

To the Rescue I, The Summer of 1996

By

DrT

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PROLOGUE

Friday, June 30, 1995

On a Muggle map, the area would look blank, a rocky wilderness in western Ontario between Lake Nipigon and Hudson Bay. No roads were marked, and low-flying aircraft were routed around the 27x60 mile oblong area.

In reality, near the center of that area, on an unmarked lake, the capital of the wizarding **Confederation of North America** has stood since 1848. With a permanent wizarding population of over 6,000, sometimes swelling to over 15,000, it was far and away one of the largest magical settlements in the world, aside from a few others in North America.

In a obscure conference room, a formal but secret meeting was being held. The twenty-seven wizards and twelve witches formed the various leaderships of the North American communities. Some were in the white robes of Druids, some in robes of Celtic tartans that pre-dated the Muggle tartans by thousands of years. Others were in dress robes of European design, three were in the buckskin or buffalo hide regalia of Native shamans. Two wore colonial costumes, from New Amsterdam and Revolutionary America. One, proud of having all Muggles for his great-grandparents, wore a Muggle business suit.

The meeting was unofficial, and so there was no one there to take the minutes.

"Do we know yet what happened at Hogwarts?" a Druid demanded.

"No," one of the robed figures stated. "The British Ministry denies this Voldemort has risen. A report from the Minister's Office, sent by a Dolores Umbridge, reports that Dumbledore agrees that Harry Potter is mentally unstable, or at least unreliable. Dumbledore's report is more ambiguous, but he clearly claims that Voldemort is back."

"And will he, as head of the Wizengamot, call in the International?" another Druid asked.

"No," the wizard replied. "There seems to be a struggle between Dumbledore and Fudge. If Dumbledore wins, hopefully the International will be called in."

"And if Fudge wins?" a witch dressed in an Old Believer tartan demanded.

"We hope that he will not," the robed wizard stated.

"But if he does?" the man in the Muggle suit demanded. "Can we interfere?"

"We cannot, in any event. Only the International can."

"Must we wait for that?" the witch asked. "The British and other western Europeans made a total hash of their fight against this Voldemort last time. If it hadn't been for Dumbledore's secret resistance and any number of volunteers, we might have had an out-right war! If we wish to stay hidden from the Muggles, that **MUST** not happen!"

"Surely we can rely on the British Ministry to do the right thing," a different robed wizard almost purred.

"According to whose lights?" a different Old Believer demanded.

"I resent. . . ."

"**SILENCE!**" The elderly leader of the Tuatha, the three person executive of the Old Believers, demanded as he stood. "We must wait upon events, it seems. However, if Dumbledore says the Dark Wizard is back, he is back. They will likely need our help, sooner or later, no matter if they ask for it or not. Our own security forces are well-trained, but need new, young leadership. Our diplomacy may also need some work -- we may have to lead the International to take action. Let us prepare for both. If it turns out to be unnecessary, it will still be a useful exercise.

"I object," the smooth-talking wizard stated.

"Then let us take a vote," a different wizard demanded.

"The Assembly will not approve," the once-smooth talking Pure-Blood stated, beginning to get desperate to halt this idea.

"The Assembly passes laws, not policy," a shaman stated. "You are here more as a courtesy than out of need. Let us vote."

The vote was 36 - 3.

Friday, August 11, 1995

The twenty-four wizards and twelve witches who had approved a more active stance met again in August to consider a very disturbing news story. "Have we all had a chance to read over the transcript of Harry Potter's hearing?" an Old Believer asked.

From the rumble of comments, it was clear that the group had, and thought little of it. "Comments?"

"It's a disgrace!" one Pure-Blood stated, standing. "What game is Fudge playing at? Every bit of evidence our Intelligence has collected states that this Dark Wizard was reborn in a very Dark ceremony!"

"Some might say that the evidence mostly comes down to one boy's word," a shaman stated.

"Some might, but I don't think they were invited this time! Not all of us have strong ties to the Pure-Bloods who supported Grindelwald and Voldemort on his last attempt."

"That is true, for which we are grateful," one of the Council of Druids said in a pacifying manner. "Still, at this point, can we actively interfere?"

"No," one of the leaders of the Confederation broke in, "we still can not. However, I can tell you there are a number of other concerned Ministries around the world. It appears as if we must allow Voldemort to strike the first blow. We must be prepared to actively interfere, and by that I mean the International in name, even if it is mostly us supplying the money and

muscle. Unless any one objects, I shall be directing all the behind-the-scenes diplomacy to that end."

No one said anything.

"Then we are agreed. We will meet slightly more formally tomorrow to allow the new head of Law Enforcement to address us."

"When will the announcement be made?" the Muggle-dressed wizard asked.

"In perhaps two hours. I expect our three missing colleagues are writing a complaint about the new man even as we speak."

"Well, that gives them something to do, I guess," another wizard commented.

Monday, June 24, 1996

While the 39 member Committee debated policy, the North American Confederation's actual executive was a 12 person Leadership Council. Six members were selected by various constituencies dating back to the Confederation's formal creation in 1785 -- four Old Believers (two religious and two secular), a Native shaman, and a representative of the Old Colonial Families. The Confederation was divided into six equal regions, based on the wizarding population. Each region elected one member of the Council and 20 members each to the 180 person Assembly (45 others were selected by the Old Believers, 15 selected by the Shamans).

The Executive currently therefore consisted on a member of the Tuatha and a member of the Council of Druids, two Old Believers selected by the Old Believer sects, three Old Believers elected by their regions, a Shaman, the Old Colonial representative, two Pure-Bloods elected by their regions, and a Full-Blood who had been elected by her region.

This Monday afternoon, they were meeting in emergency session. "There is one thing on the agenda," the chair for the day stated. "Formally asking the International to put the British Ministry into receivership, and taking the lead in fighting the returned Dark Wizard who calls himself Voldemort."

The Colonial Representative stood. "I have read the reports and am appalled at the British Ministry's mishandling of this. However, many of my fellow Colonials dislike the idea of active interference in another Ministry. Can anyone give me one major reason we should not object?" He sat.

The Tuatha member stood. "The dementors. We have all been against their employment by the Europeans at the prison the British manage for them. Now these abominations, grown strong by European coddling, have gone over to this wizard. They pose an international problem. The International must take charge as soon as possible."

A Pure-Blood stood. "And I suppose we will have to finance this adventure?"

The chair for the day answered, "The personnel, yes, for the most part. The rest will be more evenly divided."

"So it's all decided, is that what you're saying?"

"Except for the voting, yes."

"Then we might as well vote," the Pure-Blood said with disgust as he sat.

The vote was 11 - 0, with the Pure-Blood speaker abstaining.

Chapter 01

Monday, July 1, 1996

When Cornelius Fudge had left Hogwarts, back long before Grindelwald was considered a direct threat to Britain, back when Tom Riddle Jr. had barely been out of nappies, he had hoped for a good, long career with the British Ministry of Magic. He had felt, from the beginning, he could become a Department Head. He had not thought, he had barely hoped, that he might become the Minister of Magic.

Well, he had achieved that rank. A number of officials had had to first be discredited in the scandals of the 1980s, but he had stepped into power in 1990.

It had felt good.

It had been a lie.

Fudge now realized he had been used. Used by people like Lucius Malfoy. He had not done his job well, because he had been blinded by his own ambition, belief in his own value, and the information people like Lucius Malfoy had fed him.

And he would be known as the Minister who had allowed the most evil, and perhaps most magically powerful, Dark Wizard in several centuries stage a comeback on his watch. People still shook their heads at the various European ministers who had failed to stop Grindelwald, the most dangerous dark wizard of all time, from starting a series of wars that had staggered both the magical and Muggle worlds. They still shook their heads at the two British ministers who had failed to see Voldemort's rise coming in the 1960s and 1970s.

Fudge was determined that they wouldn't shake their head at his failures. That they instead remembered that, after being caught by surprise, he had helped lead the successful fight against that so-called Dark Lord.

That meant he had to stay in office.

That meant he had to unlearn all the little lies Lucius Malfoy had put in his head, all the doubts about Dumbledore's motives and Harry Potter's mental state.

Most of all, it meant he had to survive the next meeting.

Ministers of Magic are not elected, nor are they selected by any Muggle government. Instead, ministers were forced out and appointed by a combination of public opinion, opinion within the Ministry, the International, and groups like the Warlocks. Some segments, like the International and Warlocks, had more power to dismiss a minister than to appoint. Likewise, opinion within the Ministry had more say in new appointments.

And today's meeting had all these elements. If he could survive today, he could rally public opinion.

If he could survive today.

There was a knock on the door. Fudge looked up and saw a very worn Percy Weasley. Percy had been considered a true high flier until the incident of a few weeks before. In some senses, his career was as much on the line as Fudge's, and both men knew it.

"What information do you have?"

"Madam Umbridge is still being totally uncooperative," Percy stated in a strained voice. "In spite of her confession of total responsibility in front of the students, she claims you ordered her to set the dementors on Potter, and to drive him out of Hogwarts if possible. I managed to get signed statements from Granger, Lovegood, and Longbottom." He hesitated, but pressed on. "My father managed to get a statement from my sister and youngest brother. Potter hasn't responded. Should . . . someone visit him?"

"No, not unless we need him for a trial. Damn Dolores! She never knew when to stop!" Fudge sighed. If he was going to be forced out, he would at least make certain she didn't pull him down to her level! Perhaps he deserved to be remembered as incompetent, but he was NOT going to be remembered as Dark. "What else?"

"I managed to partially identify the six representatives of the International and the three from the warlocks." The two teams had come together the week before, and were investigating the whole mess.

"And?"

"Four of them are from the North American Confederation, one from the Latin American Confederation, one from Brazil, one from the Bantu, one from the Greater Indian Confederation, and one from the Australio-Oceanic Shamans."

"Hell!" The North American Confederation was the largest, richest, and most powerful Ministry of all, looking down on the muddle of conflicting authorities in Europe with disdain, if not contempt. As far as Fudge was concerned, the groups currently running the North American policy were powerful, self-assured pricks. Except on the issue of Dark Magic, the Latin American, Brazilian, and Bantu groups were often very easy going -- and of course they might see this as a Dark Magic issue rather than as the political problem Fudge saw it as. Indian officials tended to be aloof yet helpful. The Shamans were powerful and self-righteous.

This wasn't going to be easy. "No names?"

"No, sir. The Brazilian, North American, and Indian witches are of course from the International."

"Who else is going to be at the meeting?" Fudge asked eagerly.

Percy's voice shook a little. "Bones, Diggory, Weasley, Dumbledore, Snape, Lupin, yourself, and myself."

'Diggory and Bones, two people who really ARE after my job now,' Fudge thought.

"One North American wizard went to Hogwarts, and also talked with my brother and sister," Percy said. "I think he talked to Granger as well. Someone certainly did. Other than that, I can't find out anything."

"Very well, Percy," Fudge said standing. "Let's see if we can save our careers."

It was clear that none of the British group was at their ease, not even Dumbledore. It was clear that several of them wanted to know why Snape and Lupin were there (including Snape and Lupin). It was also clear no one was going to ask any of the nine strangers sitting with them. Six of the people looked . . . average in some respects, or at least typical for who they were. They were middle aged or just a bit older, probably between 60 and 90 years old. They looked intelligent and competent. The Australian shaman even looked wise. The three North American wizards, however, would have stood out in any crowd, and yet also seemed to blend in. They were young -- even accounting for how slowly many wizards seem to age, they couldn't be older than their mid-30s to early 40s. That meant they were very powerful, in both magical and political terms. They were large -- tall muscular men, who looked like they could snap a normal man in half without using magic. And they looked both intelligent and dangerous. Yet at the same time, their features were hard to describe or remember, and although they looked very different in some ways, they almost seemed interchangeable except for their ages.

The oldest of the three was sitting at the head of the table. "Mister Weasley," he said in a deep bass voice, "I believe you have collected some statements?"

Percy handed them over to the man, who glanced through them quickly, and then handed them around the table. After a few minutes, he addressed the group. "These support the idea that Umbridge was acting on her own last summer, when she tried to have Potter Kissed. Does anyone believe the Minister needs to answer for this action at this time?"

No one said anything.

"We have caucused this morning, and we have reached unanimous agreement on nearly all points, much to all our surprise."

Fudge winced. That was unusual, as commissions rarely acted this fast or this decisively.

