. Before or after a bath?"

"Your choice."

Hermione chose before. When Harry came out from his shower nearly an hour later, again just in boxers, Hermione was again in the thin lavender pajamas. "Is there any part of you that needs massaging?" Hermione asked.

Harry considered. "Actually my right arm and hand are a little stiff. Remus really jolted my shields a few times."

Hermione considered this, and had Harry lay diagonally face down on the bed. "What happened to the other bed?" Harry asked as he made himself comfortable. He was sure it had been there when he went in to shower.

"Do you mind?" Hermione asked worriedly.

"No, no!" Harry insisted. "I just wondered what happened to it."

"Winky stopped by to ask if we wanted anything for the night. I asked for the pitcher of ice water, and then asked if it was possible for them to take the bed out tomorrow and replace it with a pair of reclining chairs. She took the bed out and said she or Dobby would bring the chairs in tomorrow." Hermione was massaging Harry's shoulder and neck while she was explaining the situation.

"This feels . . . wonderful," Harry said.

"No one has ever touched you like this, have they?"

"No, no they haven't," Harry admitted.

"Well, get used to it," Hermione told him, "I like touching you." She slowly massaged his upper arm, and then moved to his forearm.

That's when she saw them. The white scars that had been cut into the back of his hand by the quill of that very evil woman.

Harry was more relaxed than he could ever remember. He was luxuriating under Hermione's touch. Suddenly, he felt a new sensation. It took him several seconds to realize what it was, since he was enjoying the feelings too much to want to move to look.

Hermione was tracing the minute scars on the back of his hand with her tongue. When she was done, she simply turned his hand over and traced the lines on his palm with her long and very pointed tongue.

"If I remember that silly book, these mean you should have a long and sensuous life," Hermione said softly.

"That's probably why we spent so little time on palmistry," Harry managed to say as Hermione licked his fingers "Hermione. . . ?"

"Yes?"

"What we did, what you did last night. . . ."

"Did it bother you?"

"No! Oh, no!"

"So you liked it?"

"It was about the most bloody marvelous thing I've ever felt!"

"Better than flying your Firebolt in a Wonky Faint?" she teased.

"Better than everything except kissing you," Harry said in a tone of voice that convinced a person and melted their heart at the same time.

"Then you won't mind if we do that about every night?"

"No!" he agreed eagerly. "But. . . ." he started in a puzzled voice.

"I'm glad I did it right," Hermione said. "If you wonder how I had the general idea, well, my parents have books on nearly everything. Some they never realized I've read."

Harry had to smile at that.

"And if you're wondering, I'm hoping you'll want to reciprocate, somehow."

"I do!" Harry said with great enthusiasm.

"Good. Tomorrow, I'll take Ginny up on her offer to depilate me. That should make things easier."

Harry had a coughing fit, which made Hermione laugh.

"Do you think the others feel this . . . not awkward, just nervous, I guess?" Harry asked.

"Not tonight," Hermione answered. "I gather Colin and Dean have been together in secret for at least a few months, though how Ginny figured it out is beyond me. The others have been snogging for weeks. We've been a couple for less than two days, even if we've loved each other a long time." Hermione reached down and stroked Harry cheek. "And, no offense, but you haven't had much experience with affection, my heart."

"No," Harry had to admit, "I guess I haven't." He rolled over on his back. "You know, I was listening to Ginny and Luna . . . flirt earlier."

"Yes?"

"They were calling each other. . . ."

"Something special, or just general endearments?"

"Probably just general, but that made me realize something." Harry looked up at Hermione's troubled face. "I don't think I've ever used one, and you probably just used one for me for the first time in my life I never even told any one that I cared for them, let alone loved them, except for you." Harry tried to smile. "I do love you, even if I can't seem to call you anything except Hermione."

"Goof," Hermione chided.

"Hermey'?" Harry asked in a serious voice."

"I don't think so."

"Mione'?"

"No!"

"Mimo'?"

"Don't be a git!"

"That's hardly an endearment," Harry teased.

"Harry?" Hermione breathed.

"Yes?" Harry answered, looking up at her.

Hermione pulled her top off, and then slipped off the bottoms. "I love you, Harry."

Harry gently pulled Hermione down to him.

Chapter VI

Friday, August 2, 1996

Harry sat up in the large bed and studied a sleeping, nude Hermione Granger. He had known her for nearly five full years now. When they had met, they had both been children, with no sign of adolescence, unlike a few of their classmates. Two of the shorter students in their year, and both thin -- although Hermione might have outweighed him by a few pounds.

Harry had finally surpassed her in both height and weight by the end of their third year, but not by much. He had grown slowly in the Fourth year and the summer before his Fifth. Finally, a little less slowly, over his Fifth year he had grown a fair amount. Currently at a little under 5 foot 9 and at moderately-muscled 10 stone 10 (150 pounds) -- Harry was starting to worry about being able to do the dives needed to be a good seeker -- Harry still hardly loomed over anyone, but he was now large enough to want to cover Hermione completely, both to protect her and to just be in as much contact as possible.

He watched her sleep. Harry's moderately-large hand could span the width of her backside, and his two long hands nearly went around her waist. He had been a bit snoop, and he felt that while 31a-18-30 was far too thin for her health, he had to admit it did look very arousing.

Her half lemon-sized breasts looked very kissable. He had never allowed himself to think such thoughts about any girl before now. Until the summer before his Fourth year, he had no real interest in girls. Since then, he liked looking -- and unlike Ron, he had always been well-aware that Hermione not only a girl, but a fairly cute one -- but he had not allowed his thoughts stray toward the physical aspects of a relationship.

To be honest, he had been obsessed by Cho's backside, or at least the lines of her form, including her backside, as she flew. Even then, he never allowed himself to think about what might be under her robes. He had never obsessed about her skin, let alone any particular portion of it. Harry knew he was obsessing about every square centimeter of Hermione, and every strand of her hair

He wondered idly if the color of Cho's nipples matched the color of her lips, like Hermione's matched her light pink lips. Harry shook his head; it wouldn't do to speculate about Cho's nipples -- or Ginny's or Luna's for that matter.

Hermione stretched slightly in her sleep, and the changes in the shape of her breasts were more than enough to drive all thoughts of all other breasts on earth out of his head. Something in the air stirred, and a slight breeze went past them. The large pink nipple puckered erect from the chill.

Harry covered Hermione with the sheet, and gently hugged her close. What they had done the night before had been amazing. Wizards had stronger strictures against pre-marital sex than Muggles currently did -- there were a number of magical reasons for it. Any other consensual sexual practice was pretty much ignored, for which Harry was very grateful.

"Harry?" Hermione mumbled, her lips against his left nipple.

"Yes, Hermione?"

"Call me that again."

"Call you what?"

"What you called me last night."

"Sweetie?"

"No."

"Ducks?"

"No!"

"Snuggle-bunny?"

"Ass."

Harry kissed her. "Angel."

Hermione put her arms around Harry. "That's it, my love." She kissed him back.

A little before 7:30, Hermione, Remus, Ginny, Luna, and Colin stood and watched Harry and Dean sprinting across the mowed field, Tonks trailing far behind. The pair passed the group and Dean shouted "Once more around?"

"Twice!" Harry shouted back.

"Damn, I feel old," Remus said.

"I just feel inadequate," Ginny replied.

Colin leaned over and whispered in Hermione's ear, "I think they just look yummy, don't you?" Hermione snorted to stop herself from giggling.

"Are the two of you really planning on practicing the Occlumency meditations?" Luna asked Hermione from the other side.

"Oh, yes," Hermione answered. "Would you like to join us?"

"Yes, please," Luna replied. She paused, and said, "I wonder if Remus or Tonks could put the Imperius curse on us, as well."

"Why would you want them to?" Colin demanded.

"Who to do what?" Remus asked walking over.

"I was wondering if you or Tonks could put the Imperius curse on us," Luna told him. "If we ever get in to a fight again, what would prevent a Death Eater from casting it on us and hurting Harry? After all, can anyone other than the Dark Lord hope to fight Harry fairly? And could Harry easily hex any of us?"

A panting Tonks overheard. "We can do it, but only as a group. No experimenting!"

Dean and Harry ran up. "Good workout, Harry!" Dean said.

"Ready for fifteen or twenty minutes in the gym?" Harry challenged.

"No," Dean answered with a smile. "Running and football are my sports."

Ginny held out her hand. "Come on, Harry. You hit the bag and I'll do some of those step aerobics Tonks tried to show me last summer." She turned to Hermione and Luna. "How about you two? Or the rest of you?"

In the end, only Henrietta, just down from bed, joined Ginny while Harry pounded the heavy bag. After quick showers, the trio joined the others for breakfast. From 9:00 to 10:30, Hermione forced everyone to study. Ron refused to study, but he did join them, working on Quidditch diagrams. From 10:30 to 11:00, Hermione and Harry helped Colin, Luna, Ginny, and Henrietta do practical work, under Remus' bemused direction. The group broke up at 11:00, Colin and Ginny joining Dean in sketching (which is what Dean had already been doing) until 12:30. Remus and Tonks, and Ron and Henrietta, disappeared into privacy. Harry and Hermione took Luna to their room to practice Occlumency.

After lunch, the group flew for an hour. Then the group agreed to Luna's proposal, and practiced resistance to the Imperius curse.

Harry, who could resist Voldemort's Imperius, could totally ignore Tonks'. Luna also had a natural resistance, if not quite as strong as Harry's had been at first.

After an hour, all the other students were making at least a little progress, but not much. When they were taking a break, Harry asked Remus, "Would it be bad if I had a try at casting it?"

"Why?" Remus asked bluntly.

"I can easily see reasons why I might have to cast two of the three Unforgiveables," Harry retorted softly.

Remus looked troubled, but went over to talk with Tonks.

While the rest of the group went back to pursue their own pastimes, Tonks took Harry to the woodshed. There he received over half an hour lecture on the Imperius as well as death curses in general. Then he spent well over half an hour practicing the Imperius and death curses on insects. Harry would spend an hour a day thereafter practicing very nasty curses indeed.

From 4:00 - 6:00, Hermione had them studying again, even Ron. Just before they ended, Hermione proposed they follow the same schedule for the rest of their time together, partially based on that day. Ron took Hermione's written copy and read it aloud.

6:30- 7:25 *running*
7:30- 7:50 *exercise*
8:15- 9:00 *breakfast*
9:00-11:00 *study*
11:00-12:30 *Occlumency, individual pursuits*
12:30- 1:15 *lunch*
1:30- 2:30 *flying*
2:30- 3:30 *defence work*
3:30- 5:00 *individual pursuits*
5:00- 6:30 *study*
7:00- 8:15 *dinner*

"Alright," Ron said. "It sounds . . . reasonable.

"Three of us do have O.W.L.s this year," Colin reminded him.

"Nothing planned after dinner?" Tonks teased.

"I thought we'd just follow your lead," Hermione remarked drily, which sent Luna into one of her laughing fits, and after nearly a minute, Luna fell onto the floor while the others looked on, all puzzled except for Ginny.

Ginny hauled Luna off the floor. "Pay no attention to the hysterical lunatic," Ginny said, which made Luna laugh all the harder. "When she's nervous or tired, she gets like this." Ginny tossed her on the largest sofa, next to Hermione. "There's only one cure!"

"NO!" Luna managed to yell between peels of laughter.

"What's that?" Harry asked, looking across Hermione.

"Tickle her!" Ginny said, attacking her girl friend. "Everything is ticklish!"

Hermione shrugged and pulled off Luna's trainers while Harry stripped off her socks, and then she and Harry each grabbed a foot and started to tickle. Henrietta and Colin jumped in as well.

When the tickle-fest was finished, Remus took the boys down to the magical cellar to teach them how to play magical darts. This was not only a fun game, but they could also use it as a weapon.

After dinner, no one made a pretense of wanting to sit in the living area. Harry paused at the threshold of their room to kiss Hermione. "What was that for?" she asked.

"Other than because you're pretty and have been so wonderfully close to me day?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. Harry wasn't the greatest flirt, although at least he was sincere. "Yes, besides that."

"I was just thinking about how difficult it will be to go to Hogwarts this year, where I won't be able to touch you so often, where we won't be together every night."

"I know," Hermione agreed. "Still, you have the Map back, don't you?"

"Dumbledore gave it to Remus, who gave it back to me," Harry agreed.

"We should be able to find some place where we can at least get together for some serious. . . ." She seemed at a loss for words.

"Snuggle time?" Harry suggested.

Hermione pulled Harry into the room and shut the door. She hugged Harry tightly. "A good term for it. Snuggle time."

"Shall I call you 'Snuggles'?" Harry teased.

"Only in private, my Harry-bear," Hermione teased back.

"Deal," Harry said. He shuddered at the thought of *anyone* hearing him called 'Harry-bear.'

The next ten days went according to Hermione's schedule. All made strides in their physical fitness and magical abilities. Hermione would never be a class flyer, but she was becoming comfortable in the air. Luna was becoming adept in ignoring the Imperius curse. Harry was becoming very adept at using the killing curses and the Imperius on insects, along with a number of other nasty curses.

Somehow, no one, not even Harry, took much comfort in his growing abilities.

Now that Hermione and Ron were no longer interested in each other, they fought a lot less. On the whole, the group of teens got along very well. By the middle of their second week, however, Ginny was speculating that Henrietta and Ron would not last as a couple much past their return to Hogwarts.

Ron had shrugged his shoulders when she mentioned the idea to him in private. He was in no hurry to find a life's partner. "Do you think you'll be with Luna for the next hundred years," he retorted. "You like boys, Ginny. I don't know if Luna does or not, but you do."

"We will certainly be together as close friends for as long as we live, no matter what," Ginny stated with conviction. "And since most boys treat girls like you do, I wouldn't be so sure I won't stick with girls, if I were you. You're starting to just use Henrietta."

Ron snorted and walked away.

On the afternoon of August 11, Dumbledore showed up for lunch. Harry pressed him for news, but Dumbledore would not be drawn, other than to assure them all that everyone who mattered to them was safe. "You all need time away from any problems," was all he would he say.

"But we can't come back totally ignorant!" Harry protested. He was backed up strongly and loudly by Remus, Hermione, Ginny; firmly if more quietly by Tonks, Luna, and Ron. Even after half an hour of badgering, the most Dumbledore would consent to was considering to brief them when they got back to Hogwarts.

Harry was fuming as they went outside. Everyone's shields were up to stopping Tonks and Remus' attacks, and Dumbledore also congratulated them on their physical conditioning. Dumbledore gently chided Harry at letting his anger bleeding through during an Occlumency test, although he did say Harry had otherwise done fairly well. He also congratulated Luna and Hermione on their progress, and all of them on their work against the Imperius curse, although only Harry could ignore Dumbledore, and only Luna could fully resist it, even if it took her some time to fully throw it off.

"Is there anything else you've been working on?" Dumbledore asked.

"I don't think it would be a good idea for me to demonstrate my knowledge of the Imperius or killing curses," Harry almost growled.

Dumbledore grilled Tonks and Remus severely about that, but then turned to Harry. "Actually, let's see how you handle the Imperius, Harry."

Everyone was shocked, to say the least. "But . . . who?" Harry asked.

"Why against me, of course," Dumbledore said. Harry's jaw set.

"Harry" Hermione warned softly.

Harry whispered in her ear. "You're right, of course. But this might be the only way I get any information."

Hermione nodded.

Dumbledore walked a few feet away and smiled. Harry walked a bit further away from the group, and nodded his neck stiffly. "Ready, sir?" Harry asked.

"Yes, Harry. Don't make me do anything too foolish."

"Yeah, right," Harry mumbled.

"What's the Headmaster playing at?" Ron asked Hermione. She shrugged.

"IMPERIO!"

"He's been baiting Harry since he arrived," Luna commented. "There must be some purpose. Unless he's just . . . uncomfortable dealing with us under these conditions."

"The angrier Harry is, assuming he can control it, the more powerful the curse," Tonks told them.

Seconds ticked by. After nearly a minute, Henrietta asked, "What's happening?"