"First of all, let me say that we are very disappointed in all of you." That brought all eight heads snapping up in surprise. "Except for some minor law enforcement requests, you have all tried to contain this problem in Britain. No aid was requested from the International. No aid was requested from other European ministries. Would you care to comment, Minister Fudge or Madam Bones, on why aid was not requested in tracking down this Voldemort" (Bones, Diggory, and the two Weasleys winced, while Snape glared) "in Albania from the late 1980s to the early 1990s?"

"Crouch fought against it," Bones answered smoothly. "I couldn't directly ask for aid without his, or the Minister's, approval."

"And how often did you indirectly ask for aid?"

Bones said nothing.

"In fact, we were repeatedly told that Voldemort was dead. Not disembodied. Would you care to comment on that, Mister Dumbledore?"

"I repeatedly reported his disembodiment to the Ministry," Dumbeldore stated calmly.

"But you stand near the top of the Warlocks, and nearly as high in the International. Why were there no reports to us?"

"You will find I made that report in November, 1981," Dumbledore replied. "I did not reiterate that fact in writing, but whenever asked, which was perhaps a mere three times, I made the same reply. No one at the International made any investigation, as far as I know, nor did they take on any action on this issue when the Balkan ministries, including Albania's, fell into turmoil in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Sections of the Balkans were under International receivership for a time, and nothing was done. I made a full report in June, 1995, which again was not acted upon. Why didn't I take more action before late year? I believe prophecy must be fulfilled."

The large man looked at Dumbledore. "You refused to share any intelligence. You made your statements in the form of opinion. Yes, you finally made a fuller statement on June Twenty-second, 1995. By then, Voldemort was ensconced in Britain, where it is usually much more difficult to interfere."

Another of the North American wizards now spoke up. "Since 1945, there have been nine Class-One Dark Wizards, and twelve Class-One Dark Conspiracies world wide, including Voldemort and his Death Eaters. Eight of the Dark Wizards have been stopped and executed, ten of the movements destroyed. All was done either by the International, or by the International and the relevant local Ministries working together. While we haven't destroyed the Dark Song Movement in Brazil, the Caribbean, and West Africa, it is at least being contained. The only failure has been the British failure to contain Voldemort and his conspiracy. And you have failed because you tried to do it alone."

"In addition, the International and many of the national and tribal ministries have warned you Europeans for decades about the use of dementors at your prison," the Bantu wizard said, taking up the complaint. "We have always said they were unstable. But no, you Europeans always think you know best. Now, these evil creatures have multiplied because of the feasts you have provided them and have allied themselves with this Dark Wizard. So, our first move is to take control of Azkaban. The International will be guarding Azkaban, and the European ministries will be charged for it in full."

Fudge winced as the wizard handed him a proclamation to sign. The fact that dementors didn't have to be paid was one reason they had been used. The fact that few people had to be directly involved had made the prison fairly inexpensive to run. Still, Fudge had little choice but to sign it. The wizard left the room to set the take-over into motion.

The Indian witch now spoke to Diggory, Weasley, and Bones. "We are also unanimous that the British Ministry must be put into receivership." All the British Ministry people and Snape winced. The day-to-day British Ministry functions would be run by a member of the Ministry, but a group from the International would be directing policy. "Do one of you want the job?"

All three department heads shook their heads. Whoever had the job would be dead-ended when it was over. The rest of the Ministry would never forgive the person.

"Well, Minister Fudge, it looks like you will be keeping your job, as Caretaker Minister." Fudge grimaced, but said nothing. It would end his career, but at least he could partially make up for the errors of the past.

"There will be an eleven person Council. Minister Fudge, you three, and Mister Dumbledore will represent the British community and Ministry. I am Parvati Das, and I am of the Council."

The Native Australian spoke. "You may call me Johnson the Dreamwalker. I am of the Council."

The North American witch spoke next. "I am Marie Turgot. I am of the Council." Her accent gave her away as French Canadian.

The middle of the three North American wizard took his turn. "I'm Henry Dorff. I am of the Council."

The oldest of the three North American wizard was next. "I am Tudor Myrddin, master warlock and Head of the Council." That also caused a bit of apprehension. A master warlock out-ranked Dumbledore, and was a dangerous and powerful individual. By announcing they were members of the Council, they had in fact called the Governing Council into effect. "Mister Anadi will also be on the Council, and will be overseeing Azkaban. Mister Dorff will be overseeing Hogsmeade and Hogwarts, Ms Turgot Diagon Alley."

The youngest then spoke up. "I am Tobias Jones. My job is to investigate Harry Potter and see to the problem of Voldemort."

"Do you think it will be easy?" Snape said with a trade-mark sneer.

"No," Jones answered.

Myrddin then spoke. "Mister Diggory, you are removed from your current position. You are now the head of the Department of Magical Relations, or whatever it is you call inter-Ministry affairs."

"Department of International Magical Cooperation," Percy corrected automatically. He flushed at the glare he received.

"Whatever. Mister Weasley the elder, you are the Liaison Officer between the Ministry, the International, and the Council, with the same Departmental rank as Madam Bones and Mister Diggory. Minister Fudge, Mister Diggory, Madam Das, Madam Turgot, and young Mister Weasley, you may go. Mister Weasley the Younger, please see that blocks of satisfactory offices are made available."

In a few moments, Myrddin, Dorff, Jones, Johnson, Dumbledore, Weasley, Snape, and Lupin were alone. Myrddin collected his thoughts, and then spoke.

"Let me summarize the chain of events as we see them. Please do not comment until I am finished. There was a prophecy concerning young Potter. To either subvert or fulfill this prophecy, Voldemort killed the Potters and tried to kill young Harry. Perhaps because Lily Potter had died invoking ancient blood magic, Harry was saved and Voldemort disembodied. After the disembodiment of Voldemort, his Death Eaters were still active. Therefore Dumbledore here placed young Harry under the care of his Muggle relatives, where he would be hidden, and perhaps safe from magical harm, until he left for Hogwarts, but where he would suffer extreme emotional abuse and at times near-starvation."

Dumbledore looked very uncomfortable, while Lupin and Weasley gave him very dirty looks. Snape looked confused.

"Because you didn't think this Prophecy fulfilled," he went on, addressing Dumbledore, "you filed a minimal amount of information with the Ministry, the warlocks, and the International, and seem to have left young Harry to his fate. In Harry's First year, you allowed him to face a partially reembodyed Voldemort, which resulted in severe injuries to Mister Potter and to a Mister Ron Weasley."

"In the summer between Potter's First and Second years, he was imprisoned in his bedroom and half-starved, until rescued by three of the Weasley boys. During his Second year, you were confronted by an old mystery, and here at least you were handicapped by the machinations of Lucius Malfoy, both directly and through his influence on the Ministry and on the Board of Governors. These would have prevented you from going directly to the International, but as best we can ascertain, you never tried any back-channels, either. At least four students were nearly killed by a basilisk, and all were petrified. Mister Potter and Mister Ron Weasley were nearly killed gathering information, and Ms Ginny Weasley and Mister Potter were nearly killed by the youthful avatar of Tom Riddle, later known as Voldemort, which was destroyed by Potter."

"In his Third year, we have the mysterious circumstances of Sirius Black." Myrddin turned on Snape. "I understand you tried to have him Kissed under false pretenses. SILENCE!" he commanded when Snape tried to defend himself. "This is such a convoluted affair, I wouldn't have believed it in a work of fiction."

"Now, the activities at the Quidditch World Championship should have brought us all in, but Fudge and Crouch fought us, and the Chief of the Wizard Courts here didn't supply us with any further cause for intervening. After the Third Task, Mister Potter reported the resurrection of Voldemort, using ancient blood magic. You," Myrddin directed his attention directly on Dumbledore, "sent a full report of Potter's claim, but no commentary on why he should be believed. Dolores Umbridge submitted a report, which we now know to be false, claiming that you had acknowledged Mister Potter was under severe stress, and that his claims were therefore not to be taken seriously."

He stopped and glared at Dumbledore. "Warlock! I ask thee. Did thee make such a statement?"

"That Mister Potter was under severe stress, yes, sir; that his claims were anything other than totally true? No, sir. I maintained from the beginning that Harry was, and is, truthful and sane."

"Good. Now, last year, you and your staff were under direct attack by Umbridge, and by extension Fudge. That no doubt limited your options, and explains why you had Potter taught Occlumency by an unlicensed and incompetent practitioner."

"Now see here!" Snape yelled as he stood. Then his eyes grew wide and he sat down, stunned.

"Johnson has been inside Snape's mind since near the beginning of the meeting," Myrddin explained.

"Mister Snape does have very powerful Occlumency shields against direct attack," Johnson said softly. "However, any skilled, subtle approach gains easy access. Looking over the data of our interviews with young Mister Weasley and Miss Granger, I would say that Mister Snape was compromised by Voldemort long ago. He has been used as an unwitting source of information for at least the last year. His attempt to prevent Voldemort from gaining the Philosopher's Stone back in 1992 would have exposed him then, assuming he had not been discovered back in the early 1980s."

Johnson turned to Snape. "Your crude teaching methods merely opened Potter up to easier access. Mister Potter should easily learn Occlumency, considering his ability to overthrow the Imperius curse." He turned to Myrddin. "It might be best if I taught the boy."

Myrddin nodded to Johnson respectfully. "Johnson is one of the most skilled teachers of Occlumency there is," he then explained.

"Mister Johnson," Remus started.

"Just Johnson," he interrupted. "My true name is not to be revealed, and Johnson is sufficient." He paused. "I am sometimes called Master J, if you prefer."

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"Fine, Master J then," Remus went on. "Harry is hurt. Is learning how to hide his emotions a good idea right now?"

"Yes," Johnson declared, "for he shall also learn what his emotions are. I have taught many troubled adolescents."

Myrddin turned to Snape. "Thank you for your attendance, Mister Snape. Please find young Mister Weasley. Mister Dorff will need to speak to you later this morning, and Weasley will know where to have you wait."

A tight-lipped Snape stood and silently left the conference room. Dorff and Johnson then stood at both ends of the room and made a double circuit of the room, checking for listening charms and other such problems. Finding no problems, they recast the privacy spells.

"Now, Mister Dumbledore, you will tell us the Prophecy. Then, we shall start to decide how to destroy Voldemort, and yes, help young Mister Potter."

Chapter 02

Monday, July 1, 1996

continued

Albus Dumbledore, the most famous, powerful, and learned wizard of the twentieth century, sat on a small hard wooden chair in an anteroom in the British Ministry of Magic. Remus Lupin and Arthur Weasley sat with him, neither speaking with their mentor and leader.

Dumbledore sighed. "Are neither of you going to speak with me?"

"What is there to say?" Arthur asked. Then he decided to speak out anyway. "Was it really necessary for Harry to suffer at his relatives? Especially to the degree he has. . . ."

"And is!" Remus snarled.

"I hadn't realized," Dumbledore answered weakly. "I didn't expect Harry to be welcomed, but I never thought it would be as bad as it was."

"Nonsense," Remus barked. "You had Figg watching; you must have gotten reports, so even if you didn't expect it, you still knew about it! And there was no excuse NOT to know about the summer after his First year."

"Better an abused Harry than a dead Harry!" Dumbledore burst out. "I hate what has happened with him! I loathe those relatives of his! But there was no other way to protect Harry from magical attack! Harry HAD to stay with them, or he would be dead!" Dumbledore stood. "Why do you think Voldemort is only able to really attack Harry at the end of the spring term? BECAUSE THAT IS WHEN THE PROTECTION STARTS TO WEAKEN!"

Breathing hard, Dumbledore sat. After a few moments, he went on, "And the more I interfered, the weaker those protections would have been. I intervened last summer, and look at what happened -- Harry was vulnerable by Christmas!"

"And you couldn't just explain that?" Arthur demanded.

"No," Dumbledore answered. "I couldn't allow any talk, even amongst my most trusted friends! Sooner or later, some Death Eater with a shade less prejudice from the others would suggest the obvious solution, for the protection works both ways."

Arthur looked puzzled, but Remus said, "Hire Muggles to either kill Harry or kill the Dursleys."

"Exactly. The blood protection helped Harry save the Philosopher's Stone, defeat the basilisk, create a Patronus strong enough to defeat nearly a hundred dementors, and duel the risen Voldemort to a draw. It helped him keep his little group of students going last month, when they should have been beaten easily. It's not the entire explanation, of course. Harry is a remarkably powerful wizard for his age. However, without the blood protections, uninterfered with, he could be killed easily. As it is, the interference I have been forced to use have left Harry open to attacks at the end of each year. Had the Dursleys accepted Harry with love, Voldemort could not have so much as portkeyed him away."