"Harry can't control Dumbledore, but Dumbledore doesn't seem to be able to throw it off."

"Whoa," Dean said, impressed.

After nearly two minutes, Dumbledore threw off the curse. "My goodness, Harry! Most impressive!"

"Thank you, sir," Harry said in a neutral voice that certainly worried Hermione, Luna, and Remus. "Any chance that it's earned us some information?"

"Very well, Harry," Dumbledore acknowledged. "Let's go in and sit down."

"The good news is that there have been no more attacks against wizarding families, no matter how broadly defined. However, there have been a number of dementor attacks on individual Muggles, and three Muggles have been killed and mutilated for their blood and body parts." Dumbledore looked at Henrietta, who had gasped in shock. The other students already knew too much to be as shocked as she was. "There are many dark rituals which require . . . fresh supplies."

He turned his attention back to Harry. "Your disappearance has driven Voldemort into great anger. There have been three attacks on Azkaban, but the arrested Death Eaters remain there for the moment. Actually, none seem very interested in leaving at the moment, which seems strange, on the face of it."

Dumbledore looked at Remus. "The anti-werewolf legislation will stay in place; in fact, it has to some degree been strengthened. I know we all hoped you would be able to act as Harry's guardian, but I regret to say you may not. Therefore, I believe I must continue. . . ."

"No, sir," Harry said firmly.

"I beg your pardon, Harry?" Dumbledore asked, surprised.

"The Weasleys or Tonks," Harry stated.

"It might be better, politically speaking, if you weren't tied too closely to Harry," Hermione jumped in.

"If Dad can't, because of Fudge, Bill would probably volunteer," Ginny offered.

A skilled Legilimens, Dumbledore could sense the strong thoughts directed against him. Disappointment in him from Ron and Dean; confusion from Henrietta. Despair and hurt from Remus; the need to care for Remus and Harry from Tonks. 'I want to trust you, but I can't. You betrayed me at least as early as my second year; as my magical guardian, you could have

allowed me to go to Hogsmeade, and you never told me why I couldn't,' from Harry, although there were other, darker accusations under those thoughts as well. 'I trust you to lead, but not to care for Harry,' were the feelings coming at him from Colin, Ginny, Hermione, and most strongly from Luna.

Dumbledore looked at Tonks. "I'll do it, gladly," she said. "Bill can be my backup."

Dumbledore acquiesced. "Any thing else?"

"What will happen to the Inquisitorial Squads?" Hermione asked.

"Oh, those are disbanded, of course," Dumbledore said easily.

"That's is NOT what I meant," Hermione nearly huffed. "What will be done to punish their abuse of power?"

"Nothing."

"NOTHING!" all the students roared, even Henrietta. "They beat some of us up for fun!" she wailed.

"If the evil is not punished, it will only grow," Luna said in a voice that, for her, was harsh. "They must receive some punishment, if only to prevent retaliation."

"Any retaliation will be harshly dealt with. . . ."

"Why?" Ron demanded. "If Crabbe can half-suffocate Neville for fun, if Bulstrode can nearly dislocate Hermione's shoulder, and NOTHING happens to them. . . ." Ron couldn't find the words to go on.

Luna, however, could, "If they are not punished, then you are no better than Minister Fudge. You are acknowledging the only things that matters are power and perhaps ancestry."

"And if the only thing that matters at Hogwarts is power," Harry said in a very quiet, and very dangerous, voice, "then we must have no qualms in using it. Malfoy and the others have already shown they don't have any, so we can't either."

"Might does not make right," Dumbledore stated firmly. "They may yet see the error of their path. . . ."

"They haven't in five years, why should they now?" Harry demanded.

"It's time to stop being so forgiving," Luna told the Headmaster. "If they repent, if they want to at least stop serving the Dark Lord, that's one thing. Without such a sign, they merely believe they can not be stopped, that you are too soft to stop them."

"If ancestry and money don't matter," Dean said quietly, "they must be punished. If they aren't punished, that means that you agree that they are better than the rest of us. That they can sin without penalty."

"ARE we equal?" Colin asked. "No, wait. Wrong question. Are the rest of my friends here equal? We already know I'm not. The Slytherins treated me like I wasn't human before. How are they going to treat me now?" He burst into tears and fled the room.

Dean stood. "I've been called names my entire life. I'm tired of being treated as second class, Professor. The time to stop it is now. If you won't make a stand, the rest of us will. I am not violent by nature, but it's time that people like me make that stand. Against people like the Minister, and if necessary even against people like you, the methods of Gandhi and King are valid. Against people like Malfoy and his Slytherin followers, let alone against the Dark Lord, survival only comes through self-defense, even preventative violence. Either you're for equality, and will act on that belief, or you won't. That's up to you. This year, the first person who calls me 'Mudblood' or 'nigger' or calls Colin an animal wakes up in the Infirmary, if they wake up at all." Dean left the room.

Harry stood. "And if Dean or anyone else is expelled for it, I for one will go with him. Then you can coddle Malfoy and his gang of cut-throats in peace, hoping for their conversion, up to the moment they kill you." He walked out, Hermione following.

As Ron and Ginny stood to leave as well, Luna said, "And never think Harry will ever be alone."

"Because he never will be," Ron agreed.

"And don't think this will only be coming from Gryffindor," Luna said, now also standing. "There will be others as well."

"We haven't forgotten Cedric," Henrietta said, still a little confused but making her decision as well. "When did you?" The students all left.

"You can't save everyone, Albus," Remus said. "You can't save Malfoy and his friends unless they want to be. And they won't consider it until they are shown that their side does not have all the power. If logic and caring and good will were all that mattered, people like Lucius Malfoy and Bellatrix Lestrange wouldn't exist, let alone those like Voldemort." He also left.

"No offense, Professor, but you've been sounding more and more like Fudge this summer." Tonks stood. "You've been doing what's easy, not what's right. You've been putting politics ahead of what needs to be done. I'm sure you can see your own way out?"

Dumbledore decided he had to sit down and rethink his priorities.

Chapter VII

August 11, 1996

Harry and Hermione walked quickly to Colin and Dean's room. Colin was crying on one of the beds, while Dean had been trying to restrain his anger and comfort Colin at the same time. At the moment, he seemed to be collecting handkerchiefs from the dressers.

Seeing the pair at the door, Dean stood up and walked over. "Here to lead, or to reprimand?" Dean asked softly.

"Maybe we should be following you," Harry answered.

"No, it has to be you," Dean told Harry frankly.

"I think it's time that we sat down and worked out some ideas," Hermione told Dean. "Harry and I have been doing some work, but we need your input. Come on."

Dean handed Harry the stack of handkerchiefs. "Be gentle, Harry," Dean reminded him. "All Colin has left is me, and his unresolved feelings and respect for you."

Harry understood.

Harry walked over and sat on the bed, uncertain for the moment about what to do. He decided to treat Colin like he would Ginny, and started massaging the crying boy's shoulders.

"I asked you to go away, Dean," Colin mumbled between tears.

"It's me," Harry said.

Colin sat up, shocked. "Harry! Sorry! I mean, I shouldn't. . . ."

Harry handed Colin one of the handkerchiefs. "It's alright, Colin. You have a right to be upset."

"No," Colin said with a sniffle, "I should be more like you. You've been through about as much as I have. You never carry on like this."

"There seems to be a general consensus that I really should 'carry on like this', at least sometimes," Harry said ruefully. "They're probably right."

They sat in silence for a while. Then Colin asked, "Harry . . . why don't you hate me?"

"Why would I hate you?"

Colin snorted. "I'm a gay werewolf, who's stalked you for four years."

"But what are your bad points?" Harry asked innocently.

Colin finally stopped crying and giggled, then asked, "Seriously, you were never even tempted, were you?"

"I was never attracted to any boy, and even you weren't that obvious about exactly what your interests were."

"I was, YOU were just oblivious," Colin teased. "I did everything but throw myself at you or crawl into bed with you! Ron threatened to hex me if I didn't stop hanging out with you in the showers -- even then you were the most well-endowed Gryffindor! I bet you didn't know that at least one student had already tried to seduce you, and wound up seducing Dean, and then me, instead, did you?"

Harry stopped blushing and demanded, "What! Who?" He had long stopped considering Colin a pest, and had become very close to the younger boy since their arrival.

"Oliver. He was doing Dean half your First year and most of your Second. He was about to seduce me when I was petrified. We took up my Second year."

"But . . . but he was five years older than you! that's . . . wrong!" Harry was appalled.

Colin managed a leer. "But it felt so right, Harry! Don't be angry with him, just think of your life if I hadn't been flirting with Oliver and getting it from him for a year?"

"You haven't . . . had many partners, other than Oliver and Dean, have you?" Harry asked, concerned.

"Harry, there's a special place . . . and no, I won't tell you who or where, where there are no Pure-Bloods or Mudbloods. The only rule is. . . . Do you know what is meant by 'top' and 'bottom'?"

"Actually, I do," Harry said. He had listened to a fair amount of day time telly that and the previous summer, trying to listen for news updates. Aunt Petunia had listened to the most lurid (to Harry's tastes anyway) talk programming.

"The rule is, the worst ratios allowed are three times top to two times bottom and the reverse. I was there a lot my Third year, until Dean and I started meeting in secret right after exams. I have to admit, I didn't like it much."

Harry frowned, but then grinned. "Please tell me Malfoy is one."

"Why?"

"Because I just like the image of him having to bend over for Crabbe or Goyle."

"He doesn't bend over for anyone, but he does have to wank them at least," Colin answered, finally smiling. "So, you're pretty oblivious, and I can't ever tempt you, can I?"

"I guess I am, and no, I'll never have sex with you," Harry said gently. "I care about you a great deal, but not that way."

"Even if I ate a fairy fairie cake?"

"No, not even then. And even if I was tempted by that offer, I wouldn't, because I'm with Hermione and because I'm not interested in casual sex." Harry decided to go through with an

idea he had had, and had discussed with Hermione. "But if you can't be my lover, would you like to be my brother? I've never had one, and could use one."

"I love you, Harry. I'd be honored to be your brother." Colin's chin trembled a little. "I need one. I miss him so much."

Harry drew Colin into a hug and kissed his forehead. "I meant it, Colin. I am asking you to be my foster-brother. You understand?"

Colin recalled a History lecture from his Second year. "Yes; yes I do." He was amazed at the implications, and that Harry, his idol Harry, would think of such of a thing and WANT to do it with Colin, a werewolf. "Thank you, Harry. Let's do it."

Harry and Colin went down to the main floor, where Albus Dumbledore still sat. Alone.

"I have not been so reprimanded in my life," Dumbledore said to them as they entered. "I have never been so rightly reprimanded in my life. I thought I had reformed my thinking, but I had not done so to a large enough degree. I probably still have not, although I intend to keep working on it. I have been too concerned with politics; too concerned in preserving the older families that no longer truly honor the Old Ways."

"We don't hate you, sir," Harry said. "But we aren't game pieces. We have our own needs, and if you don't trust us with information, we have to do what we feel best."

"I shall have to again consider how better to share information with you," Dumbledore acknowledged. "Is there something I may do for you two right now?"

"Do you know the ritual for a pair to become foster brothers?" Harry asked.

"I take it you mean bringing Mister Creevy into the House of Potter formally as your brother?"

"Yes, sir." Harry put his arm around the smaller boy's shoulders and drew him close.

Dumbledore considered the idea for several minutes, then finally said, "There are several possible ceremonies, most of which should not be used with Mister Creevy, as it involves a minor exchange of blood." He thought some more. "There is one form, acceptable as you are the last Potter. However, that is a more formal adoption. Colin must still take some of your blood, and he will be Colin Potter. I can do some additional research, and see what other forms there are, if you prefer to wait a short time."

"Harry . . . may I?" Colin asked.

"That ceremony will be very satisfactory, Headmaster. We should do this now. Are you going to be coming here at least once more, by the way?"

"I will; why?"

"I was going to give you a copy of my will, for signatures. Perhaps it would be best to do it on the First of September, if four neutral members of the Order might be available to sign?"

"That would be best. Could you call your friends to witness the ceremony, if you are determined to go through with this now?"

When everyone showed up, Dumbledore addressed them. "First, I must apologize for my actions earlier. I have kept my counsel for so long it is difficult to open up as I should. I shall try to do better. There will still be times when I must leave some or all of you in the dark. There will be times when you shall have to do that amongst yourselves. If you do not understand that, you will cause many preventible problems."

"We understand," Harry said. The others nodded.

"On the whole, I still believe it will be impolitic to levy wholesale punishment upon Slytherin. They did choose to follow Professor Umbridge, however; there must be some punishment for what they did while acting under her authority. Therefore, the three prefects who joined the Inquisitorial Squad will be removed. The two new prefects were already selected on that basis. We, meaning myself and members of the staff, shall also be lecturing all the students on proper conduct, especially the Slytherins. Several members of the staff have . . . already had some discussions with the Head of Slytherin on this matter. I do wish to point out that he advised the students strongly NOT to get involved with the Inquisitorial Squad, and will have few qualms about letting them know that one more major infraction will result in expulsion."

Dumbledore turned to Dean. "You know as well as I that students will always push the boundaries, Mister Thomas. Keep ANY retaliation equal. Name calling must NOT result in violence."

"In other words," Ron said, "when Malfoy insults us, we may only insult him back. Right. Fine. When he has Crabbe and Goyle push Firsties down the stairs, do we get to push HIM down a few flights, or just Crabbe and Goyle?"

"When Pansy and Millicent throw . . . used feminine napkins and such at a Second year, what is the appropriate response?" Hermione demanded.

"When a Slytherin destroys a potion, and the Potions teacher docks US, what is the appropriate response?" Ginny asked.

"We know it's not ALL of Slytherin," Luna said, "but you might as well know now, tempers were very frayed at the end of the term. That was true inside of Ravenclaw itself as well as Ravenclaw against Slytherin."

"There are some inside of Hufflepuff pushing for the Dark Lord. Some of the older students have stopped preaching tolerance for the intolerant in retaliation," Henrietta chimed in.

"Time is running out, Headmaster," Hermione told him. "People like Draco don't have the sense to know they'd do their Master better service by shutting up and spying. But when they

provoke us this year, well, I for one am not inclined to encourage turning the other cheek yet again."

"I understand your concerns," Dumbledore responded, a bit pale and shaken. "I can not give you more assurances until I speak with more of the staff."

"I hope you will let us know what you decide," Harry told the Headmaster.

"I shall." Dumbledore stood. "At the moment, however, there is some other business to conduct. Harry has requested accepting Colin into his Clan and his Family, as a foster brother. . . ."

Remus turned on Harry. "Do you know what you're doing?" Remus asked fiercely.

"I am standing up to help a friend," Harry answered. "Hermione and I have been talking a lot this summer, and we've decided to stand up for what's right. We're Colin's friends. We all know that, even if it hasn't been released, the news that Colin is infected will be just about the first thing out of Malfoy's mouth. The best way I can think of to help Colin is to share my name with him."

"It's not like Colin could be any more of a target," Hermione added. "Voldemort will be after him, to try and force him to attack Harry or at least the rest of us. This is just one more incentive."

"Maybe you could even use it to. . . ." Colin swallowed nervously, "maybe you can use it to draw him into a trap or something."

"After we somehow manage to win, can you imagine Harry or the rest of us allowing Colin to suffer alone like you have had to suffer?" Luna asked Remus.

"Very well," Remus said, "I won't argue with you."

Dumbledore took up where he had left off. "As I was saying, Harry is the sole remaining Potter, and Colin is an orphan. Therefore, they may do this ceremony as they are over thirteen. Colin Creevy, do you wish to be part of the House of Potter?"

"I do, sir."

"You accept Harry Potter as your older brother and protector?"

"I do, sir."

"Harry Potter, do you accept Colin as your brother, under your protection and a full member of your Clan, Family, and House?"

"I accept Colin as my brother, under my protection and a full member of my Clan, Family, and House."