"That may or may not be true, but you still shouldn't have decided all this on your own," Myrddin said from the doorway. "And, in any event, the scheme has become at least unraveled. Potter needs to be trained this summer. Jones and I present . . . a less eccentric visage to Muggle eyes. We shall have to talk with these Dursleys, and see if anything may be preserved of these protections. We of course hope they may."

He turned to Lupin. "Will you come with us?"

Remus nodded.

Myrddin turned to Arthur. "Would you allow your youngest son, and perhaps your daughter, to join Potter? And do you know the parents of the other students who were Potter at the Ministry? We must know what we're doing before we do it."

"Yes, to both," Arthur said, who then added with a smile, "but perhaps you should talk to my wife first."

Dumbledore and Remus smiled slightly at that.

"Boy! why are you so useless? All you've done for the last week is laze around that room and mope about before dawn! You smell, that bird smells, and the room smells! I don't know what you went through, and I really don't care! Get out of that bed, clean the room, take a shower, and then eat something before those freaks descend on us! I'll be out until Three, and I want things cleaned up by the time I get back!"

"Fine," Harry grumbled, laying on his cot.

Despite his aunt's words, Harry was not totally dysfunctional. He wasn't sleeping well, even by his low standards, and he had had something of a low-grade headache around his scar since he'd arrived at Privet Drive. He had nothing he had to study until his O.W.L. results came, at which point he would have to choose between five and seven courses (N.E.W.T. and vocational courses were available). He smelled a bit, because each morning about 4:00 he would wake up from dreaming about Sirius' death. He would sneak down to the basement and workout with his cousin's free weights (almost never touched by his cousin, who was spending every morning at a health club) and running the tread-mill (never touched once it had been set up the previous August). Whenever Harry tried to shower, his aunt had yelled at him, so he usually waited until she went 'visiting' in the afternoons, after he had worked out again.

In the mornings and before going to sleep, Harry did his Occlumency exercises. He hated them, they didn't seem to do much good, but he did them anyway.

He also reread his letters.

Not the one from Ron complaining about Hermione, not the one from Hermione announcing her parents were taking her on an immediate trip to Africa (where her parents were visiting a 'Doctors without Borders' clinic for two weeks), not the one from Neville telling Harry about

his new wand ('It really works!'), not the two from Ginny. No, Harry reread the short notes from Luna.

He wasn't certain why, and didn't want to know.

The previous Wednesday morning, a snowy owl had been awaiting Harry when he came out of the cellar. It had a strangely-shaped package, and a note:

Harry!

Thank you for asking again about my things. (Harry had sent Hedwig on to Luna's Monday morning, along with a brief note replying to Ginny's letter asking him if he'd made it without incident.) **As usual, everything came back, so I'm not certain why you even needed to ask. Still, I've never received a personal owl, and I will always be happy to hear from you. I seem to remember Ginny saying your relatives don't feed you much over the summer, and I remember how you were dressed on the train. Still, there are worse things in life than staying with poor relatives.** (Harry really wished he could show the note to his aunt.) **So, if you're hungry, here is a smoked herring. My father added the two little meat pies, on the off-chance you don't like herring. Have Herbert bring a note back if you have a preference. If not, just say 'No reply, thank you'. In either case, we'll send along something to eat, starting Thursday afternoon.**

your friend
Luna

Harry had swallowed his pride, and asked for the meat pies (although he and Hedwig had both picked at the herring, since they were both hungry). Each morning for the last four mornings, there was an owl with two small meat pies, and a note from Luna. Harry always had a note ready to send back.

Harry finished airing his room, and decided not to workout again. Instead, he went to take a shower before Dudley lumbered in, since he would use up all the hot water showering before leaving with his friends until midnight. He managed to eat the left-over, cold tinned vegetable soup and shower before Dudley came in. Dudley taunted Harry a bit through the closed door before and after his shower while Harry read some of the books Dudley could never be bothered with. Harry had already finished his own Defense books and Dudley's history texts, and was currently studying French and would look through the economics later.

When Dudley left, Harry looked at his latest note from Luna for the fourth time:

Harry

You are so sweet to ask. We haven't seen any snorkacks, and are beginning to wonder if they are out of season. In either case, we will be back in Britain in two weeks or so. Daddy decided the cottage is a bit exposed, so we'll be staying in the flat above the

Quibbler office. If you come to Diagon Alley any time, I'll be happy to have some ice cream with you.

your friend

Luna

Harry put the letter away. He wasn't sure what he felt for Luna. He wasn't as obsessed with her as he had been with Cho, or if he was, it wasn't the same sort of obsession. He pushed the thought aside yet again.

Harry pulled out his divination text and looked up meditation techniques to reread. Following the instructions, he closed the curtains, dug up one of the Dursleys' 'emergency' candles, and sat studying the flame. After a few moments, he tried his Occlumency exercises again.

Harry's body relaxed, although his mind remained focused. The pain around his scar slowly disappeared. In the back of his mind, all his thoughts and worries, which had been a jumble as he had poked at them trying to sort through them, sorted themselves. When Harry came out of his meditations, his head felt clearer than it had at any time since before the Third task, more than a year before. He had a clear idea of what he had to do in the short term, although the real future remained as foggy as the atmosphere of Trelawney's classroom.

When Petunia Dursley came back from 'tea' (cheap sherry) at a neighbor's, she was confronted by her pesky nephew. "What do you want, Boy?"

"I want you to do me a favor," Harry answered.

"You must be joking!"

"No, I'm not." Harry spread his arms wide. "Look at me! I look ridiculous! Now, I know you're not going to spend money on decent clothes for me," Petunia goggled at Harry. "but I need some decent clothes, some new glasses, and some supplies. What I need from you is your time."

"Why?"

"Because I can't stray too far from the house by myself! I can, however, if you come with me. I need to go shopping about five times, three times in London, once tomorrow or at least this week, and twice later."

"And who's going to pay for it?"

"I can borrow some money," Harry stated, not about to admit to have a fortune in gold. "I know you like going shopping in London. You can drop me off, and as long as I don't have to wander about waiting for you, it should be safe."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning you drop me off near Charing Cross in the morning. I'll show you where. Pick me up at a set time and place -- you won't be able to find me, so we'll have to have a set everything ahead of time. Then, we go clothes shopping and I order some new glasses. Once I get some decent clothes, we can shop closer to here if you prefer."

Petunia looked at her nephew, really looked at him. She saw him as he really looked, instead of letting her eyes roll past him in a disdainful glance. She was embarrassed. "Very well." She thought some more. "There's a one day optometrist on the way. I'll see if they can take you on the way in. Can you borrow an extra hundred and fifty pounds?"

"I think so, why?" Then Harry realized why. That was her price. It was probably reasonable enough, all things considered. "Oh. All right."

Petunia nodded her agreement. "Don't mention it to Vernon or Dudley. Dudley! He'll need lunch!"

"Dudley can microwave anything you leave for him," Harry pointed out.

"That's true." She started to turn, but stopped. "Do you know what he and his friends are up to at night?"

"Just underage drinking and trying to look tough, as far as I know," Harry answered. "Dudley's almost the oldest, so they shouldn't be drinking and driving. Piers is smoking pot, but Dudley seems to be avoiding it."

"You're sure?"

"That Piers at least is smoking it, and maybe dealing? Yes, I'm sure. He was trying to get Dudley to hold some for him, which he was smart enough to refuse to do. That's also why I'm sure he's not smoking it himself."

"I see." She thought a moment about how to deal with the situation. She came up with a set of solutions to look into. "Let me call for that eye appointment. Oh, and make it a hundred pounds, plus lunch tomorrow."

Harry nodded and slipped out the back door. He wandered up the lawn to the side of the house. "Dung?" he whispered.

"How'd you know it was me?" Dung Fletcher complained. He was under a number of concealment spells.

"I can smell that tobacco you smoke," Harry answered. "I'll be leaving the house tomorrow morning, with my aunt. Optometrist, then on to Diagon Alley. My aunt will drop me off and then pick me up a few hours later. I'll have the exact time she's picking me up when I get there."

"Thanks for being reasonable," Fletcher said sincerely.

Harry thought he detected something else. "What?" he asked.

"You know, I always got along with Sirius. Your Dad, too."

Harry's throat tightened. "Yeah?"

"Yes. Sirius was always saying how much like your Dad you are. You look like him, but you're starting to act a lot more like your Mum."

"In what way?"

"Your Dad and Sirius, well, they never really grew up. Never had the chance, in part. But your Mum, she was always thoughtful and responsible. Not in a bad way, neither."

"Thanks, Dung."

"Hang in there, lad. We'll make it."

Harry then had an idea. "Dung, are there good books on defense that I wouldn't be able to buy at Flourish and Blotts?"

"H'mm, don't know fer sure, but it's more than likely. If'n you can't, you could get them at some of the other bookshops, new or used. Especially the two in Knockturn Alley."

"Do you think I could buy something in any other bookstore, especially in Knockturn Alley, without everyone hearing about it?"

"No, no I guess you can't."

"Find me some. Think, someday I might have to throw a hex that's going to save your life. What books should I read?"

"Tough one, that is."

"I'll get you a Gringotts draft for fifty Galleons. Don't spend more than that in total. That includes a ten per cent commission for you."

"That's fair," Dung conceded. "Not great, but fair."

"Actually, I take that back," Harry said. "I'll make it a hundred and five. Five for a searching fee, the rest as stated."

"That's a bit better than fair," Dung admitted.

"See if you can find a good book on Legilimency and Occlumency, too."

"Right-o. I'll be on duty tomorrow night, from Eight to midnight."

"Right."

Tuesday, July 2, 1996

"You look happy," Petunia grumbled the next morning as they made their way to the optometrist.

"You know, I think I am," Harry replied. Harry knew he was at least not unhappy. He had actually slept until a little after 5:00 for the first time since arriving back on Privet Drive, his headache (although back) was less painful than any morning since Sirius' death, and Luna had written saying she hoped he would be able to be in Diagon Alley for his birthday.

Petunia dropped Harry off in front of the Leaky Cauldron at 9:30, and would be back at 11:45. Harry hurried inside, and found a member of the Order waiting for him. "Good morning, Tom; good morning, Mister Diggle," Harry said happily.

Tom waved at Harry and Diggle stood to follow Harry outside. "Are you going to shadow me, sir, or shall we go together?" Harry asked.

"Whichever you prefer, dear boy," Diggle responded.

"Gingotts, then shopping," Harry said, gesturing for the small wizard to join him.

"That's quite a bit of money you have, real and Muggle," Diggle commented as they headed for Madam Malkin's.

"I'm tired of looking like a scarecrow," Harry commented.

"Understandable."

Harry updated his measurements at Malkins, and had her translate his measurements into Muggle sizes. He took her recommendation for a cobbler, and ordered a pair of dragonhide boots. He made a very quick stop at the Weasleys', just to tell them he was passing through and to tell the family he really was doing better, and after a stop for owl treats and food, he made a slightly longer stop at the bookstore.

"Any place else?" Diggle asked. "Time is getting a bit short, you know."

"No, sir," Harry responded as he headed for the Leaky Cauldron, "just a question. Where are The Quibbler offices?" He didn't remember seeing it the August he'd spent so much time in the Alley.

"Just past the Gringotts Fork, two buildings down from the bank, Knockturn side, second floor," Diggle answered.

"Thank you. May I buy you a drink, for all your help?"

"No, thank you. I shall wait for you outside, in case your aunt is late. She should be here in less than five minutes."

She was already waiting. To Harry's surprise, she could see the Leaky Cauldron. She could also see the two parking places in front of it, which most people couldn't. She had just pulled into one of them. After thanking Diggle again, they were off.

Harry bought himself a full set of Muggle clothes. Underwear (boxers and briefs), socks (plus some silly ones for Dobby), three pairs of jeans, three pairs of slacks, fifteen shirts of every type, two pairs of trainers, a jeans jacket, two pairs of shorts to wear during his workouts, and a decent bathrobe. He also picked up some other supplies (including a waterproof watch and a wind-up alarm) and two bags of sweets, which he swore Dudley wouldn't get his hands on because he was sending them to his friends.

Picking up his two pair of wire-frame glasses, Harry was content. Petunia was a bit amazed at the transformation in the boy. Dressed decently, he didn't look a disgrace.

A little after 8:00, Harry slipped out of the house. "Dung?" he whispered.

"I'm over here." As Harry came over, he asked, "Can you smell the tobacco tonight?"

Harry sniffed. "No."

"Good; the new spells worked. Moody had a fit when I pointed out we'd both hadn't thought o' that." He partially disillusioned, so that Harry could see a vague outline of him.