Dumbledore took out a small pocket knife. He cut a small nick in Harry's palm, and then in Colin's. "Careful not to get any blood directly into yours," Dumbledore warned.

Harry nodded, and let his blood drip onto Colin's cut. "Colin, if you please?" Dumbledore directed. Colin took Harry's hand, and sucked a little of Harry's blood into his mouth.

Dumbledore healed the two cuts. "I shall prepare the documents before dinner. When you two, Miss Tonks, and I sign, Colin will be Colin Potter. After that, it may not be reversed under any circumstances. I will ask the rest of you to sign as witnesses as well." He paused. "Perhaps I should work downstairs."

"Use our study," Remus suggested. Tonks guided the Headmaster out.

Dean gave a sigh of relief. He loved Colin dearly, and Colin was all he had now except for his friends. He thought this would help Colin become closer to Harry without threatening their relationship.

"Well," Ron said to Colin, "Harry is an honorary Weasley, so I suppose you are, too!" He shocked the smaller boy by giving him a brotherly hug.

"Just what I need! Another brother!" Ginny teased. She walked over and kissed Colin's cheek.

"Now then," Harry said to Dean, in a perfect imitation of Ron, "what's all this about you dating my little brother?"

Dean knew Harry well enough that he laughed heartily. That set Luna off, and instantly every teen but Ron was attacking and tickling her until she stopped laughing and started to hiccough. Ron alone had not understood the reference.

The teens spent much of the rest of their free time both before and after Dumbledore's first visit devoted to Hermione's project of proposed reforms. While Hermione was of course the driving force behind the documents, she tended to get overly-involved with detail. Left to her own devices, Hermione would have produced a long pamphlet, heavily footnoted and cross-referenced.

Dean had kept pressing her to simplify. In the end, the group persuaded Hermione to go with a short declaration, and then use the (clarified) pamphlet to help explain the document.

When Dumbledore returned on August 19, Dean presented their ideas.

"Even though most wizards disapprove of Voldemort's tactics, if there's anything we Muggle-borns have learned, it's that most Pure-Bloods share some, maybe many, of their ideas. And, in part because the History of Magic is allowed to be taught so poorly. . . ."

Dumbledore winced.

". . . it's certainly true that we are at a cultural disadvantage. Most Pure-Bloods see this as both our cultural arrogance and natural inferiority. At the same time, the magical-born really have no idea how dependent they are to the Muggle world."

"Such as?" Dumbledore asked. He and McGonagall had already started planning these very courses, but he was not about to rain on the teens' ideas.

Hermione jumped in. "Over 99 percent of all the basic food comes from Muggle sources, including the processed food. Even the ingredients for butterbeer, as well as the bottles, kegs, caps, et cetera, are Muggle-produced. Over 98 percent of the cloth we use is Muggle-made. Most of the 'new' magical inventions of the last two hundred years are merely magical adaptations of Muggle ideas, right down to the Wizarding Wireless." She smiled. "An interesting term, since we were never 'wired' to begin with!"

"Granted," Dumbledore admitted.

"Now, we feel we need to undercut the passive support for Voldemort, and undercut the underlying hatreds," Dean resumed. "What we are proposing is a set of new courses for Second years: one for the Muggle-raised and one for the magical-raised, to start when this year's new students become Second years. They would need to pass the courses with a 75 at some point before being allowed to take the O.W.L.s."

"Our long-term goals will be an organization, or sets of organizations," Hermione now went on. "The umbrella group is 'Rights of Magical Persons.' ROMP will include the 'Elf Liberty Foundation,' for freeing the house elves and setting up fair employment practices; and 'Rights for Afflicted Wizards and Witches,' for werewolves and vampires. ROMP will also press for full rights for humans mixed with other magical beings and better relations between us and giants, merpeople, centaurs, goblins, and house elves."

"Very ambitious," was Dumbledore's only comment.

"Obviously, we cannot hope to push ROMP and its goals too far until Voldemort is defeated," Hermione went on. "Most of our concentration will be on that. But this will be my life's work, once Voldemort is defeated." This was said with quiet determination, and none in the room doubted Hermione's sincerity.

"We will incorporate all that as soon as we can," Harry said quietly. "If Voldemort wins, then little of what we do will matter in the long-run. If we win, then we will be prepared to move on." He handed Dumbledore a stack of parchment. "This includes copies of my will, the proposals for the courses and the rational, and the legal papers for ROMP, ELF, and RAWW. Could you ask someone with legal training to look them over?"

"Of course, Harry." Dumbledore left shortly there after, determined to see their projects through.

As the full moon approached, Colin's temper started to shorten, and he appeared slightly more feverish each day after August 23. Remus pointed out that nothing would alleviate the symptoms. Tonks, teasingly, said that a little TLC didn't hurt.

All the students, except for Ron, therefore threw themselves into coddling Colin (Ron instead took the time to help everyone else have more free time for Colin). The night of the 27th, with the moon nearly full, Colin was positively in agony, and all the next day he laid in a fever. As

Remus had pointed out early on in the process, the first transformation was by far the worst. Colin could not even take the Wolfsbane potion the first time -- the two times it had been tried in the past, the werewolf had died.

Colin tried to nap that final afternoon, but found it at first a very restless failure. Finally, Dean, Ginny, Luna, and Harry had cuddled around him, and he slept for over an hour.

Neither Colin nor Remus ate any dinner that evening, although Remus made sure Colin drank enough water. Shortly before moonrise, the pair would go out to the woodshed. Just before Colin came down to the non-magical entrance, Remus turned to Harry and Hermione. "Colin is frightened, of course, but he's not angry. It's anger that sets a wolf to attack itself or anything non-human near by, so with luck, neither of us will be terribly damaged. If a person were nearby, however, he would go into a frenzy."

They both nodded. They would make certain Dean stayed in. Tonks gave Remus a hug, and everyone gave Colin one between the time he came out of his room and his leaving the cabin with Remus. Ron even walked Colin down the stairs, his arm around the smaller boy's shoulders.

No one got much sleep that night.

Despite protests and pleadings from everyone, Tonks only allowed Harry to accompany her after the moon had set, since Dean was far too agitated. The others came down to the non-enchanted cabin, and Winky and Dobby were ready with ointment and bandages in case they were needed.

They checked the woodshed first, hoping Remus had managed to lead Colin back. Remus was there, one long gash down his left thigh.

"Colin?" Tonks asked.

Remus nodded. "It took about fifteen minutes to establish dominance." He grimaced. "If I hadn't been on the Wolfsbane, it would have taken about two minutes, but I didn't want to hurt him. He's a determined little bugger."

"Where is he?" Harry asked.

"Down by the crabapple grove, near the stream," Remus answered.

Harry nodded, and took his Firebolt down from the woodshed wall, where the brooms were stored. It took him less than three minutes to find Colin, laying nude by the small stream on the eastern side of the valley.

Harry approached quietly, and saw Colin was crying. "Colin?" Harry asked softly.

Colin rolled over on his back, and managed to choke out, "Oh, Jesus, Harry! It was . . . so awful."

Harry bent down and hugged Colin closely. "I'm so sorry we can't help you more, Colin."

"How . . . how can you bear to touch me? How can Dean . . . ever touch me again?"

Harry pulled out one of the handkerchiefs Luna had stuck in his robe and dried Colin's face. "Colin, never think it matters to any of us. Here, drink this. Remus says it helps your joints feel better."

Colin drank the potion, and Harry checked him for injuries. He could see where Remus had bitten Colin, but they were clean punctures that were already mostly healed over.

"Like what you see?" Colin asked, although his voice was a mere shadow of its flirtatious norm.

"If I were gay, and NOT your brother, I'm sure I'd find you scrumptious," Harry teased back. He hesitated but then he leaned forward and first kissed Colin lightly on his feverish forehead, and then lightly on the lips. "But you are my brother now, Colin. So, no more thoughts of incest, alright? Here put your robe on and let's get you back home."

Colin slipped the robe on, and then laid back, exhausted. His life was in so many ways a horror now, but he had the love of Dean, the fraternal affection of Harry, and more good friends now than he had had before the horrors had struck. He had a pack-brother in Remus, and sisters in Hermione and Ginny and Luna.

Life sucked, but at least he knew he could survive.

Chapter VIII

Saturday, August 31, 1996

In the end, the teens left the valley in the late afternoon on August 31. Knowing they would soon be leaving, Harry screwed up his courage shortly after lunch, asking to talk with Hermione in private.

Hermione looked puzzled. Over the previous weeks, they had become both a comfortable and passionate couple. The intense feelings they had felt during their first kiss had not abated in any way. They had, instead, deepened. At the same time, they had learned how to control those passions and keep them quiet until appropriate times.

"I know we're only sixteen, well, I am and you will be soon," Harry said as Hermione sat in her reading chair. Hermione's birthday would be September 19. "Anyway, I was wondering if you would honor me by wearing this." Harry knelt by her side and handed Hermione a small box.

Hermione's chocolate eyes went very wide at the sight of the box. "Harry . . ." she said softly, "this isn't . . . an engagement ring, is it?"

"No," Harry said with a smile. "It's more of a promise ring."

After a slight sigh of relief, Hermione gently if warily opened the box, and her breath fled. It was a mid-sized blue star sapphire, set in a slightly delicate red Welsh gold setting. "Harry . . . it's beautiful." She pulled it out, admired her birthstone, hesitated, and handed it to Harry with her right hand, and then held it out.

Harry took Hermione's small hand, and looked at it. "You have beautiful hands."

Hermione snorted. "I don't take care of them at all."

"I didn't say you had nicely varnished nails," Harry retorted, "I said you have beautiful hands, and fingers for that matter." Harry slipped the ring on her finger and gently kissed her hand and palm.

"Harry, tell me, is there ANY part of my body you don't think is beautiful?" Hermione teased, as her left hand caressed his cheek.

Harry considered. "Your elbows are too sharp; they really hurt!"

Hermione snorted and shook her head.

"Why don't you take care of you skin and nails, like most of the other girls? Even Ginny and Luna do to some extent. Are you against the idea, or can't you just be bothered?" Harry asked. Hermione hadn't even bother shaving her legs or underarms until that summer, when she had allowed Ginny to totally depilate her. "Obviously, it doesn't bother me," Harry added, "I'm just curious."

Hermione shrugged. "I just never had the time or inclination." She looked at her hands, seeing first the ragged nails, rough skin, and ink spots. Then she saw their shape, and saw them almost through Harry's eyes. It was time to smarten up her act, she decided, at least a little.

When they arrived at Hogwarts, it was late at night. The students retired to their usual rooms with a sleep draught. When they woke up in the morning, they would be fully adjusted back to their usual time zone.

Just before they turned in, Harry turned to Dean. "We're stuck here, but if you want to be with Colin, I won't tell."

Dean looked at Ron. "Go on, you lucky bastard," Ron growled. "It'll even be harder for you than it will be for us after tonight."

Dean smiled a little. "Thanks for being so understanding about all this."

"Cheers!" Ron said, holding up his vial after Dean left.

"Chin-chin," Harry agreed.

Hermione was in the girls' shower room the next morning, having woken up in time to run with Harry. Ginny walked in, and stared at her best friend. "Wow!" Ginny said.

"What?" Hermione demanded.

"You are looking . . . magnificent," Ginny admired. She hadn't seen Hermione nude since the second full day at the cabin. "You must have put on a good ten pounds of muscle in just one month." Hermione was as wasp-waisted as usual, but had added muscle to her legs, shoulders, and arms.

"About six, actually," Hermione admitted, wrapping a towel around herself.

"Are you going to let me keep you all nice and hairless?" Ginny asked.

"Of course," Hermione answered. "And I might even join in on Saturdays." Saturday mornings most of the Gryffindor and Ravenclaw girls, and many of the Hufflepuffs and even some of the Slytherins, came together for a morning of beauty treatments. Lavender and Parvati went every Saturday, while Ginny was known to go about once a month.

"Really?"

"Really," Hermione acknowledged. "How about you and Luna?"

"Luna never went, but it's time to start getting her accepted into the main stream." Both girls had been appalled when Harry had told them of the Ravenclaw treatment of Luna.

Ginny watched her friend take her ring off a gold chain and place it on her finger. "That is a gorgeous ring. I'm surprised Harry picked it."

"He has surprisingly good natural taste," Hermione admitted.

"If there's nothing else going on today, maybe I can give you and Luna manicures and pedicures," Ginny commented.

"I never thought you'd be interested in giving, or receiving, any of that . . . stuff."

Ginny shrugged. "To tell the truth, I don't care about them any more than you do, but it's fun to be pampered and actually even more fun to do." She grinned. "We can always ask Colin if I need help. I bet he'd love to help."

"He was never very macho, but he's really let his feminine side out a bit this summer," Hermione agreed.

Harry was waiting for them in the Common Room. Ron had already gone off to breakfast, while Colin and Dean had not been interested in getting out of bed yet. The students all ate at the Gryffindor table. There was a small pile of mail waiting for all of them, having built up all month. Colin and Dean finally wandered in just as the others were starting in on their mail.

After breakfast, Dumbledore came over to speak with them.

"A number of students sent me a petition this summer," Dumbledore said after his greetings. "They pointed out that they had few chances of meeting members of the other Houses. We will therefore be holding monthly dances once a month on Saturday evenings. The notices went out early last month. Full dress robes are not required; but we are encouraging more than workrobes or the House blazers."

"Something more like good everyday robes or business robes, then?" Henrietta asked.

"Exactly. Representatives from Hogsmeade will be here at Nine. If there are any other things you feel you need, please order it from them as well." He turned to Hermione, Ginny, and Ron. "Would you three be willing to portkey to London at Ten? It would help if you were to take the Hogwarts Express."

"Of course, sir," Hermione answered, happy to do her duty. Ron agreed with a bit less enthusiasm. Ginny's reaction was midway between them.

"Come along, then, Harry. The rest of you may join us when the Hogsmeade people arrive."

As Harry walked with Dumbledore towards the small room where the Tri-Wizard champions had received their instructions, the Headmaster spoke softly to Harry. "I hate to bring this up, but Arthur Weasley has been suspended by Cornelius Fudge. An appeal is in the process. In addition, there is the matter for the school fees for the Weasleys, and for Mister Thomas and your brother."

"And Ron and Ginny also need more supplies, don't they? I'd be glad to take care of them, Colin, and Dean," Harry answered.

"Good. Thank you Harry."

"Why was Mister Weasley suspended? I thought Fudge was being more cooperative?"

"Arthur seems to have been too zealous in supporting programs more pro-active than the Minister is comfortable with. He does not dare discipline the aurors or Madam Bones or myself. Arthur should have been proclaimed a hero, along with the rest of his family. Instead, it has been glossed over. There were three people seen as possible successors to Fudge: Madam Bones; Amos Diggory; and Arthur as the outside possibility. Arthur was the first Fudge struck at."

"So it's still just politics, not what's best for everyone?"

"At it's most simple, yes."

Harry didn't dare say anything more as they entered the room. Harry recognized Doris Crockford and Dedalus Diggle. Harry then saw the third of the four people was the barkeep of the Hog's Head. "My brother, Aberforth," Dumbledore said, "although I hope you shall keep that quiet. And this is Henry Lovegood."

Harry shook hands with both, and started signing documents as Mr. Diggle, who had trained as both a Muggle solicitor and wizard counselor, indicated. Harry gave Mr. Lovegood the inside story on ROMP and Colin.

Just as the last parchments were being witnessed, the door was flung open and they saw Hermione hustling Colin ahead of her while Dean guarded her back. Fudge, Percy, and two others were following them, yelling in scolding tones. Ron, Ginny, and Luna were shouting at them from behind.

"Silence!" Dumbledore commanded. Surprisingly, all obeyed. "Now, what do you want, Minister?"

"We have come to take control of this werewolf! All werewolves who are not fully qualified wizards must have someone responsible for them! As he is an orphan with no close relations, we shall have to . . . make other arrangements."

"And werewolves are NOT to be admitted to schools any longer!" Percy added. "OW!" Ginny had kicked him.

"First of all, Colin was admitted before he was bitten. Therefore, he is here legally," Dumbledore started to explain.

"Creevy was NOT under our supervision during his first transformation!" one of the two other wizards protested. "We have to see if the bite was fully infectious!"

"It was," Dumbledore said.

"Oh . . . well. . . ."

"Still, with no one responsible for him, we have little choice," Fudge stated, with an evil leer.

"What do you intend to do!" Dean demanded.

"There are various werewolf colonies, where these . . . children may be placed," Fudge said.

"Those are no better than concentration camps!" Hermione protested. "Children abandoned by society, forced to give up civilization! It's barbaric!"

"It's the law! Give me your wand, Creevy!" the second unidentified man demanded.

Harry had been looking at Dumbledore the entire time. Dumbledore now looked at Harry, as if to say, 'It's up to you.'

"Colin," Harry said with authority, "come here."

"Stay out of this, Potter!" Fudge blustered. Percy was about to say something, then saw the looks on Ron and Ginny's faces and silenced himself. Colin came over and partially hid behind Harry and Dean, who had followed him.

"I am afraid that there is no Creevy here," Dumbledore stated quietly.

"Weasley! Isn't that Colin Creevy?" Fudge demanded.

"Well, it looks like him to me, Minister," Percy said, puzzled.

"This was Colin Creevy," Harry said with authority. "I have brought him into the House of Potter."

"What!" Fudge, Percy, and one of the two other officials cried out.

"I have brought Colin into the House of Potter as my foster brother. He is now Colin Potter."

"And since Harry has nine O.W.L.s, he IS a fully qualified wizard, even if he is not legally an adult," Hermione put in.

"The dislike you and your faction have for me is well documented," Harry stated, looking right at Fudge. "Your assistant Umbridge set a pair of dementors on me, tortured me, and tried to use an Unforgivable and Veritaserum on me."

"She did all that without my authority!" Fudge cried out.

"Oh? So, you finally admit the charges are justified! Great!"

"Lovegood! that was off the record!"

"Nonsense," Mr. Lovegood stated. "It was an unguarded admission."

Percy leaned over and whispered in the Minister's ear. Fudge frowned, but took a deep breath. "Very well, Lovegood. Give up your Ministry authorizations if you wish to go against your craft's so-called code of ethics."

Luna, who had moved to stand next to her father, started to protest. Lovegood smiled and quieted her with a hand on her shoulder. "Since you've both forgotten, let me remind you those privileges were revoked after I published the interview with Harry Potter here. So, don't try and threaten me." He turned to Diggle. "I take it you have all the paperwork on Potter's enrollment of this young man?"

"I do, and I can assure everyone, it's all in proper form," Diggle replied.

"Then I do not believe there is anything here that need detain you, Minister," Dumbledore said, his voice carrying a tone of authority that made Fudge cringe.

"But Headmaster, perhaps the Minister would like to answer Mister Lovegood's questions on his attempts to remove the political dissenters who oppose Voldemort from the Ministry," Hermione said viciously. Harry realized that the Weasleys must have sent news of Mr. Weasley's suspension.

"Not to mention those who defend the rights of the Muggles, the Muggle-born, and those of mixed-heritage," Ginny added.

Fudge fled, followed by Percy, who looked at his siblings apologetically. The other pair, however, stayed.

"Sorry, Mister Creevy . . . I mean, Mister Potter," one said. "We, as representatives of the various werewolf offices, still need to talk with you. I am sorry, but there is still a large amount of paperwork we need to go through."

"Mister Diggle. . . ?" Harry asked.

"Yes? Oh, of course my boy! My pleasure!" Diggle jumped up. "Stay available, Harry," he added. "I believe there will be a number of things you'll have to sign as well."

"May I stay?" Dean asked, putting a protective hand on Colin's shoulder.

"I don't know. . . ." the more sullen of the two Ministry men started.

"Mister Potter?" the other asked Harry.

"Of course Dean may stay, if it's okay with Colin," Harry answered.

Everyone else evacuated the room. Harry turned to Ginny. "Before the Hogsmeade people show up, could you get Hedwig for me?"

Ginny looked indecisive, but said, "Sure, Harry."

Harry put his hand on Ginny shoulder as the others went on ahead. "Please, Ginny. Let me help you two, at least this one time," he said softly.

"Ron will have a fit," Ginny said.

"I know," Harry acknowledged. "Just order him the minimum if he fusses. Don't feel you have to limit yourself to the same."

"Really?" Ginny said.

"I know I can trust you not to go crazy. Please, Ginny? If you would take it from Bill or George, please, take it from me."

Ginny managed to smile. "Alright."

"Don't forget robes for the dances," Harry added. "I think you'll need at least three different ones."

She smiled a bit broader. "I won't forget." Harry looked around, and whispered in her ear. Ginny grinned in return.

As Ginny walked out, Harry sat down and borrowed quill and parchment from Hermione. "Harry, could I borrow some money?" Hermione asked.

"You may have anything you want," Harry answered, glad he had access to his Gringotts account.

"Thank you, Harry," Hermione said, leaning over and kissing his temple. "I made a complete list of thing to pick up if I don't have time to be more than measured. What are you up to?"

"I have letters from all the media," Harry answered. "I'm writing back, saying I would give them interviews, except I understand that Minister Fudge will pull their Ministry access and other press privileges if they print anything I say that he doesn't like, just as he did with The Quibbler."

Hermione smiled. "Good boy." She kissed the back of his neck.

Just as the Hogsmeade people started setting up in the Great Hall, Ron sidled up to Harry. "Harry, mate. . . ." Ron sighed. "Harry . . . I hate to ask. . . ."

Harry didn't look up from his letter writing. "Consider it gift, or a long-term, interest free loan if you want, Ron, or consider it your Christmas and birthday gift."

"Thanks."

"Talk with Ginny, to make certain you don't forget anything."

Ron grumbled, and then said, "Alright."

After sending Hedwig away, Harry saw there was a goblin sitting at a small table. Harry walked over. The goblin nodded. "Mister Potter; I am Gosbeak. How may I be of service?"

"I need to set up three small vaults and a larger one," Harry answered. "Plus I'll be paying for myself and five others today."

"Are the four people you are opening vaults for available now?"

"Miss Granger is over there, talking to the person from Glad Rags. My brother and his friend are talking with the Ministry people right now."

"Brother?" Surprise -- it was the first real emotion Harry had seen in a goblin, other than slight annoyance.

"Foster brother," Harry clarified.

"Ah," the goblin said. He went on. "Miss Granger already has one of our smallest vaults." Seeing Harry's puzzled look. "Her family has been transferring small amounts via their Muggle bank these last two years. They earn a better exchange rate, which nearly pays for the vault. And the fourth?"

"I see," Harry said, ignoring the question. "Tell me, will the smallest vaults hold at least two thousand Galleons?"

"Yes, but little more."

"Please transfer a thousand Galleons into Miss Granger's account. Please arrange the same size vaults for my brother, Colin Potter, and for Dean Thomas. Deposit fifteen hundred in Colin's, five hundred in Dean's. Here is a copy of a statement of incorporation -- I need . . . a vault which can hold at least thirty-thousand Galleons for this account, but only transfer in twelve thousand. I also need four school fees transferred to Hogwarts, in addition to my own."

"Please have the three come over to sign the vault papers when they are available," the goblin said, filling out forms with rapidity.

"Of course. Thank you for your efficiency."

The goblin smiled, revealing rows of sharp teeth. "Gringotts guaranties efficiency and honesty, Mister Potter."

"As long as you read any fine print," Hermione said, coming up behind them. Harry quietly handed her the paperwork the goblin had just handed him.

"You don't have to do this, Harry," Hermione whispered, when she realized what the papers said.

"No, I don't, but I will," Harry responded.

"How much do you have in your vault?" Hermione asked.

"Gospeak?" Harry asked.

"I was only been informed of the approximate contents of your current account, Mister Potter. With the recent addition of the liquid assets from the Black estate, it went from 160,578

Galleons to 494,871 Galleons, after taxes. As of right now, no monies from your investments are to be added to your current account until you are older, but I do know your current account is just a small portion of the total."

"Approximately?" Harry asked.

"No sickles or knuts, or any other articles of value," Hermione said.

"Ah."

"Mister Potter does have various incomes, which are all still being reinvested automatically for the time being. Some are freed up when he turns seventeen, the others will be freed when he turns eighteen, twenty-one, twenty-five, or thirty," the goblin said.

"Alright," Hermione said. "Do what you want with part of the current account."

"You two must sign here to activate the ROMP accounts," Gospeak stated.

Hermione smiled and signed, and then dragged him over to the wizard optometrist Dumbledore had arranged to come just for Harry.

After Hermione, Ginny, and Ron left, Harry had a few words with Dean and Colin. He only had trouble with Dean.

"Harry, my parents weren't rich, but we were far from poor."

"And you're going to need that money when you leave here," Harry argued back. "Do you or Colin have any idea what you're going to do once you leave? I mean, there aren't any wizarding universities . . . I wonder if we could even get into a regular university. . . ."

Dean smiled. "Idiot. We have . . . what was it McGonagall called them? . . . 'special relationships' with Oxford, London, Edinburgh, and Dublin, not to mention other schools. I'll be going to art school in London, remember? Still, thanks, Harry, for everything."

Colin grabbed Harry with a strong hug. "Thanks, brother." He rested his head on Harry's shoulder, and pulled Dean into the embrace as well.

Harry smiled. He really had an official family that cared, as well as a wonderful unofficial one.

Chapter IX

Sunday, September 1, 1996

Harry spent the afternoon exploring the collapsed tunnel behind a mirror on the fourth floor between the Gryffindor and Ravenclaw towers. All he knew about it was that the Weasley twins had told him it had collapsed.

The mirror opened onto a landing that extended about twenty feet before going down a set of stairs. Ignoring various landings for the moment, Harry climbed well down below ground level. The collapsed area was a good half mile towards Hogsmeade. As best Harry could tell, it was a solid cave-in. He decided to ask George or Fred to check it out from the other end.

There were no exits or doors on the second or third floors, or on the ground or dungeon levels. On the first floor, however, Harry discovered a long abandoned set of rooms through a secret panel off the landing. Checking the map, Harry realized he was near the little-used theater; in fact, the rooms were under and behind the seats. The rooms consisted of a classroom, an office, and a lavatory, although the water was turned off.

Harry used a few of the household charms Luna had taught them that summer and sat in the chair behind the desk in the office once it was cleaned up a bit. He considered, and pulled out a little bell and rang it.

"Master Harry?"

Harry had found Dobby much more pleasant to be around, once they were thrown together that summer. Dobby had tentatively offered his services to Harry once Harry had left school, and Harry had accepted. Dobby had given Harry a bell to use to call him, and begged to be of any service during the year as well. Hermione, to her great surprise, had been offered the same deal by Winky, and had accepted it. They were currently in negotiations over pay. Harry had convinced them both that Winky could wear anything she wanted, even her preferred pillow case.

"Sorry to bother you, Dobby; I know you're all busy getting the feast ready."

Dobby almost swooned, so pleased he was that Harry would think of him and his busy life.

"Do you know where we are?"

"An abandoned place, Master Harry."

"I think I will need a private place, Dobby, a place I can go to be alone."

"And to be with Miss Herminny?" Dobby suggested.

Harry sighed. "Yes, Dobby. And for her to have a private place to study. Anyway, I know I can trust you to keep my secret, right?"

"Yes, sir!" Dobby hesitated. "If Headmaster asks, Dobby would have to tell."

"Dumbledore and Hermione, no one else!" He thought a moment, and added, "Except Winky, if you need to."

"Yes, Master Harry!"

"Do you think the water and drains in the lavatory can be reconnected?"

"Yes, Master Harry!"

"Can you do it?"

"Yes, Master Harry."

"It obviously doesn't have to be done today, but I need the water and drains connected, the fireplace cleared if necessary, the classroom cleared, and the rooms cleaned. A sofa or something we can rest on, some stuffed chairs, and some lamps for this room, lamps and a library table for the classroom. Whatever else you think useful."

"When would Master Harry need this finished?" Dobby asked.

"Certainly not before Friday afternoon," Harry answered. "Don't neglect your other work, or over-work yourself. Okay?"

"Yes, Master Harry."

"Thank you, Dobby."

Dobby smiled, then hesitated. "May Dobby ask Winky to help?"

"If Winky can keep it secret until I show Hermione."

"Winky can keep it secret unless asked a direct question." Dobby hesitated, then said, "House elves very good at not being asked direct questions."

"Fine, do what you think best."

Dobby smiled again and disappeared.

Harry looked at his watch and hustled off. He was to meet Dumbledore to look over the area of the dungeons where the DA would meet that year and where a gym was being set up.

"What the matter, Harry?" Dean asked as Harry paced up and down their room later that evening.

"Just worried about Hermione," he admitted.

"For any particular reason?"

Harry just said one word. "Malfoy."

"And?"

"Malfoy will look for me to insult me, as usual. Remember, we hexed him at the end of the last two years; I'm just worried he and his goons might catch Hermione alone."

"We'll know soon enough. I'd be more worried about him catching Ron than catching Hermione."

"Good point."

Harry paced some more.

"Harry, this term is going to be . . . rough, isn't it?"

"Let's see, Voldemort and the Death Eaters will likely attack more of our friends' families, if not us; all the homophobes, and some of the secret homosexuals who want to avoid being identified, will be attacking Colin at the least; the Pure-Bloods will be after Colin as a werewolf; Malfoy and his group will be after all of us; and God only knows what kind of Defense teacher we'll have. Add in Fudge, the different werewolf people at the Ministry, the publicity Colin will get as my foster brother, and having a bloody dance once a month. . . ."

"So, pretty much things as usual, huh?"

Harry smiled, then asked, "Do Seamus or Neville . . . know?"

"That I'm gay? Seamus does. He thinks it's a bit odd, but basically he figures the less competition the better."

"When will Seamus learn leering doesn't get girls?"

"Or boys." Dean shrugged with a smile. "I hope Neville doesn't take it too badly."

"He's more likely to be upset Ginny is dating Luna," Harry answered. He frowned. "I know I'm oblivious, but ARE there any other openly gay couples here?"

"Not in Gryffindor, although Lee and Oliver were both in the closet, not that they were together that I know of. Katie is sort of out of the closet with Su Li over in Ravenclaw, but they don't parade it. Bulstrode and Greengrass over in Slytherin, and Kevin Entwistle and Stephen Cornfoot in Ravenclaw, aren't exactly out, but everyone probably knows about them, except you. There are a few others, but not couples." He sighed. "Colin and I probably won't parade it, either, unless we have to to back up Ginny and Luna."

"Malfoy?"

Dean shrugged. "I don't think he cares who or what he screws. Barring a person, he'd probably grease up a knothole or a kneazle."

Harry shuddered at the image.

"Why don't you wear out the floor somewhere else?" Dean suggested. Harry took him up on the idea.

Harry was just wandering around the castle. He suddenly heard a sharp, soft intake of a breath, and partially turned, his wand out, as the person commanded, "Legilimens!"

Harry's mind grabbed the intruding thought, and mentally held it in a vise-like grip with his mind. Then he squeezed.

He squeezed until Snape cried out in agony.

Only then did Harry fully turn around.

Snape had partially collapsed on the floor, and was leaning against the corridor wall. "Oh, it's you, Professor Snape," Harry said with faux concern and a nearly-sneering politeness. He dropped the connection, and Snape fell to his hands and knees. "May I assist you to stand?"

"No," Snape said, keeping his eyes on Harry. "No, that will NOT be necessary." He managed to stand on his own. "Well done. I see the Headmaster . . . was if anything under-reporting your progress." Snape cleared his throat. He looked at Harry, as if uncertain how to proceed. Finally, he said, "May I presume you wish the Wolfsbane potion made for . . . your brother, come October?"

Harry remembered it was deemed safe for a werewolf to take the potion for their third transformation and thereafter. "Yes, please. That would be . . . very helpful of you."