"I had them make the draft out to bearer," Harry said.

"Good thinking! Now, here's six books for you. I have a lot o' junk laid away, so I shuffled about an' found these. Galleon each. Had to buy the Occlumency book -- three Galleon eight sickles an' eleven knuts that was. Let me know what you think, and what more you'll need. Okay?"

"Sounds good. Oh, here." Harry handed Dung a package.

"What's this?" Dung was puzzled.

"While I was watching my aunt searching for some magazine, I got talking to the tobacconist about my 'uncle Dung'. I described the awful smell of his pipe tobacco, and he said it was either Latakia or perique."

"Can't usually afford perique. I usually use a half Latakia half burley mix."

"Well, now you have some of each. If you smoke that perique mix around Mrs. Weasley, don't do it while I'm near by."

Dung smiled. "Yer a right good lad, Harry." Fletcher swore again that this year, he would keep a closer eye on Harry. This time, he meant it.

Harry went to his room. Instead of reading any of his new books (or any of Dudley's old ones), he relit the candle and meditated for half an hour. The pain in his scar went away again.

Harry then prepared four small packages. Neville didn't crave chocolate like many of Harry's friends, so he sent Neville a number of fruit-flavored sweets plus some salted pumpkin and sunflower seeds, and some soy nuts. Ron and Ginny were sent chocolates, while Luna got a mixture. Harry sent Hedwig off to Neville and the Weasleys, along with short notes of explanation.

Harry then laid down around 10:30, over an hour earlier than usual, and fell into a restful sleep.

Chapter 03

Thursday, July 4, 1996

Harry woke up at 5:45. It was getting harder each day to wake up early as his sleep increased. Still, between his Occlumency meditations, his new glasses, and his better sleeping habits, Harry's headache was totally gone for most of each day.

After nearly two weeks, Harry was beginning to see a few results from his exercise. He had greater stamina, and was lifting heavier weights with more repetitions. There still weren't many real physical signs (since he had so little body fat, each muscle was fairly well-defined as it was), but Harry was sure mass would come sooner or later.

This morning, as he was slipping on his exercise shorts, Harry that saw Hedwig was back and that there was a barn owl, most likely from Luna (she never used the same owl twice in a row). Harry took the package from the owl, verified it was from Luna, tied the return note he had written the previous evening to its leg, gave it a treat, and sent it off.

Harry then took the notes off Hedwig, gave her a treat, and stroked her feathers a bit. She hooted softly, and dug into the owl kibble Harry had picked up for her in Diagon Alley. Finally, he went down to the cellar.

By now, the Dursleys knew he was working out in the early mornings. Harry waited until Vernon left, and then came up to shower before Dudley woke up. Harry had agreed to do the laundry, and in exchange no one complained about his showering twice a day.

Harry managed to finish eating just as Dudley thundered down the stairs. While Dudley ate, Harry went up to see what Luna and the Weasleys had written.

Dear Harry

Thank you for the chocolates. Ron complained about the chocolate turtles not moving and for not looking more like turtles, but he ate them so I know he found them as delicious as I.

I've been taunting Ron with all the boys I'm going to date (I would never really date Malfoy, but it's fun to watch Ron turn all those interesting colours when I mention the possibility). I understand you're writing to Luna, so I will ignore all Ron's hints. I'm glad we're real friends now, that I'm not just Ron's little sister. And I'm sure that you won't think I'm a 'scarlet woman' for writing to the boys (Ron tried that one, too; I don't care what Ron thinks, but I do care what you think about me). I'm actually thinking about dating one boy, but I'm still weighing my options -- please tell me I'm not horrible!)

In case you're curious, Luna likes imperial almonds and carob.

**your friend and follower
Ginny**

When Harry wrote back, he made certain to assure Ginny that she wasn't a scarlet woman, and as long as she didn't lead anyone on unnecessarily, he couldn't think badly of her. After a little extra thinking, he assured her he didn't think of her as a little sister, but as a close and trusted friend.

Harry

Thanks for the chocolate -- don't believe anything Ginny says about it. Thanks for sending her some, otherwise she'd had snaffled mine. Owls have been flocking to her all summer. Justin, Seamus, and Neville are the worst. At least Malfoy hasn't sent any that I've seen, although George claims he saw that damn eagle owl at her window last night (he and Fred came for their first visit in over a week). If I see it, underage magic or not, we're having fried owl for dinner!

Still haven't heard from Hermione, but I'm sure she'll be back in time to get her O.W.L. results. That should be around the 15th to the 21st. Fred and George said you didn't look too scrawny when they saw you, which made Mum happy.

Something big is going on. Not certain what, but there're rumours of some sort of reorganization at the Ministry. Dad seems pleased about it, whatever it is. He said to tell you the news is supposed to be in Friday's Prophet.

Write soon!

Ron

Dear Harry

First, let me thank you for the wonderful candies. It's not often I get chocolate; it usually disappears faster than my other possessions, and no one ever brings it back or replaces it. At school, I usually buy carob candies and imperial almonds, since no one else seems to like them much.

I didn't know about your relatives. We can talk about them, and anything else, when we see each other. I also understand about the meditation. See if you can find a mantra (a repeated sound or phrase, it doesn't have to make any sense) that will help. I understand 'om' is supposed to be popular, repeated either verbally or mentally.

We've basically stopped looking for snorkacks of any kind. Hermione will no doubt be pleased we haven't proven her wrong. Strange that she can only believe things that she's told by an authority figure.

Please enjoy the meat pies. I sent along an eel pie for you to try. I promise, it tastes better than it probably sounds to you.

your friend

Luna

"I'll try it, but I don't think I'll like it," Harry muttered. To his surprise, he didn't hate it when he ate it with lunch.

Thursday was the day for Petunia's 'bookclub' -- although as far as Harry knew they merely drank pink gin and gossiped. Still, that and her other groups took Petunia out of the house most of the weekdays. Petunia left a few minutes before 1:00, and Harry was working out a few minutes later.

A little after 2:00, Harry went upstairs to shower. Coming out of the shower, Harry was shocked to Remus Lupin standing in front of his bedroom door.

"Hi, Harry. How are you?"

Harry managed to find his voice. "Surprised."

Remus smiled. "Sorry about that. We figured there was no reason to interrupt your workout."

"Who's 'we'?"

"Come on down stairs, and meet some people."

"May I at least put some pants on?"

"Sorry," Remus said, realizing Harry was standing in only a towel. "You may even put your trousers on. If you hurry, you may also add shirt, socks, and shoes."

"Harry, this is Tudor Myrddin, Tobias Jones, and Johnson the Dreamwalker." Harry regarded the two large men warily. Johnson, at least, seemed friendly. "The details of the situation are somewhat . . . convoluted, but the short version is, the Ministry has been put into receivership. That means the International has stepped in to help straighten things out. Mister Myrddin and Master Johnson are two of the International people acting as the real executive, while Fudge mostly does routine paperwork. The Council has eleven people, six from the International, five British. You know Madam Bones and Amos Diggory, of course, and Arthur and Professor Dumbledore are the other two, along with Fudge."

"Ron mentioned something was happening, but he wasn't certain what," Harry told them. "He said it would be in tomorrow's Prophet."

"True. Master J is a greater expert, and hopefully a better teacher, on Occlumency than Severus. He will help you master it this summer. Mister Jones and I will be tutoring you in general defense."

"Since your wand is on file at the Ministry, you don't have to stop by," Myrddin said. "We've lifted the prohibition on underage magic on you."

"Thank you."

"Your neighbor, Mrs. Figg, is just close enough for the blood protection to work there," Jones told Harry. "We would like you available for training, at least between One and Five every day."

"All summer?"

"At least until your birthday. We have several ideas for August, but changing the basic routine is unlikely," Jones stated. The man's dispassionate tones were beginning to grate on Harry. Like most people, Harry hated being treated as an object.

"Perhaps we could at least arrange something for your birthday," Myrddin mused. He looked at Harry. "Our purpose is NOT to keep you isolated, Mister Potter. Dumbledore believes the protections here don't just keep you hidden, but believes it reenforces your magic and protects you and your relatives from magical attack."

Harry frowned. "You mean I'm not really doing things like producing a Patronus?"

"In part. You would be able to produce a Patronus, but not one strong enough to drive away a hundred dementors. Even a wizard as powerful and experienced as Dumbledore or myself wouldn't find that easy. Now, I don't know if his idea of the additional power is true or not. I have known a few students who excel at one branch of magic to the degree you do who are only average or slightly above average in related fields. I think that a much more probable explanation. and, as I said, Dumbledore also believes the protections keep you fairly safe from magical attack, not just hidden, at least from Voldemort, until they start to weaken in the spring. That also sounds over-stated at best. Still. . . ."

"Best not to take chances?" Harry asked.

"Exactly. Why don't you go with Lupin and Master J, while Jones and I stay and talk to your aunt."

"Alright."

"You seem to be a natural Occlumens," Johnson said as they walked towards Mrs. Figgs. "I have been probing your mind for weaknesses -- not looking into your thoughts, I must add. I see no easy way in."

"Professor Snape would disagree," Harry said drily.

"Professor Snape was exactly the wrong person to teach you," Johnson retorted. "And I am NOT referring to his charming personality or personal history with you and your family. He managed to teach himself a variety of Occlumency, which was amazing in itself, but it was incomplete. His father was abusive, mentally and physically. Snape learned to ward off those attacks, including a straight-forward Legilimency attack. A direct attack will not work against Severus Snape. I am one of the greatest masters of Legilimency there is, and I could not successfully attack him. However, there are many subtle ways of entering, as opposed to

attacking, a mind and he is wide open to most of them. You have a natural defense against those subtle attacks. It is the curse link to Voldemort that allows his attacks on you, and leaves you open to frontal attacks. Have you been practicing at all?"

"Not as such," Harry answered. "I have been trying, combining it with meditation."

"Good! Using what as a focus?"

"A candle flame. I've had a slight headache, centered around my scar, since the Ministry. It seems to be gone now. My concentration has also improved, or at least it feels that way."

"Interesting. Let's see what we can do for you."

Harry came back to the house happy. He was convinced he could learn enough Occlumency to deflect the attacks through his scar at the very least. It would take a lot of work on his part to be able to deflect a direct attack or to turn an attack against his attacker, especially if that attacker was Voldemort, but at least Harry had some idea of what he had to do and how he would have to do it.

"Boy! Come in here!"

Harry obediently went to the kitchen.

"Did you know some of those people were coming here today?"

"No, it was a complete surprise," Harry admitted.

She looked at him. "Very well. I have a good idea what you're supposed to do, and where you'll be. I think it's best we don't mention any of this to your uncle."

"Yes, Aunt Petunia."

"Why exactly do you have a candle in your room?"

"It helps me with the meditation I'm supposed to be doing."

"You're not . . . conjuring anything, are you?"

"Absolutely not!" Harry was appalled by the very idea.

"Alright, I believe you. Go get cleaned up."

Friday, July 19, 1996

The next two weeks were interesting. Harry was now sleeping from just before 10:30 until just before 6:00, which was still less than he probably needed, but more than he had been

constantly getting for over a year. His physical workouts continued, and he was starting to put some muscle on his frame. In addition to the meat pies (Luna and her father had come back on the 17th, but she still sent Harry food), Mrs. Figg had him eat a 'snack' (usually a sandwich thick with meat and tomatoes and a tall glass of milk) each afternoon.

Harry had made progress with his Occlumency and meditation. Master J thought he had great natural ability in both, which came as a shock to Harry. Jones had been equally, although less visibly, impressed by Harry's abilities. He and Remus had Harry well into the N.E.W.T.-level Defense practicals in a week, and had him starting his Seventh year charms material and the introductory auror material in two.

Harry didn't mention one reason for his progress were the books supplied by Dung Fletcher. Fletcher had found so many good books at reasonable prices that the man had even thrown in a special gift -- a seven compartment magical trunk, much like the faux Moody had had during Harry's Fourth year. Harry had been grateful, but Dung refused any more money. He had decided to just take Harry's five Galleons, the rest he supplied almost at cost. The old crook had decided Harry Potter was a special boy, who deserved all the help he could get. Dung had even spent the previous Sunday morning, when the Dursleys were on an outing, teaching Harry how to pick locks the Muggle way. He also supplied Harry a knife to replace the one he'd ruined at the Ministry and a set of picklocks almost at cost.

Over this training period, Harry had decided against becoming an auror. He still wanted the training, but he had decided to try for the more elite hit-wizards, with encouragement from Remus and Jones. The first step would be getting the auror training.