"The temporary headmistress started an audit, which might be restarted at any time," Snape said. "There are certain . . . expensive ingredients which we were barely able to account for. Now that everything must be nearly doubled. . . ."

"How much?" Harry asked bluntly. Apparently, everyone now knew he was wealthy and wanted to help him spend it.

"A hundred and sixty-five Galleons would take care of a three year supply," Snape answered.

"Cheque or private transfer?" Harry asked. "I don't think I could easily get to Gringotts to get cash."

"Since you are not going to be my student this year, and thank you for that, by the way, any method would be acceptable."

"Shall I make it an even two hundred, for other supplies and such?" Harry asked.

Snape flushed slightly. "Thank you; any donation to the programs would be welcome."

Snape started to turn, but was halted by Harry's voice. "May I ask you something, Professor?"

"What?"

"Some questions on wizarding behavior. Not having had the advantage of being raised by my parents or godfather, I have some questions best answered by an adult male Pure-blood wizard, one not as . . . forgiving as the Headmaster or Remus Lupin."

That caught Snape's attention. 'Amazing how like his father the Boy can be,' Snape thought, but his inner honesty finally made him add, 'The difference is, this is the Boy at nearly his most insolent, while this was his father at nearly his most polite.' "Yes?" was all he said, however.

"Once we leave school, is it true that I could walk up to Malfoy, for example, challenge him to a duel, and even if he refuses, I may hex him?"

"Within limits, yes." Snape hesitated, then said, "and if he accepts, and if you both sign off on it, with proper seconds and a judge, it may even legally be . . . to the death."

"I see. And while it's generally seen that one should fight their own battles, isn't also generally agreed that some wizards may exercise a right of protection over those who are his responsibility?"

"While a wizard may protect anyone weak, an escalated response is only justified if the person under attack has been publically placed under the wizard's protection, and that right acknowledged. So, for example, you could not make that statement in regards to Miss Granger at this time. And, to give you a word of advice, I wouldn't suggest you do so in regards to Miss Weasley or Miss Lovegood, either, at least not without consulting them."

"Thank you. And would that public statement really need to be made in regards to Colin being attacked by older students, or by ANYONE with silver?" Harry asked.

Snape looked Harry in the eye, and was a bit surprised by what he thought he saw. "Perhaps I might make such an announcement for you, to certain . . . individuals?"

"I would appreciate it that very much," Harry said sincerely. "And. . . ?"

"And I shall make certain Mister Cr . . . Potter does not have to handle silver in class."

"Thank you, Professor Snape. I really do appreciate that." Harry was obviously sincerely grateful, which surprised Snape a little.

"I will need that bank draft by a week from tomorrow," Snape reminded Harry.

"Yes, sir. That will take care of both Colin and Remus?"

"Yes, it will. Your brother's case will be more difficult; he's a much smaller . . . person than Lupin, and we will likely have to try several minor variations before we hit on the best formula."

Harry smiled. "I have every confidence you will solve any problems, Professor."

Snape sketched a bow, and hurried away. For five full years, he had despised Harry Potter, and had done so because of his hatred of James and the Boy's own traits.

He had just seen Lily's sense of justice and compassion, linked with James' nobility complex, and had, for the first time, gotten a sense of a power he had only seen in Dumbledore and the Dark Lord.

He was very grateful the Boy was NOT in his class this year.

"Any problems on the train?" Harry finally managed to softly ask Ron as yet another student was sorted into a different House.

"Malfoy and his enlarged posse tried, but two aurors showed up right before Neville hexed them."

"Neville?"

Neville leaned across the table. "It's my new wand, Harry! Oak and dragon heart-string. Mister Ollivander said more than half my problems were from using the wrong wand!"

Harry grinned. "Great! We can use you in the DA this year!"

Hermione turned her attention back to Ron and Harry. "That's the last! Nine; not a bad haul for us this year."

"How many in Slytherin?" Harry asked.

"Just seven, and all old Slytherin families," Lavender contributed. "And did you see Malfoy's cousin? He looks like a weak and stupid version of Draco."

"We shouldn't judge just by appearances," Hermione stated firmly, but then admitted, "He didn't look very promising though, did he?"

"Are you FINALLY going to tell us who the ring was from?" Parvati demanded. She and Lavender had both been certain at first it had been from Ron, until their distance, and the obvious expense of the ring, ended the idea. Lavender was betting on Krum, Parvati had been undecided.

Harry leaned over and quickly kissed Hermione's temple. Lavender and Parvati looked stunned. "Harry!" Hermione whispered, "NOT in public!"

"Oh," Dean said to the shocked students around them, "there are more surprises than that!"

"WELCOME, TO ANOTHER YEAR AT HOGWARTS!" Dumbledore boomed, quieting the room. "As most of you are aware, attacks from the sources of Darkness have been frequent this summer. We have lost several students, and several more families of students. Therefore, let me state this firmly -- THERE SHALL BE NO MORE TOLERANCE GIVEN TO THOSE WHO ACT IN LORD VOLDEMORT'S INTERESTS!" There was no doubt the group Dumbledore was directly addressing.

"To make certain you all understand what this means, the Heads of Houses will be meeting with their students directly after the Feast. A memorial service will be held late Tuesday afternoon, just before dinner, for those who were lost this summer. Pursuant to that, I am certain you all know most of the Creevy family was killed in one of those attacks, including Denis Creevy, who would have been a Third year tonight, and his sister, Nicole, who would have been a First year. Fortunately Colin, a Fifth year, is with us; however he is no longer Colin Creevy. Harry Potter has invoked one of the ancient rites and enrolled Colin into his Clan, Family, and House, and is now Colin Potter."

Colin, who was tearing up at the thoughts of his family, was not called upon to stand. Harry had been staring at Malfoy the entire time. He had been actually gloating up until the announcement of Colin's new status. That got the entire Slytherin group talking, and Malfoy gave Harry a puzzled glance.

"On happier notes, at the request of a number of students from all four Houses, we will be having a monthly informal dance once a month this term. If these are successful, we shall continue the custom."

This gathered some applause, especially from the girls.

"We have two new members of the staff to introduce. Doctor Tyler Powell will be our new Muggle Studies professor." A youngish, muscular-looking man stood. "Mister Timothy Law is our new Defense teacher." A paunchy late middle-aged wizard of average height and piercing blue eyes also stood, to the light applause both garnered. Both men looked similar right down to their mustaches, although Law's hair was 'salt and pepper'. "Professor Law is a retired hit-wizard for the International." The room went dead silent. Aurors were the law enforcers, but hit-wizards were a small group who, in the Muggle phrase, were 'licensed to kill.' Somehow, he didn't look as jolly as he had a few moments before.

"In addition, Professor Remus Lupin is rejoining us as a security consultant. Now, as most of you know, Professor Lupin is a werewolf. . . ." There was a slight stir at that, especially from the younger students.

"The infection may only be passed on by the afflicted person in their wolf form; that is, during those short hours from when the moon hits total fullness until the moon sets that night. A human bite will not spread the infection, although for forty-eight hours before the full moon and for twenty-four hours after the full moon sets, a human bite will result in a mild fever. Voldemort used dark werewolves to destroy the Creevy family. Mister Colin Potter was bitten in the attack." The noise level rose for a few seconds, but Dumbledore spoke over it. "Both Mister Potter and Professor Lupin will be taking the Wolfsbane potion. So again, there is no need to be alarmed. You are all fully safe."

Dumbledore took a great breath of relief. "Let the Feast begin!"

"What?" Dean demanded to the rest of the table a few minutes later. "Stop staring at Colin!"

"Dean, calm down," Ginny said. She turned to the first years under her charge. "I spent the last month with Colin and some of my other friends. There's absolutely nothing to be afraid of. Alright?"

"Eventful summer, I take it?" Lavender asked Hermione.

"Very."

"We'll talk about some of it when we get the Firsties and Seconds off to bed," Harry said. He looked up the table at the Seventh years. Katie Bell, the Head girl, nodded.

McGonagall had lectured the entire House on proper behavior for ten minutes, then another ten on how to try and avoid trouble, and then sent the first two years off to bed after making the Quidditch announcements. She had then lectured the remaining students for five minutes on setting a good example.

Katie took over the meeting as the Professor left. "Anyone have anything to say before I start?" she demanded.

Colin stood up. "This has been a very . . . difficult summer for me. I lost most of my life this summer. I thought I would be coming back with a dark secret, but instead, I've decided to be totally honest with all of you. I hope . . . I hope even if some of you hate what I am, that you can tolerate me being here."

One of the Fifth year boys stood. "You all know me by sight. If you don't know me by name, I'm William Lloyd." Harry was a bit worried, as he was by far the loudest pro-Pure-Blood in Gryffindor. "You all know my background, as I've been told I've spouted off about it too often!" That brought a few titters.

"Colin, I'm sorry for everything that happened to you this summer. To you and your family. I don't hold it against you, mate."

William started to put his hand out, but Colin stopped him. "Before you shake my hand, you should know . . . I'm gay."

Dean stood up and walked over to just behind Colin, and put his hands on Colin's shoulders. "And I'm his boyfriend."

"About time you got out of the bloody closet," Seamus said. "Well done."

William stared at the pair for several seconds, then burst out laughing. In seconds, he was actually on the floor.

"What's so amusing?" Hermione demanded.

"My parents. . . ." William managed to get out. "Mother was a Slytherin; Father, a Ravenclaw. . . . Both hate Muggles . . . and 'deviants.' . . . And my best friend is a gay Muggle-born werewolf, dating a Muggle-born black! . . . They'll have fits when my sis writes 'em!"

"If anyone has a problem with either issue, I ask you keep it to keep it to yourselves," Harry said with quiet authority. Every eye went to him. "The Dark Lord is after me. That makes all of you targets to some degree. I'm sorry; it's not by my choice, I assure you. I would like to think none of you would side with the Death Eaters, but. . . ." He trailed off, not totally certain how to go on.

"So, when's the first meeting of the DA?" Parvati asked. There were sounds of agreement.

"Are you certain you want to keep it up?" Harry asked.

"Listen, Harry," Lavender told him, "I'm not the bravest person around. I still don't know why I was put in Gryffindor rather than Hufflepuff like most of my family. But I do know one thing. The Dark Lord threatens us all. The only way we have a good chance of getting out of this, if it lasts much longer, is by sticking together. You know how to fight; you know how to survive. I intend to do both. Teach me, and I'll follow you."

"I've known you for over five years now, Harry," Parvati said. "You're a lousy date, but you are the one person I trust to lead me. I'm with you."

The entire group of students agreed with Parvati and Lavender. In short order, Harry had them seated to listen. He told them the inside story of his first year, and then he and Ginny told them about the Chamber of Secrets. Harry went on to tell them a shortened version of Sirius and Wormtail, and a slightly fuller version of the Third Task and the Battle at the Ministry. Hermione, Ron, Ginny, and Neville added their perspectives as well.

Then Harry told them the Prophecy. Everyone was quiet as they contemplated what Harry faced. "Well," Harry said when he was finished, "what do you all say now?"

Lavender stood up, tears running down her cheeks, walked over to Harry, and to his shock, kissed him. "Thank you, Harry," she said. "I wouldn't want my worst enemy to have a burden like that. I promise, I will help you carry that burden." She turned to Hermione. "I'll help you help him, too."

Parvati hugged Hermione and agreed.

As silence went over the group, Margery Cadfael, a very small, very shy Third year came out from her usual dark corner. She never spoke unless spoken to. The general consensus had always been she should have been in Ravenclaw, as most of her family had been since the founding of the school, or Slytherin, for her family was even older than Lloyd's, predating the druids.

"Harry?" she said in a soft, high voice.

"Yes?"

"You won't give in, to Him, I mean, will you?"

"No, I won't," Harry promised.

"Then I swear my allegiance to Harry Potter." She looked around. "Either we stand up to evil, or we deserve what happens to us. We know there are people here, especially in Slytherin, who will support the Dark Lord. I say, we support Harry!"

The cheering nearly woke up the younger students.

Chapter X

Monday, September 2, 1996

By the end of August, Harry, Hermione, Ginny, Luna, and Dean had been running every morning, although only Harry and Dean were running the whole hour. The Gryffindors runners therefore jogged out of their Common Room at 6:25 and went towards Ravenclaw, where they picked up Luna. Harry cut the time short, since they had to jog back up the many steps to shower. They all made it to the Great Hall by 7:30.

Ron was already there, eating his second portions. He handed the Sixth years their schedules. Ron, Harry, and Hermione compared theirs, as they had every year since their Third.

Harry:

CharmsM. . . . 8:00- 9:20
Care/Creatures . . .M. . . . 9:30-10:50
Muggle Studies . . .MW . . . 1:00- 1:50
Transfiguration. . .T. . . . 8:00- 9:20
MedicineT. . . . 9:30-10:50
Defense.W. . . . 2:30- 3:50

Hermione:

CharmsM. . . . 8:00- 9:20
Care/Creatures . . .M. . . . 9:30-10:50
Transfiguration. . .T. . . . 8:00- 9:20
MedicineT. . . . 9:30-10:50
Defense.W. . . . 2:30- 3:50
Runes.R. . . . 8:00- 9:20
ArithmancyR. . . . 9:30-10:50

Ron:

CharmsM. . . . 8:00- 9:20
Care/Creatures . . .M. . . . 9:30-10:50
Herbology.MWF. . .11:00-11:50
MinistryW. . . . 8:00- 9:20
DivinationW. . . . 9:30-10:50
Defense.W. . . . 2:30- 3:50

Ron smiled. "No Potions."

Harry returned the smile and raised a glass of juice. "No potions!"

None of the Sixth year Gryffindors were taking the subject, and so all raised their glasses in the toast. Even Hermione, although she cast a nervous glance at Snape as they all said, "No potions."

Harry glanced that way, and saw Snape lift his coffee cup and mouth, "And no Gryffindors!"

The N.E.W.T. Charms class was huge, with twenty-eight students from all four Houses. "No Malfoy," Ron pointed out with satisfaction.

"With luck, we won't have many classes with him," Harry muttered back.

Hermione said nothing, knowing that Malfoy, for all his faults, was intelligent. He would no doubt share Runes and Arithmancy with her.

They were meeting not in the usual Charms classroom, but in a large, dusty cellar, far away from the Potions Dungeons. Professor Flitwick pointed out that this would be a very full term: they would be learning most of the household charms in one term that the 'Practical Charms' class would be learning over the next two years, while the next term and the first term of their Seventh year would be mostly devoted to theory.

Professor Flitwick then made each student go through two minutes of wand work, making certain their motions were crisp. The quartet, having had the chance to practice for a month, all won points for Gryffindor.

Creatures was a more reasonable size, with fourteen students from all four Houses (Hermione, Millicent Bulstrode, and Megan Jones from Hufflepuff were the only girls). Malfoy was again missing, although Crabbe, Goyle, and Nott were still there.

"Mornin' all!" Hagrid greeted. "I've got us some interestin' critters this year!"

All the students groaned slightly.

"Now, now, now! None of that then! How many of you own familiars?" Nine of the students raised their hands. "Let's see, six owls, two cats, and a toad?" The students nodded.

"Good, some practical experience takin' care o' living things outside of class." He pulled a sack out from behind him. "Now then, these pair things 'ave been underfed since birth, aye, an' abused, too. I want them perfectly healthy and well-fed by the last class in December."

"Puffskeins?" several students demanded.

"Aye, Puffskeins. They're a bit more sensitive than most people think; you need to feed 'em without overfeeding them. An' you need to get this tonic into 'em, at least once a day, fer at least six weeks. You need to stroke them. Right now, they weigh between about one hundred and one hundred an' thirty grams. They should weigh between six hundred and seven hundred grams by December. You all got O.W.L.s, so you should know what yer doin' by now!" Hagrid looked uncharacteristically fierce. "If any die due ta neglect or abuse, you fail, an' I'll boot your arse out o' class! Now, bring 'em by once a week."

"That's it?" Hermione asked.