To Harry's surprise, they quit at 3:45 rather than 4:15 that Friday. "You've done well, Mister Potter," Jones told him, "better than we had hoped, let alone expected." Neither Harry nor Remus had warmed up to Jones, who was brilliant at what he did but who didn't seem to want to be friends. Still, the man worked hard to help Harry and was very informative, which Harry appreciated.

"Myrddin has decided to arrange a holiday for you," Jones told Harry. "Your relations will drop you off at Diagon Alley tomorrow morning, and pick you up in the late afternoon. Most of your class will receive their O.W.L. results first thing Monday morning. Here are yours. Be prepared to decide on your Sixth year courses by Monday. Lupin will work with you until Two on Monday, if you need that much time."

Jones and Johnson flooed away, leaving Harry with his O.W.L. results.

"Go ahead and open them," Remus teased. "I'm sure they're good."

Harry gave Remus a weak smile.

O.W.L. RESULTS FOR HARRY J. POTTER

Required Courses:

<i>.</i>	<i>.Theory.</i>	<i>.Practical.</i>	<i>.Total</i>
<i>Astronomy</i>	<i>.A</i>	<i>.A.</i>	<i>.A</i>
<i>Charms.</i>	<i>.E</i>	<i>.O.</i>	<i>.O</i>
<i>Defence against the Dark Arts</i>	<i>.O</i>	<i>.O+</i>	<i>.O</i>
<i>Herbology</i>	<i>.A</i>	<i>.A.</i>	<i>.A</i>
<i>History of Magic.</i>	<i>.D</i>	<i>-.</i>	<i>.D</i>
<i>Potions</i>	<i>.E</i>	<i>.E.</i>	<i>.E</i>

TransfigurationEOO
Theory IOO
(Charms, Defense, Transfiguration)
Theory IIAA
(Herbology, Potions, Defense)

Optional Courses

Care of Magical Creature.EOO
Divination.APA

"Ten!" Remus proclaimed when he saw the results. "Well done!"

"Not good enough for auror training," Harry pointed out. "I needed an 'O' in Potions to continue."

"To continue N.E.W.T. potions," Remus pointed out in turn. "You need five E or O N.E.W.T.s. Potions is recommended, not required. Without Potions, you need to take Defense, Charms, Transfiguration, and Medicine. Take either the N.E.W.T. Herbology or Care, and maybe Practical Potions -- you don't even need an A-level for that. Or take N.E.W.T. Care and Herbology, or even Law, and screw Potions either way! I'm tired of defending Snape, and you shouldn't have to put up with him if you don't want to. Tonks will be on duty tonight between Eight and midnight. I'll have her out on the side of the house, and you can talk with her."

"Alright," Harry said, bouncing back a bit. "Can you tell me if I should write Hermione, Ron, and Luna with my results tonight?"

Remus smiled. "Well phrased. No, I'd wait until you're back from London to write to anyone. If our plan works out well, be sure to thank Jones, Master J, Tonks, Dumbledore, and Arthur. If it doesn't, blame Tonks. The sequence of events is her idea."

"I thought you liked Tonks?"

Remus flushed. "I do, actually."

"Really? I didn't mean like that!"

"Oh! Still, yes, I do like her 'like that'." Remus sighed.

"What's wrong? Doesn't she like you?"

Remus snorted. "She has made it very clear that she's determined to, in her words, 'bag the man or bag the wolf'."

"Sounds kinky," Harry said with a grin, earning him a slap aimed in his direction that was easy to duck. "What's the problem?"

"I'm a werewolf."

"I've heard that. I take it Tonks knows."

"She does." Remus seemed depressed.

"Is it true that werewolves have great stamina?" Harry asked with a straight face.

"Of course! you should know that. . . ." Remus stared at Harry, and then blushed for the first time in years as he caught the implications.

"Tonks knows what she's doing," Harry said softly. "Does it mean you can't have children?"

Remus' blush intensified. "Yes, we can! Although, if something happens to Tonks I can't raise the children."

"Really?"

"Harry," Remus said seriously, "if I could have raised you, I would have. Blood magic or no blood magic, Dumbledore or no Dumbledore, living relatives or none. Sirius and I both loved you like our own son, and I still do. Had it been at all possible, nothing would have stopped me short of death."

Harry felt very warm over that idea, but still managed a comeback. "Then love Tonks, and have some of your own, so I can be the godfather who spoils them," Harry retorted.

"When the war is over," Remus replied, reflecting on the possibilities, "perhaps we will."

Petunia drove them into London early the next morning. Vernon and Dudley were disconcerted that Vernon couldn't see the parking space Petunia pulled into, although Dudley could if he concentrated.

Remus was waiting for Harry just outside the pub, and he quickly guided Harry through the pub and out into the Alley. Remus had sat Harry down late one afternoon the week before and explained the Potter finances to him. James Potter had inherited a small fortune from his parents when they had been killed in a massacre of Pure-Bloods opposed to Voldemort early in the previous war. James had also inherited money from a number of other relatives, who had also died in the conflict. While not quite in the league of the Malfoys, the resulting fortune was still very large. James had sold off some of the property when he could get a decent price for it, and invested in the Muggle world. The Trust he had set up had converted more property over the years. Harry would gain an income from the Trust when he turned 17, become a member of the Trust board when he turned 21, and inherit the whole thing at 30 if he wanted to dissolve the Trust. The gold in his vault was his to do with as he pleased; it did not represent his entire wealth, just his liquid assets.

Sirius' will from before his incarceration had also been filed that July. Andromeda Tonks had inherited all the property, but Harry would find 50,000 Galleons more in his account.

Therefore, Harry stopped by Gringotts and took 50 Galleons in cash and transferred 25,000 from his vault into a current account, so he could pay for large purchases by cheque instead of cash.

As they stood in front of the bank, Harry asked Remus, "Now can you tell me what's going on?"

"It's almost Ten-fifteen," Remus replied. "Be at the Leaky Cauldron at Twelve-thirty. Tom will have a parlor for you. Hermione came back into town Thursday night. She, Ron, Ginny, and Neville should be there."

"Not Luna?" Harry asked, disappointed.

"Luna is here," a soft voice said from next to Harry. Harry turned and saw her. Although Harry had put on some nine pounds of muscle that summer and had grown over four inches over the last two years, he was still only 5' 6. He was therefore looking directly into the only slightly-shorter girl's eyes. "Luna!" Harry took a step towards her, and then stopped, unsure what to do.

Luna smiled sympathically. "You're looking very nice today," she said. Luna didn't care very much how people dressed, but Harry looked better in his new clothes that fit than he had in the ragged over-sized ones he'd often wore. He also looked more rested than she had ever seen him.

"You're beautiful," Harry said. Then realizing he'd said it aloud, Harry blushed. Luna blushed slightly as well.

Remus looked at Luna. She was wearing a work-robe that could use a pressing, scuffed shoes and totally mis-matched yellow socks, and a necklace made out of butter-beer caps. Her long dark-blonde hair looked like she'd just come out of wind-storm, and a pair of mis-matched plastic earrings (a radish and a yellow pepper) were just visible. She was thin as a rail, and had probably never worn make-up or nail polish. Her large eyes were blinking about one third as often as most people's, and their strange color proclaimed her a seer of some sort.

Then Remus saw the smile form on her face, and understood why Harry thought her beautiful -- she was happy to see Harry. Their hands seemed to move without either noticing, and they were soon holding hands, still looking into each other's eyes.

Remus nudged Harry. "Don't block traffic," Remus said with a smile.

"What? Oh!" Harry dropped Luna's left hand so he could face Remus.

"Go on. Have fun, just don't do into Muggle London or down Knockturn Alley."

"Thanks, Remus, and thank Tonks for me."

"I will." Remus watched the pair amble down the Alley, hand-in-hand, oblivious to the rest of the world.

Chapter 04

Saturday, July 20, 1996

Luna directed Harry down to the building where The Quibbler had its offices, and she had Harry follow her up the stairs.

Harry had first been attracted to Cho's flying ability, but had become a bit obsessed about watching her athletic legs, especially when she was flying. Luna's thin legs weren't nearly as attractive, but Harry decided, walking up the stairs a few stairs behind Luna, that her small, tight, currently eye-level butt was more interesting than Cho's legs had ever been.

They went past the paper's offices and on up to the top floor, where Luna's father kept a small flat. "May I get you some water?" Luna asked. It was a warm day, and Luna was a naturally polite and generally considerate person.

"Please." Harry was the same, after all. Harry looked around while Luna was gone. It was a smallish room, fairly narrow, serving as dining room and parlor. The dining area was in the back, as was the kitchen next to it, which Luna had headed into. There were two sets of bookshelves and a cuckoo clock along the walls, and then two easy chairs with a table between them and lamps behind them on the Alley side.

Luna came back with two glasses of water. "What's out there?" Harry asked, referring to the windows, the blinds half down, in the dining area as he took one glass.

"Not much," Luna acknowledged. "There's a small courtyard and then the buildings over on Knockturn. We keep our blinds down at night, and they keep their blinds down all the time." She shrugged. "It's a little cramped here. Just two bedrooms, and the bath is next to the kitchen, although the door's opposite mine. Our cottage isn't that much bigger, but the attic, cellar, and grounds make it feel less confining."

Harry sipped the water, then said, "Are you nervous?" It was clear he was.

"I think so," Luna admitted. "Tell me, Harry, were you trying to ask me . . . on a date in your letters, or just being friendly?"

"Both," Harry admitted.

Luna smiled nervously. "I hadn't noticed at first, but I like you Harry. I . . . you're not, no, of course you're not."

"Not what?" It was unusual to see Luna flustered.

Luna flushed slightly. "Never mind. I know you're not teasing me or having me on."

"Has that happened before?"

Luna shrugged. "People don't seem to like me very much. They like teasing me for some reason." She scrunched up her eyes. "It only hurts when they pretend to be my friends, and then drop me."

Harry knew next to nothing about girls or dating. He did know about being lonely, about being the outsider, about being teased and hurt. He sat his glass down and put his arms around the thin, shaking figure. Luna wrapped his arms around Harry, and cried into his shoulder.

Harry wasn't certain why, but this didn't bother him at all, like Cho's crying had. It didn't make him feel awkward; it made him feel protective.

Harry squeezed a little tighter. "Whatever else happens, I will always be your friend," Harry promised.

And Luna Lovegood, only, lonely child of a caring if somewhat distracted and even befuddled father, cried a little more from happiness and relief.

At the same moment Harry had left Privet Drive that morning, a less pleasant meeting was going on.

"Take the hood and gag off."

The man strapped to the chair spat and moved his jaw a bit, making certain it still worked. He looked around, puzzled, and saw everything was in shadows. He could tell there were people, probably a number of them, but that was all. He wasn't sure what had happened; one moment he had been in a cell, and now he was here. He had no sense of how much time might have passed.

Still, he had always gone by the motto 'when in doubt, bluster'. "Who dares treat me like this! I demand to know who you are, what you're doing, and. . . ." The man's mouth kept moving, but now sound came out. He had been silenced.

". . . bastards." The hex had been lifted. Surprised, the man fell silent

"You are Lucius Malfoy. You are the last prisoner to be judged. You have confessed to multiple murders, assaults, and conspiracies."

"I have done no such thing!"

"Look at your chest."

Malfoy noticed for the first time he was naked except for a loin cloth. Something brown was painted across his chest.

"That is what remains of a powerful new truth potion that is absorbed through the skin. It will make you tell your innermost thoughts, even recognizing if you are under a spell, such as the Imperius. You are not now, and have not before been under such a spell. Do you have anything to say before sentence is carried out?"

"Who are you? You have no authority over me! Where's Fudge? Where's Umbridge? Where's. . . ."

"SILENCE! Your information is out of date. The British Ministry has been under receivership for more than two weeks."

'That explains the harsher confinement, and the lack of a rescue,' Malfoy thought, now worried.

"The prisoner, having nothing to say, is condemned."

"WAIT!" Malfoy pleaded, straining against the chains. He felt the pull of a portkey, and the actions of his pushing against the chair pushed him face first onto a metal floor.

"Well, look who's here," Malfoy heard Crabbe say.

Malfoy got up to his knees.

"Where are we?"

"I don't know, but I don't like it," Macnair answered.

Malfoy looked around and saw he was with all the prisoners captured at the Ministry, plus a few other Death Eaters who must have been captured since. They were in an all metal room, with a single Muggle light bulb set into the ceiling to provide light. There was a metal door set off to the side of one of the walls, and, strangely, what looked like four shower heads.