"Barrin' one gettin' sick, yeah, that's it for this term. Extra credit for each trick ya manage to teach yers. Twenty-two per cent of yer N.E.W.T. will be askin' ya questions about a creature's care and behavior. This time, it's puffskeins. Three per cent will be on handling 'em." Hagrid

handed each student a wicker cage, pamphlet and thin ledger. "The pamphlet explains basic care; the ledger is to keep track o' feedin' an' such, fer extra credit." Hermione perked up. "If one gets sick, that's no points off, unless it's fer neglect or abuse." Hagrid glared at the three Slytherin boys. "That includes bein' poisoned or hexed. Ye may be aware that's why there're no Slytherins who've managed to get into the Seventh year class fer several years."

The class broke up shortly there after. Hermione had, of course, taken the smallest and weakest puffskein, and she and Neville had stopped to ask for pointers. The group had also arranged to come to tea later that week.

Walking back, the Gryffindor quartet saw the Slytherins having it out. "What're you lookin' at?" Crabbe groused at them as they approached.

"Millicent, may I have a word?" Hermione said sweetly. Harry, Neville, and Ron looked at each other in surprise.

"What do you want?" Millicent demanded, suspicious as she walked over.

"May I make a suggestion? I think you should take care of those three puffskeins. If your roommates don't like pets, find some Third or Fourth years who can."

"Why?"

"Do you think those three could keep a fly alive?" Hermione demanded. "If you want all three to fail, don't pay any attention to me."

"They won't learn anything, then!" The Gryffindors merely looked at her. Millicent scowled, but then sighed. "You're partially right, of course. Vincent doesn't have the brains, and he and Ted would probably prefer to roast them than care for them." She stalked over to the three Slytherin males. Nott said something, which made Crabbe laugh. Goyle slugged Crabbe, while Millicent flattened Nott. When Nott stood up, he and Crabbe stalked off. Goyle and Millicent took the four cages.

"Why did you do that?" Ron asked. "What?" he demanded, as Harry and Neville rolled their eyes.

"She did it so those puffskeins have a chance to survive," Harry said proudly. He leaned over and kissed her cheek. "I'm very proud of you."

Now Ron rolled his eyes, and went off to Herbology with Neville, both leaving their puffskeins in Hermione's care.

"Where to, Milady?" Harry asked.

"To the dorms, to water our puffskeins," Hermione said severely. "I need to introduce them to Crookshanks."

"Yes, dear," Harry said affectionately. Hermione gave Harry a dirty look.

Harry and Hermione introduced the four puffskeins to Crookshanks, who seemed very uninterested. They spent the rest of the time before lunch comforting the First years, who had had their first Potions class that morning. As Harry and Hermione guided the Firsties to the Great Hall, Hermione thanked Harry for everything he had done the day before.

Harry smiled to himself, knowing Hermione didn't know the half of what he'd done. Knowing Ron would be in a hurry, they saved him a place.

Draco Malfoy caught Millicent Bulstrode as she made her way to lunch from Herbology.

"What do you want, Draco?" she asked in a neutral tone.

"You sound . . . displeased, Millie, dear," Draco managed to drawl, despite her fast pace.

"You talked me into joining that damned Inquisitorial Squad. It was fun for a while, but we are damn lucky all we officially lost was three prefect positions."

Draco winced. "What. . . ."

"Don't think people like Macmillan and Entwhistle have forgiven us, Draco. Don't think that the Hufflepuffs or the Ravenclaws couldn't jump you and your trio and whack the shit out of you. And never think the Gryffindors might not do worse."

"They have no real sense of organization," Draco scoffed. "Potter is the only potential leader, and he doesn't like leading."

"Granger might be able to stiffen his spine," Millicent warned. "Or maybe the events of last June will. After all, the Potter we think we know wouldn't have adopted that little pest."

"So?"

"So," Millicent answered, "that's a statement, saying he'll stand up for what he believes in. Tell me, did you have the guts to take the Dark Mark this summer? I can't believe you weren't at least given the opportunity!" She leered at Draco. "Or is the rumor going around Knockturn Alley about His ancestry true?"

Draco went even paler. "We don't know," he admitted softly. "Potter did make the claim during the Battle. Aunt Bellatrix told my Mother."

"Then Potter believes it's true," Millicent said simply. "You know none of that bunch would have the imagination to think that one up! Especially not Potter, and not in the heat of battle! So, it's either true, or Potter at least thinks it's true."

"That doesn't help much," Draco complained. He glanced around and verified they were alone. "None of the . . . followers who are . . . out of commission want to continue their association if He is a half-blood of the worst sort. How could He really believe in Pure-Blooded power if He's not a Pure-Blood?"

"There's an old Muggle saying, Draco; 'converts are the greatest believers.' He believes so strongly in us because we have what He wants."

"Well, if it's true, we don't want Him!" Draco said fiercely. "But how can we prove it, one way or the other?"

"Well, there is one simple way," Millicent answered, forcing Draco to look her in the eye.

"What's that?"

"Ask Potter."

"WHAT!"

"Ask Potter." She considered. "There's no way he would trust you enough to meet you alone." She looked at him. "Who else needs to hear this besides you and me?"

"Pucey, Bletchley, and Montague . . . and I guess Nott."

"Not Vinny and Greg? Or the younger students?"

Draco shook his head. "If the five of us agree, they'll all go along. Plus, if you're there, that would make six of us, and that's almost too many." He hesitated. "There is one other, but I'll talk to him first. So Potter and six others."

Millicent nodded. "I'll try to get them to include some of the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws. That way we can probably exclude Weasley."

"Not Granger?"

"Resent her for being a Mudblood, or, like me, dislike her on her own merits, but admit she's the most brilliant student to come through Hogwarts in decades. We want her there, Draco. Weasley would just say something stupid to get someone angry."

"Alright. You set it up, hopefully before next Monday."

She nodded. "Agreed. I'll try for tonight."

Harry found Muggle Studies more interesting than he had anticipated. Powell's revamped curriculum helped, and the man seemed to be a knowledgeable and interesting teacher. Harry was still a bit puzzled by him, however. He seemed to be more than just another teacher, but Harry wasn't certain what that meant. He decided he would talk it over with Ginny and Luna at some point after they had him for class.

Harry was not surprised to see Hermione waiting for him as he came out of the Muggle Studies class. He was rather more surprised to see Dumbledore waiting with her.

"Please walk with me," Dumbledore said. They walked in silence into the mostly-deserted third floor. Dumbledore led them past the area where the trapdoor had been located. He led them into what had been a mid-sized classroom.

"Have you been practicing your wandless magic, Harry?"

"Some," Harry said. "You SAID to keep it totally secret."

"Ah . . . yes. From now on, please feel free to tell Miss Granger everything you feel comfortable with."

Harry gave him a dirty look for that.

"After today, on Mondays and Fridays at Two, Professor Lupin, and perhaps Professor Law, will be coaching you on fighting. When they deem you ready, Professor Powell will also join you. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, Mistress Merry will again be coaxing you on wandless magic. Miss Granger is invited to both. Who else should I consider allowing to join you for the fighting practices on Mondays? We should have an even number."

"Ron, Ginny, Neville, Dean, Colin, and Luna," Harry stated.

"Are you agreeable, Miss Granger?"

"Of course, Headmaster," Hermione said in her poshest tones.

"In that case, I leave it to you to inform them," Dumbledore told them. "Professor Law wishes to speak to you after class, before you restart the DA." Dumbledore smiled at them, and went on his way.

Hermione and Harry stared after him. "I understand why he makes you so angry at time," Hermione finally said. "It almost feels like he's playing with us."

"Exactly," Harry agreed. He held out his hand. Hermione looked at it.

"I know what we said about being seen in public," Harry said, "but do you want to stick to that?"

"Yes," Hermione decided quickly. "I love you, Harry. I love you more than I ever suspected I could love anyone." She took both his hands in hers, and they kissed.

After nearly five minutes, they broke the kiss. Hermione smiled and let go of Harry's right hand. "It's a lovely day. Shall we walk together by the lake? After all, this time is booked after today."

"Sounds like a brilliant idea."

They walked slowly across the grounds, drawing the attention of students from the different Houses. The rumors that had been flying were now confirmed.

"An eventful few days," Harry said.

"Very," Hermione agreed.

"How are your parents?"

"Glad to be at work. If you and Ron think I'm a fussy workaholic, you should see my parents. I mean, they love me, and care about me, but this world, our world, frightens them. They don't show it when we're with the Weasleys, but they are afraid. Afraid of this world, afraid of my powers." She looked down. "Afraid . . . of me."

"Odd, isn't it? The Muggles are afraid of us whenever they find out about us, and the Pure-Bloods are really afraid of us," Harry said. "Stuck between both worlds, unable to fit into either, and they're both afraid of us, because they each think we have more access to power they don't have."

They stood near the lake, and Harry stood behind Hermione, hugging her around the waist. "I miss you, Harry."

"I'm right here."

"No," she said very softly, "I miss having you to snuggle against at night. I miss being held. I miss being pleased, and massaged, and pampered. I miss tasting you."

Harry nuzzled Hermione's neck, which made her weak in the knees. "I'm thinking of a solution," Harry whispered in her ear.

"Good," Hermione said softly back.

"Have you told your parents about us?" Harry asked.

"I've written letters since the First of August but haven't sent any of the detailed ones yet," Hermione replied. "May I borrow Hedwig?"

"Ask Remus to check her out," Harry answered after a moment's thought. "We don't want any tracking spells on her."

"Good idea," Hermione replied. "In fact, I'll have him teach us both how to check."

A few minutes later, they were interrupted by the snapping of a twig.

Harry instantly had thrust Hermione gently to the side and had his wand pointing at the noise. Hermione had her wand out and was looking behind them, checking for any attackers from the rear. Millicent raised her hands. "I come in peace, Potter."

"Really? I thought perhaps you just wanted to twist some arms," Harry sneered. Hermione flushed at the reminder.

"Your friends more than exacted revenge," Millicent pointed out. "Now, shall we maintain our . . . opposition, or find common cause?"

"What cause is that?" Harry asked.

"You hate the Dark Lord, because he will destroy everything you believe in. Draco, and his crew, want to know if the Dark Lord really is a half-blood. Because, if He is, then He has betrayed what we believe in. And what many of Draco's friends' families believe in. They want to know what evidence you have for what you told Bellatrix Lestrange last June."

"And you're a disinterested party?" Hermione asked sarcastically.

"Compared to you two and Draco, yes, although I can see why you wouldn't believe it. I believe in Pure-Blood, but the Dark Lord's way is NOT the best path to keep us where we belong, no matter what His bloodlines might be. So, I'm here to arrange a meeting. From Slytherin, it would be Pucey, Bletchley, Montague, Nott, and of course Draco and myself. Draco said there would perhaps be one other. You two; Macmillan and Finch-Fletchley from Hufflepuff; Turpin and Boot from Ravenclaw; plus any person you want."

"No Crabbe and Goyle?" Harry asked.

"No. And no Weasley. Things will be volatile enough as they are."

Harry and Hermione whispered for a few seconds. "We're going to ask two more," Harry said. "Susan Bones and Luna Lovegood. Why don't you ask Blaise Zabini?"

Millicent thought, and then agreed. "When and where?"

"Seven thirty, in the trophy room," Harry suggested.

"Sounds reasonable."

The sixteen students confronted each other. "Well, Potter?" Draco finally said.

"Who's your friend?" Harry asked. The unknown student was still unknown, under a heavy hooded robe.

"He prefers to be anonymous," Draco said with a slight sneer.

"That's not a very becoming color, Zacharias," Luna said. The Slytherin group jumped, the other group frowned at the cloaked figure. "You may as well take it off."

The figure hesitated, and then Zach Smith showed himself, very red in the face.

Harry gave Zach a very dirty look, but turned back to Draco. "And if I convince you?"

"We will not follow a half-blood to prove Pure-Blooded superiority," Draco said simply. "Neither will our families. He becomes our common problem. We don't like you; you don't like us. The Dark Lord threatens us both." His allies agreed.

Harry had asked Ginny for permission, and so simply told everyone the story of Tom Riddle Junior and the Chamber of Secrets, as he had learned it. Riddle's award was behind them, his full name on the list of Head Boys not far away. Hermione reproduced the trick of changing

Riddle's name into Voldemort's. Harry also told the stories of Sirius, the Third Task and the Department of Mysteries. He did not, however, tell them the Prophecy.

The pro-Death Eaters were looking very confused and angry by the end of the stories. They finally went over to a corner and talked quietly while Millicent and Blaise stood apart. After nearly ten minutes, Draco turned around. "We are not backing Riddle any further, and we'll be writing to our families."

"Anything else?" Ernie Macmillan demanded.

"Such as what? Sucking up to Mud . . . Muggle-borns?" Draco sneered.

"No, but why don't you recognize the real advantages you have," Hermione snarled. "You know how the system works; everything is stacked in your favor."

"And don't think we despise wizarding culture," Harry added. "Be glad you're not trapped between two cultures, like we are."

"We don't need you!" Nott snarled.

"You need us, and you need the Muggles," Hermione retorted.

"Really?" Montague said disdainfully.

"Want to give me fifteen minutes?" Hermione dared.

"Go ahead," Millicent said.

"What?" three of the boys cried out. Millicent gave them a dirty look, and they all quieted down. "Talk, Granger."

Hermione talked, fast and cogent. She pulled out every fact she knew that showed how much the wizarding world depended on both the Muggle world and the Muggle-borns and Mixed-bloods. She moderated some of her opinions, pointing out how the Pure-Bloods still stood at the apex of the Wizarding world. Reminding Malfoy that there were families older and purer than any of those present, both in Hogwarts and those who refused to associate with 'common' Pure-Bloods like the Malfoys and Blacks (and Longbottoms and Weasleys, for that matter) by even coming to Hogwarts, made the Pure-Bloods wince.

"What do you want from us, Granger?" Millicent finally demanded.

"If you don't like me, or Harry, because we're the individuals we are, fine." Hermione smiled sweetly. "After all, we don't like you. But just as we don't hate you because you're Pure-Bloods, don't hate us because there are Muggles in our immediate ancestry. Help us learn more about the wizarding world. We WANT to become better members of the magical world. We all know that what we learn in class isn't what it's all about. Being able to do every spell or make every potion perfectly isn't even half what it means to be a witch."

"You'll never be a real, full-fledged witch," Millicent said firmly. "But you're a lot closer than I ever thought you were. You do belong." The other pro-Pure Bloods grimaced, but didn't

dare openly disagree. The Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws looked very much in agreement with Hermione.

"Anything we find out, we'll get word to you," Draco said, going back on topic. The Slytherins turned to leave, Blaise giving Harry a wink. Zack Smith scurried away.

"Do we believe them?" Susan asked.

"I don't know," Harry asked. "What do you think, Ginny?"

Ginny disillused herself from the area where the group had caucused. Tonks had taught the entire group how to do disillusion others that summer (they all still had some trouble disillusing themselves, but Harry and Hermione could totally disillusion anyone else). "They seemed as sincere as they get."

"Dean? Colin? Ron?"

The three disillused themselves, grinning. "We can't trust the bastards," Ron said, "but I don't think they're as much of a threat as I thought they were. So, yes, I'll agree to a truce. And we can't forgot that there might be others around they don't know about who don't agree with Malfoy, let alone Bulstrode."

Led by Ernie, the others burst into laughter, congratulating Harry and Hermione on a fine plan.

Chapter XI

Tuesday was another early day for Harry and Hermione. They and their friends ran, showered, and had a quick breakfast. To both their surprise, Transfiguration was another large class, with twenty-three students. Besides Harry and Hermione, Neville, Parvati, and Lavender had managed to get into the class. At the beginning of class, McGonagall even told the class that they were the largest N.E.W.T. group she had ever had.

Draco sat in the back, next to Zach Smith, and behaved himself.

The class would be spending the term learning the various Disillusionment spells. Hermione and Harry smiled at each other, having mastered the spells on others already, although they still had some troubles disillusioning themselves.