Suddenly, Malfoy remembered something he had read about how some of Grindelwald's Muggle allies had eliminated people.

"What is it?" Nott demanded.

"Can anyone do a bubblehead charm without a wand?"

"Why?" Marcus Flint demanded.

Malfoy tried casting one on himself, and failed. He tried it on Nott, and failed again. "Hurry, you fools! Try!"

"Why?" Crabbe now asked, but it was too late. Gas poured into the sealed room.

"Problem, Mister Weasley?" Vincent Anadi asked Percy.

"No . . . not really. It just seemed so, abrupt."

"He was questioned for eight hours, although he doesn't remember it," Anadi responded. "Here, this might interest you." He handed Percy the transcript of Malfoy's interrogation, opened to his revealing the plot of using Tom Riddle Jr.'s enchanted diary.

Percy's jaw set.

"I am curious, Mister Weasley. Your entire immediate family has been strong in the fight against this Riddle. What made you go against them?"

"I . . . I . . ." Percy didn't really have an answer he was willing to share.

"Sometimes, we must choose the Higher Good over our family, but that is different than choosing a career over our blood," Anadi said softly. "There are some, many actually, who would like to move you down to the rank of mail clerk." Percy winced. "Do you know why you were given a second chance? Who spoke up for you?"

"Minister Fudge?" Percy asked hopefully.

"You are a very stupid boy. Your father and Albus Dumbledore spoke of saving your career both before and after the take-over meeting. Harry Potter has also expressed hope you might become reconciled to your family, and Tudor Myrddin, Johnson the Dreamwalker, and even Tobias Jones think very highly of young Mister Potter. Your mother spoke to them and to Marie Turgot as well. Minister Fudge merely thanked us for keeping you on. If you do not take advantage of this opportunity to mend your fences, do not expect another. Now, begone from my sight. Come back in an hour, and count the bodies, so you may believe. GO!"

Percy fled the room.

Harry and Luna sat on the floor, leaning against one of the chairs, and leaning against each other. They said very little, they were just happy in each other's company.

Harry looked up at the cuckoo clock and decided they really would have to go soon. He was shocked so much time had passed. "Luna?"

"Yes?"

"Do you believe I really do like you?"

"Of course." She frowned. "I can usually tell how people feel about each other, but not how they feel about me."

"Have the Inner Eye do you?" Harry teased.

"Acutally, I believe I do," Luna said. "I'd always been told that, but I didn't think so after my first year with Professor Trelawney. Then I realized that while she actually does know a great deal about the subject, she doesn't have as much of the Sight as I do, and I'm sure mine isn't really all that powerful. She is rather unsure of herself, and so goes in for dramatics."

"What's your other class besides Divination? Runes?"

"Harry, I'm a true Ravenclaw, despite the teasing I get from my house mates. I take a full schedule. Muggle Studies as well as Runes."

"Oh. Anyway, Since you believe I like you, and you seem to like me. . . ." Harry found himself at a loss for words.

"I would like to . . . walk with you," Luna said. "I am your friend; I would like to be more."

"You are," Harry assured her. Harry leaned towards her, and they kissed lightly, almost chastely. 'That was wonderful,' Harry thought. 'How could I ever think I had more than a crush on Cho?'

Harry and Luna sat, their foreheads touching, for almost a minute. Finally, Harry said, "I think we need to be going."

"True," Luna agreed.

Harry stood and held out his hand to the surprised girl. With a slightly amazed look, Luna took Harry's hand, stood, and kissed him on the nose. "You are a very sweet person."

"Thanks," Harry said. Then a thought occurred.

"Why are you frowning?"

"You do know I'm dangerous to know, let alone . . . date?"

Luna smiled. "If you mean I might be in danger because I know you, I've known that since you and Ginny sat with me on the train last September. This is my choice as much as yours. Don't try to protect me, Harry. If our . . . togetherness is to work, it has to be as partners. I'll try to over-look your protectiveness, if you'll overlook my lack of tact."

"Deal," Harry said, going out the door. After Luna locked the door, he gestured her to go down the stairs ahead of him.

"No," Luna said simply, "this time I want to watch **your** arse."

Harry stared at her. "I didn't . . . how. . . ?"

Luna shrugged. "I heard your breathing change, and it's my only attractive feature, assuming you like taut buttocks instead of overtly feminine ones."

"I never have before," Harry replied, "and you have many attractive features."

"Name one other," Luna asked, curious.

"You have an incredible smile," Harry replied. He took her hands. "You have elegant hands, too, and you don't paint your nails odd colors."

"Sometimes, but not too often." Luna smiled. "Then let us walk together, so that people of all persuasions may ogle our wonderful buttocks."

Harry shook his head. Luna was a baffling combination of the wholly innocent and the overly forthright. 'Maybe the two go together,' Harry thought.

They reached the Leaky Cauldron with a few minutes to spare. As Harry searched for Tom to ask which room was reserved for him, he saw a table with several people he knew.

"Ah, Mister Potter. Right on time," Tobias Jones said.

"Luna, this is Tobias Jones, who has been tutoring me this summer along with Remus. This is . . . Miss Tonks, an auror I know, and of course you know Remus Lupin. Mister Jones, Tonks, this is Luna Lovegood."

Tonks gave Harry an 'ok' sigh and a wink, and Luna a polite, "Hi!" Jones merely said, "Pleased to meet you, Miss Lovegood. Lupin, you should probably go in and do the honors, since they all know you."

"Now?" Remus asked.

"Why not? More efficient that way."

Remus shrugged. "Alright." He stood and led Harry and Luna to a back parlor. Ron, Ginny, Hermione, and Neville were already there. Ron and Hermione were sitting next to each other. Hermione was talking to Ginny, while Ron was giving Neville a dirty look. All four looked over when they realized the door was open.

While Ginny, Ron, and Neville were content to say, "Hi, Harry," Hermione sprung out of her chair with the shout of "Harry!" She stopped just in front of Harry, her arms partially lifted to hug him. She had just seen Luna and Harry were holding hands. Hermione's eyes went almost as wide as Luna's.

Harry dropped Luna's hand and pulled Hermione into a hug. Hermione, after she'd gotten over the triple shocks of Harry holding Luna's hand, seeing him in clothes that not only fit but which made him look good, and being the one to hug her instead of her hugging him, returned the hug. "I'm so happy for you!" she whispered joyously in Harry's ear. She kissed Harry's cheek, and to Luna's shock, embraced Luna, told her the same, and kissed her cheek as well.

"Please sit down, everyone," Remus said, amused at the slack-jawed Weasleys and grinning Neville. "You can share your personal news later."

Harry and Luna sat next to each other, and continued holding hands. Ron jumped in his chair a bit when Hermione took his hand as well.

"With the International taking charge of the Ministry, the official policy towards Harry has changed. Harry is receiving special training this summer. At the same time, it is important that he doesn't stray from his relations' house too long or too often. Still, Harry shouldn't be isolated, either. Each of your parents or guardians have been contacted, and they have agreed that you may stay at the house Harry is training at for all or part of the summer, if you wish to."

"As you may or may not know, Harry has to stay with the closest blood relative to his mother to have a very old type of blood protection form. That is his aunt. His uncle is very . . . anti-magic in his attitudes, his aunt and cousin are only marginally less so. We have arranged for Harry's uncle to go on a business trip, helping to set up a new subsidiary for his Muggle firm overseas. To our surprise, the Durselys not only liked the idea, they decided to send Harry's cousin along as well." Remus looked at Harry. "Something about an undesirable friend?"

"One of Dudley's close friends is a heavy pot user, and maybe a dealer," Harry explained, in a daze from all the news.

"Ah. In any event, Dudley will be spending the weekends with your uncle, and the week in a training camp for aspiring boxers. Since we're paying for almost everything the company isn't, they were happy for Petunia to stay with you. Ron and Neville may take turns staying with you, if you all wish. Harry will be in training at the guest house from roughly Ten in the morning until Five in the afternoons. You may visit with Harry after supper until Ten at night, then back to the house. If you come along, you will be doing any school work that needs to be done in the mornings before Harry arrives, and then getting tutored in defense. If you're going to follow Harry into dangerous situations, and after five years we know Ron and Hermione will at the least, no matter what we say, you should be better trained."

"I will be with Harry," Luna said simply.

"And so will I!" Ginny declared.

"We won't let him stand alone," Neville said quietly.

"Never have, never will," Ron stated.

Hermione merely nodded, since she was a little teary. That some of Harry's Housemates had doubted him the year before had offended her even more than it had Harry or Ron.

"Good," Remus said. "Obviously, you'll be allowed to practice underage magic, although you should not in front of Harry's aunt except under external threat. You will be staying with or near her at least until Harry's birthday, and perhaps until the end of August."

They all nodded their understanding. Remus turned to Hermione. "Your parents agreed, but want you to spend two weeks in August with them. You may have one person other than Harry come with you for the two weeks, or different ones over for a few days each."

"I understand," Hermione said.

"Can we eat now?" Ron asked.

Remus grinned. "First of all, here are Luna and Ginny's letters for the next year. We'll pick up the books before we go. We'll make a trip for robes and such later in August."

Ginny immediately tore open her letter. "I'M A PREFECT!" Ginny yelled. She jumped on Neville's lap and gave him a kiss, then jumped back up and ran around the room kissing Hermione, Luna, and Harry.

"I'm not," Luna said while Ginny was still hopping up and down from joy.

"Did you want to be?" Harry asked.

"My mother was," Luna said, "but I didn't really expect it. I don't think the students would listen to me."

Ginny and Hermione were still talking about the office of prefect. Ron grimaced. "I wish Dumbledore had made you the prefect, Harry."

"Then how can you become Head Boy?" Harry teased. "Remember, your dream was to be Head Boy and Quidditch Captain."

"If Katie Bell isn't the captain this year, you will be," Ron said. "And you certainly will be next year."

"I don't know the plays, and the keeper can direct traffic better than a seeker or beater can," Harry argued.

"Miss Bell will be the new Head Girl, and will only take it if you and Ron both refuse," Remus said. "Professor McGonagall asked me if you two had a preference, or would be willing to be co-captains."

"You take care of booking the practices and the paperwork, I'll direct the play," Ron said.

"Deal."

Remus cleared his throat, drawing everyone's attention. "There is still one more thing before Ron may eat."

"Our O.W.L. results?" Hermione almost begged.

"Actually, yes," Remus told her. Hermione sat, and was soon threatening to hyperventilate.

"Please be prepared to tell us by Monday which classes you wish to take," Remus said. "Harry already received his, but here's a copy, to make certain he doesn't forget to tell you in detail. Read yours to them, then hand out the others, one at a time, Miss Granger last."

"Why last?" Hermione demanded.

"So you'll hear the others!" Remus teased. Hermione pouted.

"Food will be in in twenty minutes. We'll go shopping at Two."

Remus handed Harry the envelopes and left.

Chapter 05

Harry read off his marks first.

O.W.L. RESULTS FOR HARRY J. POTTER

Required Courses:

. . . . .	.Theory.	.Practical.	.Total
Astronomy . . . . .	.A . . . .	.A. . . . .	.A
Charms. . . . .	.E . . . .	.O. . . . .	.O
Defence against the Dark Arts . . . .	.O . . . .	.O+ . . . .	.O
Herbology . . . . .	.A . . . .	.A. . . . .	.A
History of Magic. . . . .	.D . . . .	-. . . . .	.D
Potions . . . . .	.E . . . .	.E. . . . .	.E
Transfiguration . . . . .	.E . . . .	.O. . . . .	.O
Theory I. . . . .	.O . . . .	. . . . .	.O
(Charms, Defence, Transfiguration)			
Theory II . . . . .	.A . . . .	. . . . .	.A
(Herbology, Potions, Defense)			

Optional Courses

Care of Magical Creature. . . . .	.E . . . .	.O. . . . .	.O
Divination. . . . .	.A . . . .	.P. . . . .	.A

After receiving his congratulations, Harry quickly offered Neville his. "You read them," Neville said nervously. Ginny smiled at him, and put a hand on his shoulder. Neville managed to smile.