The Basic Medicine Class was also larger than they had expected, with twelve students (Neville was the only other Gryffindor). This term, they would be learning physiology. This time, only Hermione could smirk, although she refrained from doing so. She was fairly well-acquainted with human anatomy. Harry had managed to memorize the major organs (and their functions) and the bones over August, but that of course was just the beginning.

For Hermione, being so close to Harry was exquisite. The previous year, she had been worried they might be drifting apart. Harry had been so angry; understandably so to some degree, but still disturbing. And yet, despite the clumsy dance she and Ron were involved in at the time, it seemed at times only she could get through to Harry. 'No,' Hermione thought, as she leaned gently against Harry as they ate lunch, 'Ginny and Luna could get through to him, just not as often.' She had so wanted to date Ron the previous year, and yet the image she had seen before her the entire spring term was Harry opening the bedroom door at Grimmauld Place, that horrible evening right before Christmas. But in her dreams and daydream reenactments, she had embraced Harry as she had wanted to do so much.

Now she could embrace Harry almost anytime she wanted. Perhaps not in the intimate ways she wanted to embrace him, but any time. Hermione hadn't missed the jealous looks Cho and her band had been giving her. Even Pansy had stared at her ring with open envy during Charms, and Millicent had had a difficult tearing her eyes away from it. She still wasn't totally sure of Ginny and Luna's motivations in holding her hand so much the previous Sunday (if they liked staring at the ring that much, or just liked holding her hand -- she rather suspected both.) Lavender and Parvati were treating her slightly differently as well, as if they finally respected her as a woman instead of just as a brilliant student.

She decided she liked the attention, although it all paled almost into nothing compared to Harry's.

While Hermione's young life had been no where near as horrible as Harry's, she was also a fairly lonely child. She had never had a real friend until Ron and Harry. Now she had Ginny, Luna, Dean, and Colin as more intimate friends than she could ever have imagined. Ron was still a good friend, and Harry . . . wonderful, caring, awkward, confused, damaged, heroic,

handsome, well-built (especially in one anatomical aspect that she had quickly grown very fond of) Harry -- Harry was her love and lover.

Hermione was content.

For Harry, being so close to Hermione was exquisite torture. Even though Ron and Hermione had been his close friends for five years, he had never opened up to anyone until Luna had opened that slight crack at the end of the last term. He had been abused, used, and ignored for some ten years. For the next five years, he had mostly held himself aloof, and had still been used.

And in that time, who really had taken the interest in knowing Harry? Luna seemed to know him by instinct, but only Hermione had taken the time to really know him. True, she did that with everyone, but not to the degree she did him. She had always taken care of him, and looked after him. At times, during parts of their Third and Fourth years especially, she had tended to smother him with her concern. She had backed off slightly the previous year, and hadn't done so since they'd come together.

Harry hadn't consciously realized something that Luna had guessed at and Hermione now was realizing -- he was at his core a very loving, tactile person. He longed to touch and be touched. His attempts of affection and intimacy with Cho had scared him so much the previous two years in part because he hadn't experienced it since he had been just over a year old, and in part because somewhere deep inside he had known that he would fall deeply in love so easily that if he picked the wrong person, he would be wounded even deeper than he already was.

And now, he could barely touch the young woman he loved and adored. Now that they had been intimate, his thoughts kept straying to those erotic and tender evenings at the cabin. Harry decided he would have to cast a silencing charm over his bed that night.

Hermione was leaning against Harry, making him sit in a very uncomfortable position. Hermione pulled him towards her, and whispered in his ear, "I hope you've found us someplace. If you've been a good boy and haven't spent anything, maybe I can have you for an appetizer before lunch on Friday."

Harry nearly choked on the stew he was eating. Ron managed to get him breathing again. Harry could never tell Ginny or Ron what had made him choke, because he knew no one would ever believe straight-laced Hermione could EVER make that lewd a comment.

Harry bowed low to the venerable Mistress Merry. At 201, she was the oldest known witch in Britain. "So, boy, who's this young gel?"

"This is Hermione Granger, Mistress."

"A pretty name for a pretty young thing, but who is she, boy?"

Harry smiled. Mistress Merry always made him think he was in a Victorian novel. "She is my heart and advisor, Mistress." Hermione looked shy at hearing that.

Mistress Merry smiled. "That is good. Your heart needed someone inside it. You, gel, what is Harry to you?"

"He is my heart and my courage," Hermione answered proudly.

The elderly witch walked slowly over to Hermione and took her right hand in both of hers. She examined Hermione's palm. "I do not believe one can truly see the future in a palm, but one can see something of the personality. You are a Virgo, yes? You match Harry fairly well, although Leos and Virgos often clash. You are a little lacking in humor; and while Harry hides his emotions because of the scars given him by life, you hide yours for fear of losing yourself in your emotions. Few will ever know how passionate you both are. You both must never hide from the other. If you are both able to do that, you will have a happy life together."

Hermione smiled bravely.

"Now, wandless magic is difficult," she told Hermione, dropping her hand and moving away. "You have spent five years learning how to focus magic through a wand. The easiest wandless magic to do is, therefore, summoning the wand. Let us see if young Harry can still do so."

Harry sat his wand down and walked across the room. He concentrated, and after a few seconds it flew across the room into his hand.

"If you are separated from your wand, you are likely to be in trouble. It would be best not to have to shout a spell. Why don't you work on that, while I work with Harry."

Hermione was reminded of her first broom lesson.

Mistress Merry came over a short time later. "Come now, dear; this should be no more difficult for you now as learning the original summoning spell was with the wand."

Hermione tried again, and it just rolled a little for her.

"See, dear; it would not move at all if you had no talent for this."

"I'm trying," Hermione told herself more than the elderly woman.

"There is no try, only do," Harry teased. "Use the Force, Leia."

"Very funny, Harry."

"Is that a Muggle literary reference?"

"Sorry, Mistress," Harry answered. "It's from a Muggle film."

"I have not moved in Muggle society since King Edward's funeral," she mused. She waved the thought away. "The wand is part of you, my dear. Pull it towards you as if it were merely an extension of your hand."

The wand flew into Hermione's hand.

"Very good. Is there some other spell you know by instinct, which would be useful?"

Hermione thought.

Harry gave her a teasing hint. "Hermione? Are you a witch or aren't you?"

Hermione frowned, and then smiled. She placed her wand in her belt and thought a moment. Then she cupped her hands, and a bluebell flame appeared over her palms. It was not very bright, and it was just hot enough to be slightly uncomfortable, but not burn. Hermione smiled even wider.

Mistress Merry waved her hand, and the flames disappeared. "Well done, my dear." She patted Hermione's cheek. "You have the prettiest smile, my dear, although your front teeth are a tiny bit small." Hermione gawked a bit.

"You have indeed chosen well, Harry Potter. I will teach you both." She turned to Hermione. "I do not know any Grangers. When did your family emerge from the Muggles?"

Hermione squared her shoulders. "I am the first."

Her eyes went wide. "I taught Charms at a small private school in Wales for over a hundred years. I was an Examiner until fifteen years ago. I have never seen a Muggle-born with your power, my dear. Not even Harry's mother was as strong as you, and she was by far the most powerful Muggle-born before you that I have ever heard of in Western Europe! And you are supposed to be one of the most intelligent students at Hogwarts this century." She considered. "For many women, especially in past times, their powers were subordinated to men, or else they did not seek the company of men. Let your heart rule you more, my child. Bring out the power of your own heart, and that will not only be good for you but good for your lover here. Trigger the full power of his love, and he will not only defeat the evil Dark Wizard, but you will feel more joy than most women and any men have ever felt."

She smiled at them. "I shall watch you learn Thursday." She nodded to Hermione. "Guide me to the Headmaster's office. Young Harry is to find his friend Lupin. You may catch up with him there."

As Hermione walked slowly with the elderly witch, they went most of the way in silence. Just before they arrived, however, she turned to Hermione. "When will you move that lovely ring from your right hand to the correct hand?"

Hermione thought about it. "Not until Harry really meets my parents. I mean, they've met, but they don't really know each other. And the way things are, I don't know when I'll see my parents again, let alone when Harry will be able to see them."

"You remind me much of myself at your age, or at least how I remember myself." She again patted Hermione's cheek. "I shall see if I can help." She turned to the Guardian. "Kit kat."

Hermione watched until the old witch was gone, then went off to the small office Remus used.

Hermione found a happy Harry, with three new pairs of glasses, and the wrap-around sports goggles. With Quidditch trials coming up that Saturday, Harry would now be ready.

They walked back towards Gryffindor side by side. Hermione took a deep breath, and took Harry's hand.

Harry's arm jerked a little. He turned and looked at Hermione, a genuine smile on his face. Hermione smiled back.

"How much homework do we have to do, other than the anatomy?" Harry asked.

"That's all, so far," Hermione said, struggling to keep the conversation normal when she was mentally licking Harry all over. "Have you or Ron named your puffskein yet?" Neville had already named his Trevor, which had made everyone shake their heads in confusion.

"You mean you can't guess Ron's?" Harry was playing the same game, with very similar thoughts.

"Yellow?" she asked. All the puffskeins were rather yellowish for the most part.

"Puffy," Harry said in a disbelieving voice.

"That sounds about right for Ron. And yours?"

"Goldie," Harry said with dignity.

Hermione snorted. "Well," she finally said, "at least it's better than Puffy."

"And what's yours? Aurora?"

Hermione stopped and looked at Harry. "How did you know?"

Harry shrugged. "It had a sort of rose and pink tinge." He looked at Hermione and abandoned his lewd thoughts for a moment. "What? I like to read, just not text books. I've been stuck in Dudley's junk room since I was moved out from under the stairs." Hermione's jaw set. She'd seen the cupboard under the stairs. If Harry didn't go back and hex his relatives, she might.

"Anyway," Harry went on, "that's where Dudley stores all the stuff he's broken that they like to pretend they'll fix or the things he doesn't like."

"Like books," Hermione said with a sigh.

"Like books," Harry agreed. "So I've read all the classics he's been given, including all the literature assigned for the Muggle Studies through seventh year. I've taught myself Latin, French, and Italian, and even though my accents are horrible, I can read them. I've only

managed a little German, Welsh, and classical Greek. I started teaching myself Fortran and C, but they threw the spare computer out when they saw what I was doing."

Hermione stared at him in horror.

"What?" Harry asked. Hermione merely hugged him, a few tears running down her cheek.

"Heh-hem!"

The two broke apart, and were confronted by Professor Snape. "If you do not wish to be docked points, I suggest you refrain from such embraces in public corridors," he snarled. "Well? Begone!"

Harry and Hermione fled hand-in-hand. They didn't stop until they had passed the Fat Lady. They kept going down and around the corner. There was nothing in that direction except stairs leading down to the corridor connecting them to the Ravenclaw Tower. They sat on the top step and caught their breath.

"Snape was almost pleasant," Harry commented.

"Well, we weren't doing anything wrong!" Hermione stated. Harry rolled his eyes. "True," Hermione agreed, "that never did stop him before."

"What do we have tomorrow?" Harry asked. "Just Muggle Studies and Defense for me, and just Defense for you, right?"

"Right. I have prefect duty from Ten until Eleven tonight."

Harry looked puzzled. "I know, I know," he finally said, "I never pay attention. What do you have to do for prefect duty?"

"I have to make a patrol, starting from the Great Hall. It goes to the Library and hits most of the more obvious snogging places."

"But no points are taken or detentions given out before Eleven," Harry pointed out.

"I know. It's sort of a last warning."

"When does Filch sleep?" Harry asked.

"Where did that come from?"

Harry shrugged. "I always wondered. I thought maybe you'd found out."

"I don't know; I'd guess between Four in the morning and lunch." She eyed Harry. "Are you planning something?"

"Something," Harry agreed. "I'll show you Friday. Do you want to scare some boys?"

"What boys?" Hermione asked.

"Colin told me there was a place where, well, where some of the boys went to have sex. The only rules are, it's consensual and non-violent, and -- I suppose you know what they mean by 'top' and bottom'?"

Hermione flushed slightly. "I do."

"Well, the other rule is the worst ratio of top to bottom is three to two, that way no one can get away with using the others too much."

"And where is this?"

"The lavatory north of the exit to the greenhouses. There used to be an exit there for the outdoor dueling patch, when that was active."

"I never knew where the outdoor dueling patch was! How did you find it?"

Harry shrugged. "It's marked on the Map."

Hermione thought about it, but finally shook her head. "It would just make them angry at me." She looked at Harry. "Why don't you bring Goldie down to the Common Room tomorrow at Nine thirty. I'll bring Aurora. We can groom them and then study anatomy. There should be some of the younger students around, and they can play with them."

"Good idea. Shall we get ready for dinner?"

Wednesday, September 4, 1996

"Another large class," Harry observed. "Twenty!"

"Complete with ferret and the pug-dog," Ron added.

"At least it shouldn't be as bad as last year," Hermione observed.

Professor Law's earlier classes had judged him as knowledgeable but not terribly interesting. He had not had anything above a Fourth year class, however.

Law came in and surveyed the class. "My, my. This must be a recent record for a N.E.W.T. Defense class." He took out a parchment and called the roll. When he was finished, he looked around the class. "Who here thinks they are an excellent fighter?"

Half the class looked at Harry, but Harry just looked straight ahead. Law looked back at him. He opened his mouth, and it took all of Harry's Occlumency training not to flinch. "Mister . . . Malfoy. Whom would you judge to be the best fighter in this class?"

Harry glanced at Malfoy, who was grimacing. "Well, Mister Malfoy?"

"It's supposed to be Potter," he spat, adding an almost polite "sir."

"Do you agree with that assessment, Mister Malfoy?"

"well, sir, he's certainly the luckiest."

"Luck is not to be despised. Whom would you judge as better?"

Malfoy hesitated. It was obvious he wanted to claim the top spot, but was worried what that might entail. "I don't know, sir."

"I see. Mister Potter, would you say you're the best fighter in this class?"

"Probably, Professor, but that doesn't mean I'm that good."

"Very good, Mister Potter. I have been looking over all your scores. Nearly all of you did well on your practicals. Most of you need some work on some of your dark creature knowledge. Therefore, next week you will have a test on what you should have learned in your first three years. You seem weakest on the information from the first two years. Professor Lupin and I will present you with a series of creatures. You will identify them, and give the proper information on how to combat them. You will all sit here during this test every week until you all score a hundred. This test will take some forty minutes. The rest of the class, you will be dueling. We will start with blocking charms. We will be dividing into two groups of ten."

Law suddenly smiled; it was a very cold smile. "Actually, I think it would be best if we NOT make you all wait to duel full-time until EVERYONE makes a hundred. We'll just do it by group."

Harry just barely heard Malfoy say, "Hope I don't have to work with Longbottom."

Law heard him. "Keep your remarks until after class, Mister Malfoy. One point from Slytherin. Now, group one is: Susan Bones; Lavender Brown; Seamus Finnigan; Hermione Granger; Neville Longbottom; Parvati Patil; Harry Potter; Dean Thomas; Ron Weasley; and Blaise Zabini. The other is therefore Hannah Abbott, Terry Boot, Millicent Bulstrode, Justin Finch-Fletchley, Anthony Goldstein, Draco Malfoy, Ernie Macmillan, Charlie Moon, Zacharias Smith, and Lisa Turpin."

Law smiled again. "I would also like a parchment on the nine basic blocking spelling. Never mind inches; one thousand to twelve hundred words. One point off for every word under or over. Due by noon Monday. See you all next Wednesday." His smile now looked positively frightening.

The room emptied quickly, but Harry was furthest from the door.

"Well, Mister Potter, why don't you stay? Let's see how good you really are."

Chapter XII

Wednesday, September 4, 1996

Harry managed to drag himself out of the Defense classroom an hour later. All the Sixth year Gryffindors were waiting for him down the corridor.

"Blimey, Harry, you look awful," Neville stated.

"Thanks, Neville; I wasn't certain if I looked as bad as I feel," Harry grumbled.

Hermione started to embrace Harry, but he literally collapsed in her arms.

Hermione dropped him.

"Sorry, Harry," Hermione said, nearly in tears as she knelt and tried to gather him back in her arms.

"What did the bastard do to you, Harry?" Seamus demanded.

"We dueled, and I think he even pulled some of his punches," Harry said after he managed to open one tired eye. "I'm not hurt, just very very tired."

Dean and Ron, assured Harry wasn't hurt, pulled him up and held the shorter boy between them. "Prefect's bath?" Ron asked Hermione.

She thought and nodded. She leaned and whispered in Harry ear. He managed to nod.

"Come on, then," she said. "Neville, Seamus, go get Harry a complete change of clothes."

"Where are YOU going?" Ron demanded, shocked.

"Harry's got his boxers on," Hermione said with dignity. "We'll transfigure something into bathing suits for us." She looked at Lavender and Parvati. "If you'd care to come?"

"We wouldn't miss it," Lavender said with a grin.

Neville and Seamus went as fast as they could. When they arrived at the prefect's bath, they found Ron standing guard. "Go on in, Neville," Ron said.

"Wot about me!" Seamus protested.

"Lavender said something about not wanting to have to clean up your drool, and Hermione said we both suffered from too much testosterone," Ron grumbled.

"I'm not sure if I've been complimented or insulted," Neville said.

"Shut up and enjoy your ruddy luck," Ron told him.

Neville crossed his fingers and went on in. He came out five minutes later, smiled at Ron and Seamus, and then collapsed against the far wall with an even bigger grin on his face as he slid to the floor.

"Wot!"

"They were in the bath with Harry . . . Lavender and Parvati stood up . . . biminis. . . ."

"What?"

"I think he means bikinis," Seamus said. "Two piece bathing suits."

"Parvati is very pretty . . . but Lavender!" Neville cupped his hands well in front of his chest. "Wow! Hermione said it was a string bimini, and that's about all it was! String!"

"I thought you still wanted to date Ginny," Ron protested.

"She's with Luna," Neville replied. "I asked Parvati to the dance."

"Not Lavender?" Seamus and Ron asked together.

"Her too. We're all three going together." Neville grinned.

"You're a disgusting, lucky bastard," Seamus said. "I still haven't got a date." He turned to Ron. "Did you ask Henrietta, or is she available?"

"I already asked; she's going with me," Ron growled.

Harry had actually napped nearly his entire time in the tub. He was a bit embarrassed that he had created such a fuss, although he enjoyed seeing the three girls in their bikinis and getting massaged by all three plus Dean. Even Dean had said he wished he could paint the girls just as they were. The Gryffindors finally went down to dinner together a little late.

"So," Seamus asked just before they arrived, "did he keep beating you, or was it one long battle?"

"It was three fights, plus a little skirmishing," Harry said. "The last one went for almost forty minutes. And, just for the record, I won all three."

The group was very quiet as they walked into the Great Hall for dinner. It did not escape them that Law was missing that night.

Hermione talked with Susan and Blaise, arranging for a first meeting to go over the material for the Defense test the next morning. Harry was still tired after dinner, having expended a great deal of power in his dueling. Harry just sat in one of the comfortable, cushier chairs and

watched his fellow students. Ginny stopped by and massaged Harry's still aching neck while they watched Ron beat Hermione yet again in chess. Finally Harry went to bed at 9:00.

He woke up feeling refreshed, and joined in the usual morning run. While Hermione had to go off to Runes and Arithmancy, Harry studied anatomy and prepared for the Defense meeting. Just before 10:00, Harry made his way to the Defense classroom. Two groups of First years were making their way in and out of class.

"Mister Potter," Professor Law acknowledged. "I hope you're not feeling many ill effects?"

"I was exhausted the rest of the day, but I'm feeling pretty good today," Harry answered.

"Ah, the resilience of youth," Law said with a smile. "I must admit I'm dragging today. I might even have to ask the nurse for another slight stimulant. You were most impressive yesterday. You have a fairly limited repertoire, but it's still more like I would expect of an excellent student at the beginning of their Seventh year, or even the end, than the beginning of their Sixth. But your power and talent are most impressive."

"Professor Dumbledore said we couldn't finalize any plans for the DA until after we talked yesterday, and we didn't really talk."

"True, we didn't. You have the practical knowledge; I'd like to see how you and Miss Granger do on the theory and background next week. When you both score a hundred, you may go ahead."

"Thank you, Professor," Harry said. "Do you have any recommendations on . . . expanding my repertoire?"

"No," Law replied. "All things considered, it would be better to continue to improve your response times. For what needs to be done, that should serve you better at the moment, although we will diversify your blocking abilities."

"I understand, sir."

"Would you mind helping me demonstrate the blocks to the rest of the class?"

"No, sir; I'd be happy to."

Law smiled. "Then I wish you good day, Mister Potter. Classes are about to begin."

Hermione was happy with the Defense meeting, which only took a quick break for lunch. Ron had pointed out that, while they obviously needed to review, they shouldn't panic and neglect their other studies and obligations (by which he primarily meant Quidditch of course). Everyone felt they had demonstrated a good knowledge of the material they were likely to be tested on. They therefore agreed to meet again just once more before class the next week, on Sunday.

Harry and Hermione went off for their wandless magic lesson, and then joined in with most of the other Sixth years, doing their homework for the next week. They wanted to get as much done as possible, to leave their Friday free. Much of Saturday would be devoted to selecting the rest of the Quidditch team, Sunday morning Hermione had another patrol duty, and Sunday afternoon would be devoted to the Defense study group.

The pair did manage to finish their Defense essay that evening, but they both knew they would be devoting a lot of time to anatomy that term. As the Common Room slowly emptied, however, they persuaded Ron and Neville to bring Puffy and Trevor down to join their puffskeins. The Fifth years, already nearly overwhelmed by the first wave of O.W.L. material, were happy to take a break to play and pet the little balls of fluff.

Harry took the opportunity to talk with Colin. So far, Colin reported, no one had indulged in any gay bashing, although there had been a few mutterings about his 'animal nature' from some of the Slytherins. Considering their usual comments, they were being fairly restrained. Flitwick had taken one point for their comments, and even Snape had issued a warning.

Harry looked around the Common Room. It was a little after 10:00. The last of the Fourth years were just going up to their dorms, and the younger students were also gone. Most of the older students were starting to yawn and trying finish whatever paragraph they were working on.

Harry had never heard the Common Room as quiet as it had been that week -- the Weasley twins and Lee, Harry decided, had made over two-thirds of the noise all by themselves. Ginny and Hermione walked by and kissed him on the top of his head and headed up to their rooms. Ron, Dean, and Seamus were still writing away on their Defense essays, while the Seventh years were huddled together, sorting through their N.E.W.T. material.

Neville came and sat next to Harry. "You're looking thoughtful," Neville commented.

"Just thinking how quieter the Common Room is without the Weasley twins."

"That's true!" Neville agreed. "It's nice being able to snack on something around here without having to worry about turning into something or other!"

Harry smiled at the memories.

"Harry . . . could I ask you something?" Neville asked with a lowered voice.

"Sure."

"Ginny and Colin told me about the, well, the fairy fairie cakes. I've collected four; you don't happen to have your two, do you?"

"Actually, I do; why?"

"A trick on some Slytherins," Neville answered.

"Be careful, Neville," Harry warned. "We have a pretty precarious peace right now."

"I know . . . actually, Crabbe and Goyle claim they're going to use them on Malfoy, along with Pansy and Millicent. I don't know what they're going to do to him, and I don't think I want to know!"

Harry shuddered. "I don't either, but I can guess. Come on up. I have them."

Friday, September 6, 1996

"So, what do you two have planned today?" Ginny asked as the group finished breakfast.

"More anatomy study for the Medicine class," Harry said with a sigh. "We don't even start on the medical parts until we get most of this down. How about you?"

"Muggle Studies again," Ginny replied.

"We have to finish a short parchment for Herbology," Neville said. "We spent all the time doing that Defense essay."

"I'll drop all of ours off as soon as I collect Blaise's," Hermione said. "Let me go catch him."

While Hermione collected the last of the group's essays, Harry went back to his room to collect his copy of the anatomy texts. He also took the Marauders' Map.

Harry swung around the library, just as Hermione was coming towards the library from the other direction. From there, they walked together, talking normally, as Harry led them to the fourth floor.

As they approached a huge mirror on the end of a corridor, Harry checked the Map and saw there was no one nearby. "'Show us what is not shown,'" Harry quoted. The mirror slid aside. A row of torches sprung into light, and Harry guided Hermione inside. The mirror slid silently shut.

"Where are we?" Hermione asked, looking around her.

"This used to start a tunnel that ran all the way into Hogsmeade, near the 'Three Broomsticks.' The tunnel collapsed a few years ago."

"And?"

"And come down to the first floor." Harry held out his hand, and they went down the stairs together.

"Isn't this near the theatre?" Hermione asked.

"Exactly; under the seats, for the most part." Harry opened the secret door to the landing. "We have a classroom, an office, and a lavatory," Harry said. "This corridor would have continued on, until they built the theatre."

Harry opened the door to the classroom. Hermione took a deep breath out of shock. Harry had to admit, he was impressed as well.

The classroom had been emptied, cleaned, and polished. It was a long room, perhaps 15 feet wide by 48 feet. Along the far long wall and the far short wall, it was now all bookshelves. Dobby had left a note, explaining that the elves had scoured the castle, looking for lost books that did not belong to any current students. The best of the reference and text books were scattered throughout the mostly-empty shelves.

The chalk board had been refurbished, in case Hermione needed to use it for Arithmancy or her Runes. The teacher's desk had been polished. Twelve magical lamps, which could hold bluebell spells to provide light, were scattered throughout the room. Along the wall with the outside door, the elves had created a large faux window, with curtains that Hermione said had matched those in her now-lost bedroom. It could be set to show the outside conditions, bright daylight, or, as the default setting, early twilight. There were two stuffed chairs and a low table in front of the window, and a long library table going between the window and the bookshelves.

Harry took Hermione over to the door between the chalk board and the bookshelves. The former office was smaller, 15 x 18. There were three doors, the one they were standing in, one directly across the room, and an exit to the corridor to the right. Along the right wall was the exit to the corridor and then the large fireplace. Along the far wall was the next door and then a large canopy bed. Along the near wall was a huge dresser. The left wall, which ran between the two inner doors, was blank.

Harry escorted Hermione to the other inner door. Inside, the elves had extended the lavatory into a full bath, although the far wall sloped a bit to allow for the theater seats. There was a sink, toilet, and a large step-in bath, some 5 feet across by 9 feet long, with two showerheads and three faucets.

"Wow, Harry . . . this is an apartment!"

"It's a hide-away," Harry said simply. "Only me, Dumbledore, and the elves would know how to find you. I saw how hard it was for you to find quiet places to study last year. You'll need the quiet time even more with ROMP and such."

Hermione embraced Harry tightly, her head resting against his shoulder. She gave a contented sigh. Hermione wondered yet again why she hadn't gone through with her first inclination two years, even two and a half years, before.

Reality asserted itself -- Harry had certainly NOT been ready for any type of relationship until that summer. But that was seven weeks before. They now had a real relationship, far more sensual and sexual than she had anticipated having this early in her life, and one that had them even more spiritually and emotionally connected than she had ever hoped for. Harry hadn't swept her off her feet to start a romantic affair; but every day she felt she was now further off the ground. 'It's better to end up this way than it would have been to start,' Hermione decided.

She pushed Harry back so that he had to sit on the bed. She pulled off her robe. Hermione partially shut the door to the classroom, leaving the room in what she hoped was romantic shadow. Hermione slowly stripped off the rest of the school uniform, except for her long socks and shoes.

Hermione sat on Harry's lap. "Harry . . . we've never talked about it, but should we keep to magical traditions, since we're really Muggle-raised?"

"You mean . . . keeping your virginity?"

Hermione nodded.

"We both know what it's all about, right? I mean, the potions created from . . . the first night enhance the probability of male heir the first time we use it, which I don't care about, but it's also supposed to help increase the probability of magical heirs in general, which I think we would care about."

"That's true," Hermione admitted. "I just wondered."

"And you have to admit, we're having a great deal of fun without it," Harry said with a grin, rolling Hermione over on her back. "May I please please you first?"

"Please. . . ."

Thursday, September 19, 1996

A little after 5:00 pm, Ginny and Hermione were walking together towards the Transfiguration classroom. "So, did the last people finally pass their Defense test?" Ginny asked. "They should have been posted by now."

"Yes. Draco isn't going to live down the fact that it took his group two extra tries to get everyone to pass when we all passed the first time."

"Not to mention that it took him a second time to pass himself," Ginny agreed. "Did anyone other than you and Harry score a perfect score?" Law had said they had to score a hundred, which they had all feared meant a perfect score, but there were actually a hundred and twenty questions.

"No, we were the only two," Hermione said, proud they had done so on their first try.

"Not even Draco on his second try?"

"He's smart and talented, but so spoiled he doesn't understand that money can't buy everything. Sometimes, you really have to work hard."

"You seem to have been scarce these last two weeks," Ginny went on. "At first, I thought you were escaping with Harry to snog, but sometimes I see him around when you're gone."

"I've found some good hiding places," Hermione answered. "If only Harry knows where to find me, I can get some work done."

"Harry doesn't find you anyway?" Ginny teased.

"Sometimes, but even then he lets me work," Hermione retorted. Neither had used their tokens to stop the other from working.

"Ron couldn't stand not being the center of your attention," Ginny agreed. "I'm glad he and Henrietta's relationship is still staggering along. I really think he'd be hell on any girl in Gryffindor."

"It helps that Quidditch practice has started," Hermione pointed out. "Is he as bad as Wood?"

"According to Harry, no. Of course, Katie and Harry have seniority and know what they're doing. If we were all younger than Ron, I bet he'd be just as bad as Wood at his worst." They came to the Transfiguration classroom. "It's good of you to help Luna and me practice."

"I just hope she's already here. We don't have much time before dinner." Hermione opened the door.

"SURPRISE!" Luna, all of Hermione's Gryffindor yearmates, Eloise Midgen, Susan Bones, Henrietta, Colin, and several other younger Gryffindors whom Hermione often helped were all there, along with Professors McGonagall, Flitwick, and Lupin. There was a large sheet cake on McGonagall's desk which proclaimed 'HAPPY SWEET 16TH, HERMIONE'. Hermione saw Winky hiding in a corner, and she went to thank the elf for the cake, knowing Winky had made it on her own time.

Hermione quickly cut the carrot cake (her favorite). "What?" Remus teased, "No presents to open?"

"I don't need presents; I'm just happy you're all here," Hermione retorted. She had opened the presents from her parents that morning.

"Oh," Harry said, very disappointed, "does that mean I should take these back?"

While the group laughed, Hermione approached the four small packages warily. She was not surprised to see two pairs of earrings, which matched her ring, a small set and a larger set, in two of the three smaller boxes. The third small box had a pair of red gold ear studs. She opened the largest box, and found a necklace which matched her ring as well.

"I know we don't have any formal dances scheduled, but I thought we should be prepared," Harry said. The first informal dance would be that Saturday.

Hermione took out the small gold studs from her ears and replaced them with the red gold. "Thank you, Harry," Hermione said, kissing his cheek lightly. "I have to say, this is the best birthday I've ever had."

"I thought Harry would be a total bust as a boyfriend for any girl, after the Yule Ball," Parvati said that night as the three girls changed for bed. "I guess he just wasn't ready back then."

"No, he wasn't," Hermione agreed. "He has so much pressure on him, and, as much as it hurts and twists him, it just seems to . . . temper him in the long run."

"He's like a jewel," Lavender said. "The pressure hardens him, but it makes him all the more brilliant and precious. We just have to make certain it doesn't crush him along the way."

Hermione smiled at the pair. They hadn't always gotten along, but now they had a bit more in common. "It has been very quiet since late July," Hermione said seriously. "When things start up again, I really will need your help."

"Harry is going to save us all," Parvati said. "So we'll help you save Harry."

"Someone has to care for him," Lavender agreed. "And that will be all of us."