O.W.L. RESULTS FOR NEVILLE F. LONGBOTTOM

Required Courses:

. . . . .	.Theory.	.Practical.	.Total
Astronomy . . . . .	.A . . . .	.D. . . . .	.P
Charms. . . . .	.E . . . .	.A. . . . .	.E
Defence against the Dark Arts . . . .	.E . . . .	.O. . . . .	.E
Herbology . . . . .	.O+. . . .	.O+ . . . .	.O+
History of Magic. . . . .	.A . . . .	-. . . . .	.A
<hr/>			
Potions . . . . .	.E . . . .	.A. . . . .	.A
Transfiguration . . . . .	.A . . . .	.A. . . . .	.A
Theory I. . . . .	.A . . . .	. . . . .	.A
(Charms, Defence, Transfiguration)			
Theory II . . . . .	.O . . . .	. . . . .	.O
(Herbology, Potions, Defense)			

Optional Courses

Care of Magical Creature. . . . .	.O . . . .	.O. . . . .	.O
Divination. . . . .	.A . . . .	.P. . . . .	.A

"Ten! Well done!" Hermione and Harry patted Neville on the back, while Ginny kissed his cheek.

"Ginny, stop kissing Neville on the cheek!" Ron complained.

"Alright," Ginny said, defiantly tossing her hair. She kissed Neville on the lips. Neville grinned.

"Ginny, keep kissing Neville on the cheek," Ron commanded.

O.W.L. RESULTS FOR RONALD B. WEASLEY

"What does the B stand for?" Hermione asked.

Ron mumbled something.

"What?"

"Bilius," Ginny answered. "After an uncle."

"A hundred years ago, you would have had to be named 'Septimus,'" Luna commented.

"Is that a family name, too?" Harry asked.

"No," Ron answered, giving Luna a dirty look. Hermione and Neville looked stunned.

"What?" Harry demanded.

"Would that have been part of your father's name as well?" Luna asked gently. Ron nodded glumly.

"What does THAT mean?" Harry demanded.

"It means he's the seventh son of a seventh son," Luna answered. "They are generally seers of some sort."

"Seventh son?" Harry asked puzzled.

"There was another brother, John, between Charlie and Percy," Ginny said. "He died a few months after he was born."

"And all seventh sons in Europe and most of the Americas were once required to be named Septimus," Hermione said. "Some groups still require it."

"Well, let's see if that helped my Divination grade. Go ahead, Harry."

Required Courses:

	<i>.Theory.</i>	<i>.Practical.</i>	<i>.Total</i>
<i>Astronomy</i>	<i>.E</i>	<i>.P.</i>	<i>.A</i>
<i>Charms</i>	<i>.E</i>	<i>.E.</i>	<i>.E</i>
<i>Defence against the Dark Arts</i>	<i>.E</i>	<i>.O.</i>	<i>.E</i>
<i>Herbology</i>	<i>.A</i>	<i>.A.</i>	<i>.A</i>
<i>History of Magic</i>	<i>.P</i>	<i>.-.</i>	<i>.P</i>
<i>Potions</i>	<i>.E</i>	<i>.A.</i>	<i>.A</i>
<i>Transfiguration</i>	<i>.E</i>	<i>.A.</i>	<i>.E</i>
<i>Theory I.</i>	<i>.E</i>		<i>.E</i>

(Charms, Defence, Transfiguration)

Theory IIAA

(Herbology, Potions, Defense)

Optional Courses

Care of Magical Creature.EO.O

Divination.EA.A

"Eleven! I can't believe it!"

"Well done!" Hermione said, kissing Ron's cheek.

Ron frowned. "I'll have a hard time making auror without potions."

"But it's possible," Harry said. "We'll talk about it later. Hermione can't wait much longer!"

"Just so you know, the J stands for Jane. Go on, Harry." Ron laid his hand on Hermione's back, and his long fingers went under her hair to massage her neck. Harry saw Ginny roll her eyes.

O.W.L. RESULTS FOR HERMIONE J. GRANGER

Required Courses:

.	<i>.Theory.</i>	<i>.Practical.</i>	<i>.Total</i>
<i>Astronomy</i>	<i>.O+.</i>	<i>.O.</i>	<i>.O</i>
<i>Charms.</i>	<i>.O+.</i>	<i>.O+</i>	<i>.O+</i>
<i>Defence against the Dark Arts</i>	<i>.O+.</i>	<i>.O.</i>	<i>.O</i>
<i>Herbology</i>	<i>.O+.</i>	<i>.O.</i>	<i>.O</i>
<i>History of Magic.</i>	<i>.O+.</i>	<i>.-.</i>	<i>.O+</i>
<i>Potions</i>	<i>.O+.</i>	<i>.O+</i>	<i>.O+</i>
<i>Transfiguration</i>	<i>.O+.</i>	<i>.O+</i>	<i>.O+</i>
<i>Theory I.</i>	<i>.O+.</i>		<i>.O+</i>
<i>(Charms, Defence, Transfiguration)</i>			
<i>Theory II</i>	<i>.O+.</i>		<i>.O+</i>
<i>(Herbology, Potions, Defense)</i>			

Optional Courses

<i>Arithmancy.</i>	<i>.O+.</i>	<i>.-.</i>	<i>.O+</i>
<i>Care of Magical Creature.</i>	<i>.O+.</i>	<i>.O.</i>	<i>.O</i>
<i>Muggle Studies.</i>	<i>.O</i>		<i>.O</i>
<i>Runes</i>	<i>.O</i>	<i>.-.</i>	<i>.O</i>

"Thirteen! How'd you sneak in Muggle Studies?" Ron demanded.

"All you need is the permission of the instructor and at least one full year in the subject," Hermione answered. She frowned. "I knew that one rune would ruin things!"

"Hermione, you have thirteen O O.W.L.s, seven of them pluses," Ginny pointed out. "You've done better than anyone I've ever heard of."

"The record for the top scores for the test by whatever name, held by several people in Europe and North America, is thirteen O's, all of them pluses," Hermione said. "The Hogwarts record is ten pluses."

"Held by?" Luna asked.

"Two people," Hermione said. "The test was only established in 1920, after all."

"And they were?" Harry asked gently. He had an idea who one of them was.

"Professor McGonagall, who missed the plus in Care, Muggle Studies, and Herbology -- she didn't take Divination. . . ."

"Surprise, surprise," Ron said with a smile.

"And Tom Riddle, who actually took thirteen O's and an E, the highest combined score of the six people who took fourteen O.W.L.s -- he scored the E in Muggle Studies, believe it or not."

"He was raised in a Muggle orphanage," Harry reminded them. "He probably was told to take it, then dropped it, but tried to get all the O.W.L.s to show off."

"He missed the pluses in Divination, Care, and Astronomy," Hermione concluded.

"Who's Tom Riddle?" Luna asked.

"Voldemort," Harry said softly.

They ate quietly at first, but gradually the discussion picked up. Harry explained the rules on applying for auror training in detail, and Hermione explained the rules for taking classes in the Sixth and Seventh years.

To be a Sixth and Seventh year student at Hogwarts, a student had to take five, six, or seven classes. At least two had to be N.E.W.T.-level. All twelve O.W.L. subjects were available as N.E.W.T.s, as were Introduction to Medicine (required for those interested in medicine or herbology, suggested for those interested in Potions), and Introduction to Laws and Regulations (highly suggested for most Ministry Careers). Both could be used to satisfy auror requirements. There were vocational courses available in potions, charms, and transfigurations, plus a N.E.W.T. level class in accounting (suggested for those entering their family businesses, Gringotts, and some areas of the Ministry) and a special course for those interested in pursuing degrees in Muggle universities. Several tradespeople in Hogsmeade also offered workstudy. Apparation was also taught as either a Sixth or Seventh year option, beyond their set courses.

The four Sixth years discussed their options, and some took a surprising turn. "Why would you take Divination?" Harry demanded. "We're done with that! You swore. . . ."

Ron merely handed around a note from Dumbledore, asking that Ron continue on with Divination.

When Remus came back, Hermione handed Remus their choices and asked if he knew what books they would need. Remus shook his head, a proud smile on his face, and made some quick inquiries. They got started a little late (2:08), which didn't please Alastor Moody, who had joined the group waiting to escort the students, but not even Tobias Jones seemed worried. He just had the students step a bit quicker.

Sixth years classes for:

Harry Potter

Defence, Charms, Care, Transfiguration, Medicine, Law, Apparation (Spring, 1997)

Ron Weasley

Defence, Charms, Care, Transfiguration, Law, Divination, Apparation (Spring, 1997)

Hermione Granger

Defence, Charms, Transfiguration, Medicine, Arithmancy, Runes, University Prep, Apparation (Spring, 1997) Hermione also included an appeal to be allowed to take Potions, or failing that Law, as an eighth full-time course. Despite being interested, she decided the other courses were more important than Potions. She had had to promise her parents to take the University Prep. She had been torn between Law and Medicine (wanting both, until Harry had pointed out that Law was not highly suggested for those hoping to become magical solicitors -- those had to first get Muggle law degrees).

Neville Longbottom

Defence, Charms, Care, Herbology, Medicine, Law, Apparation (Spring, 1997)

All the Sixth years would therefore have Defense, Charms, and Apparation in common, Harry, Neville, and Hermione would have Medicine, and the boys would have Care and Law.

Harry had insisted on buying everyone's books, to thank them for coming to stay and work with him. He also bought Hermione the Potions and Law books, knowing she would want to read them whether or not she took the courses. Jones bought all the students except Harry multi-compartment trunks (Harry had had to explain how he got one, however).

Remus told them to ignore clothes for the moment, so they concentrated on books and other supplies, although Harry picked up his dragon-hide boots. They did stop in on Fred and George's, but again Remus refused to let them buy anything. In both cases, he promised they could stop and buy whatever they wanted before September 1st, but said no more.

Harry drew a small crowd, which Moody, Tonks, and Jones kept moving. By 3:35, the teens had been escorted out of the Leaky Cauldron and into a waiting Ministry van. They spent the next three hours shopping in Muggle London. Harry didn't have much to buy, so he helped Ron and Neville to get properly fitted out with Muggle clothing. Hermione helped Luna and Ginny. All the Pure-Bloods were amazed at how much cheaper Muggle prices were for Muggle clothing. The stores in Diagon Alley slapped at least a 20% mark-up on everything from the Muggle world.

Jones gave each teen a cell phone. Hermione showed Harry how to use it, and would show the others later that night. Harry again bought a little something for everyone. Ginny had her ears pierced. (The students giggled a little, hearing Tobias Jones mutter, "That'll teach the biddy to yell at me" -- they all recognized someone whom Mrs. Weasley had not been happy with.) Luna had gotten three pair of pewter earrings, Hermione one pair (owls), while Ron and Neville each got gloves so they could punch the heavy body bag.

By the time they had left the last store, not even Petunia Dursley could have found fault with them. They were then port-keyed to Mrs. Figg's. To Harry's surprise, they were all then hustled over to the Dursleys. Aunt Petunia had prepared a large meal, and, although it was obviously a bit of a strain, managed to be polite to all the young witches and wizards.

Neville had volunteered to stay the night with Harry, and the other teens walked back to Mrs. Figg's under Remus' watchful eye. While Neville got cleaned up, Harry turned on his aunt and asked, "Why?"

"What do you mean?"

"I know you don't like me, let alone my friends. In fact, you hate me. I understand why Uncle Vernon is traveling, and I understand why Dudley was sent along. Why are you trying to be nice? Why allow us here?"

Petunia frowned at Harry, but after a moment's thought, she answered him honestly. "Your kind is about to have another war. Potter's parents and grandparents and other relatives were killed in the last one. My parents were killed in a very mysterious auto accident, which was probably caused by magic. I've been told by the old man that our best chance of getting through this is by having you survive. That means you'll be protected -- and no, I don't like you at all, but you are still my nephew -- and Dudley will be protected. So, if that means being nice to you and welcoming these freaks into my home, I will do so. Vernon couldn't do it, but I can and I will."

"Enlightened self-interest?"

"There's nothing wrong with that!"

"Well, there are certainly a lot of worse things," Harry admitted.

"I take it the girl with all the brown hair was raised normally," Petunia stated, loading the dishwasher.

"Her parents are dentists. How did you know?"

"She was the only one who looked around like a person normally would. I will grant you, the others just looked interested and a little dumb-struck. Some of the ones your mother brought home," Petunia said with a sniff, "they looked at us with nothing but contempt, as if they couldn't imagine their precious Lily coming from such a compost heap."

"There are some like that," Harry admitted. "Ron, and especially Neville, haven't had much exposure to . . . the everyday world. Luna and Ginny have at least studied it."

"Studied!" Petunia shook her head in amazement. "What are we to them? Primitive savages? Or just animals?"

"Not to any of my friends," Harry asserted. "A very different tribe, perhaps, but not primitive. The ones who think so, or worse, wouldn't bother to study you." Harry grinned. "That gives us an advantage, of course."

"How so?" Petunia asked, curious despite herself.

"We can think in both worlds. They have little idea what modern technology is like. If the Pure-Blood types weren't so blinded by prejudice, they could have all of us killed by hiring some gangsters to kill us here, but they won't associate with . . . typical people even to that extent."

"Good. Now, go take your shower, and no larking about after Ten."

"Yes, Aunt Petunia."

A second small cot had been placed in Harry's room. "Sorry about putting you out," Neville said when Harry came back from his shower.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, two small cots instead of a bed. . . ."

"Neville, this has been my cot for years."

"Oh!"

Harry shrugged. "I don't expect you'll find it easy to believe, but this summer has marked the best they've ever treated me, and tonight the best night this summer."

"I believe it, because it's you," Neville said.

"Not that I care, but why did you and Ron decide you were spending the night?"

Neville shrugged. "Two reasons. One, so he could make time with Hermione. . . ."

"And two, to stop you and Ginny from doing the same."

"Exactly." Neville grinned. "I overheard Ginny and Hermione. They're going to have a beauty night -- all sorts of creams, polishes, and use of razors. Luna looked rather . . . bemused by the idea but was going along. And I doubt if Ron will get to see many of the results."

Harry smiled. "And, if you hadn't heard, Ginny will be spending the first week with Hermione, Ron the second, with Luna spending a day or so in between. Are you serious about Ginny?"

"I am," Neville admitted.

"Well, then you'll have a whole week without Ron to see if she's serious about you, or if she was teasing you, and Ron, today."

Neville grinned. "Lights out?" was all he asked, however.

"I need to do my Occlumency first." Still, Harry turned off the lights and lit the candle.

"G'night, Harry."

"Goodnight, Neville."

Harry's dreams were undisturbed yet again.

Sunday, July 21, 1996

Harry woke up at 6:00. He did his morning meditation, then woke Neville up. He showed Neville how to use the equipment, and was a bit surprised to see Neville in his shorts and trainers. Neville was mid-way between Harry and Dudley's height, and still carried a slight layer of fat around his middle. However, he packed as much muscle on his slightly broader, shorter frame than Dudley did. Harry showed Neville the best exercises to add muscle, and the boys set to work. Jones had assured the group that the same exercise equipment had been set up at Mrs. Figg's, so that Neville would be able to keep his exercises up every morning.

Harry stopped the work-out at 7:15, knowing that if Neville over-did the reps, he would be too sore to work-out the next morning. With Petunia's permission, Neville did a survey of her lawn and flowers. Neville complemented her on both, and told her a number of 'acceptable' (ie Muggle) ways to improve their performance. By the time the pair came down for a late breakfast at 8:30, Petunia had decided at least two of Harry's friends were acceptable.

Harry showed Neville how the shower worked, and then they went back to Harry's room so that Harry could brief Neville on how he'd been training with Jones and Lupin that summer, which made Neville a little worried. At 9:40, they left Privet Drive, and walked over to Mrs. Figg's.

Neville's eyes bugged out even more than Harry's when Ginny answered the door, clad in just a very short pair of shorts and a thin white blouse she'd tied just under her large breasts, and obviously nothing else. Like her mother, Ginny was short, and no doubt in thirty or forty years, she might even be stocky. Today, she was just plain cute, sexy, and attractive.

Harry pushed the stunned Neville in the door and shut it behind them. Seeing Ron fuming in the front parlor, Harry leaned over and kissed Ginny's nose and left her to deal with Neville. Harry then walked into the front parlor, and saw Hermione was actually sitting to the front right of Ron, dressed much like Ginny, although she wasn't much bustier than Luna. Harry made a sharp turn, which brought him to Hermione and distracted Ron enough that Ginny could escape with Neville.

"Good morning, Hermione," Harry said, stooping and kissing her offered cheek.

"Good morning. Sleep well?" Hermione took Harry's hands and used them to stand.

"Actually, I have been," Harry said, putting his arm around Hermione's shoulders while she snaked an arm around his waist. "How about you?" he asked in a way that included Ron as well.

Ron looked at the two of them and growled.

"Oh Ron, stop being jealous," Hermione admonished. "Neville is good for Ginny, and both Ginny and I love Harry."

"It would cause talk, but if it makes you feel any better, I could kiss you hello from now on, too," Harry offered with a straight face.

Ron colored in anger, but then burst out laughing. "Yer a right bastard, Harry."

Remus and Luna had come in, and Remus joined Harry and Ron in laughing. "Meeting in the kitchen in ten minutes," Remus managed to say, before leaving.

Harry stared at Luna, who was dressed exactly like Hermione and Ginny, although she had less to show off than either. Harry didn't care. She was gorgeous to his eyes. Harry walked over to Luna, kissed her very lightly on the lips, and both walked to the kitchen, smiling.

Finally regaining his color, Ron said, "Well, it's better than his yelling, I suppose."

Chapter 06

Sunday, July 21, 1996 cont.

From 10:00 until noon that first day, Harry coached his friends on some of the advanced training he had received over the previous weeks. He knew all their abilities, especially Hermione, Ron, and Neville's, very well, of course. While Harry was in many ways an insular, almost self-centered person (unsurprising, considering how he had been raised), he did pay attention to all of his friends. Their experiences within the DA had honed Harry's knowledge of all five of them, and exposed him to thinking about the abilities, needs, and accomplishments of others as well. Harry knew all of their weaknesses, and went through them all with Remus and Jones, with Master J looking on.

It could have been ruthless and even belittling. It was neither. Harry had a real knack for teaching. That, and his obvious concern for his friends, made his evaluations acceptable to those friends. Hermione often over-thought situations, which didn't always allow her the time to act as she thought things through in elaborate logic trees. She needed help in her reaction time. Neville, of course, had self-confidence problems ('He just won't accept he's not only not below average, but actually excellent,' Harry had said, to Neville's embarrassment). Ron and Ginny both tended to get over-excited. In addition, Ron usually either plowed straight ahead without thinking or got too caught up in complicated strategies. Ginny also had some self-confidence problems. Luna tended to be easily distracted in practice. Harry then practiced dueling with each, and managed to show off both their strengths and their weaknesses.

After lunch, Master J spent half an hour with each student, evaluating them for Occlumency, while Harry dueled with Jones and Remus supervised the others. From 3:30 until 4:00, the three men conferred with each other, while the students talked about their experiences. Remus came in at 4:00 to talk with them.

"Alright, here's the schedule for the next three weeks. Wake up is at Six every morning. Exercise is from Six-thirty until Eight. We'll have four treadmills downstairs. You're expected to jog at least three miles each morning, although running would be better. You're also expected to spend at least fifteen minutes doing the upper body exercises. Harry is in training, and you five claim to want to be with him. Well, this training is the price you pay."

When no one said anything, Remus went on, "Showers, then breakfast. From Nine to Ten, study time. Luna and Ginny have more O.W.L. preparation, Harry, Neville, and Hermione have anatomy to memorize before they start the medical class, and all four of you should familiarize yourselves with your other material. Harry and either Ron or Neville show up between Ten and Ten-fifteen. From Ten-thirty until noon, Harry coaches you on dueling, with me supervising. This week, Master J will be coaching you all on Occlumency, after that Harry and Mister Jones will be. From Two until Three-thirty, Mister Jones will be working with Harry and I will be working with the rest of you. From Four until Five-thirty, back to the books, then showers. Some nights you might stay here after dinner, some nights all or some of you might be going back with Harry for dinner. Lights out by Ten-thirty."

The next nine days passed quickly. By the afternoon of July 30, Ginny and Luna had cleared off most of their summer assignments, so they could start their first serious O.W.L. revisions under Hermione's tutelage. Harry and Neville made real strides memorizing the anatomy that the medical course required -- Hermione had learned it on her own even before her first Hogwarts letter. All four Sixth years had made some progress in their advanced work as well.

Harry made even greater strides in his physical fitness, alternating his work-outs with Ron and Neville. Neville concentrated on strength-training, while Ron worked on his endurance. Harry, alternating each morning, made faster progress with each than he had been working on his own.

All five of the students made fast progress in practical defense under Harry's morning sessions and Remus' afternoon ones. At the rate they were going, they would have all learned the basic practical skills through the Seventh year curriculum by the time Hermione would have to leave in just over a week. The rest of the summer could be spent in honing those skills.

Harry had made even faster progress. He would still have to learn all the theory, but he would make it through the Seventh year Defense, Charms, and Transfiguration practicals, and the fundamentals of auror training, by the end of the summer. Even Jones had felt compelled to tell Harry he was the fastest study of any age he had ever seen.

In part because of all the students were ahead of schedule, Jones had started giving them half an hour of physical combat training, starting their second Monday. This would consist of a week of learning how to fall properly from all positions. "By the time we're through, you'll be able to slip totally by surprise, and land not getting hurt. You'll be able to fall or dive, and be able to spring up, ready to fight. If you can do that, your chances of surviving will be much greater."

Hermione and Luna didn't care much for the exercises in general, and the falling in particular, but they acknowledged the need. Hermione and Neville had the most difficult time getting used to the 'bumps', but by the end of that Thursday's practice, they were dropping without getting hurt.

Luna had been the only student who had picked up the Occlumency easily. Master J was very happy about that, because Luna's unshielded stream of consciousness had nearly given him a headache. Hermione's blazingly fast mind still threatened to do so. Still, Johnson was a master teacher, and had taught more difficult students than these the basics. Even if he could now only come on Mondays, he was certain that by the end of the summer, all six students would be impervious to the Imperius curse and able to deflect most Legilimens. Harry and Luna, he felt, would be very powerful Occlumens by the end of summer.

Wednesday, July 31, 1996

"Happy birthday, Harry."

"Happy birthday, Neville."

Neville looked at Harry. "How . . . how did you know today's really my birthday?"

"What do you mean 'really'?"

"I was born a few minutes past midnight, but my birthday was announced as the Thirtieth."

Harry sighed. Things looked a bit clearer. He wondered whose bright idea that had been. "That prophecy we tried to save? It predicted the person who would have to face down Voldemort -- a wizard born at the end of July, 1980, whose parents had defied Voldemort three times."

"You mean . . . it might be me?"

Harry shook his head. "Might have been, but Voldemort was drawn to the correct answer: me. He must have had us both investigated, which might be one reason his followers went after your parents. They knew a lot about them."

Neville thought deeply as the boys changed into their workout gear, and continued thinking throughout the workout, shower, and breakfast. When they sat down to study, Harry asked, "I can see you're thinking about the prophecy and all this, but may I ask you something?"

"Sure," Neville answered, distracted.

"Why didn't you mention your birthday, yesterday or today?"

"My grandmother told me a long time ago not to reveal it, but that she wouldn't tell me why until I reached seventeen. I guess that makes sense, now."

"I guess." Harry thought. "You know, I know when Ron's birthday is in March, and Hermione's in September, but I don't know when Luna or Ginny's are."

"I don't either," Neville replied. "I think today would be a good day to find out, don't you?"

"We don't want to miss them," Harry agreed.

"Harry. . . ." Neville asked after a few more moments of deep thought.

"Yes?"

"If our situations were reversed, what do you think it would be like for us?"

"I don't know," Harry admitted.

"I think I know you well enough to say you wouldn't shy away from being my friend," Neville finally said, "even trying to take some of the burden on yourself. Anything I can do to help, I want to do it."

"How about letting me at least say your birthday was yesterday?" Harry suggested.

"Alright," Neville answered. "And with all this working out, I could use some birthday cake and ice cream."

"Let's hope Jones gives us at least part of the day off," Harry grumbled.

"Let's hope."

Jones greeted Harry and Neville at the door -- usually Luna and Ginny, and sometimes Remus, would greet them when Neville had stayed with Harry. Remus, of course had been transformed the evening before, under the full-moon, and so they hadn't expected him. "Good morning, gentlemen." His arm directed them into the front room, where the other four students were sitting in their robes, rather than their workout clothes.

"Since today is Mister Potter's birthday, and Lupin is indisposed, we thought that would be a good reason to give you a day of rest. No one can train every day without some relaxation. While as far as we know Voldemort and most of his people are in the Urals, trying to recruit the giants again, it is possible they have someone watching Diagon Alley. How would a holiday in Hogsmeade sound?"

The teens all agreed that it sounded like an excellent idea.

"I have been informed that Hogwarts will have four semi-formal dances," Jones went on. "So, while you will be going back to Malkins' at some point, we'll start off at Gladrags. You boys should pick out at least one good outfit; the girls should pick out two. I know you'd probably rather have four," he said, since he didn't know these three particular witches as well as he thought he did, "but Gladrags is having a special on gowns that have two permanent colors -- unlike much spelled cloth, they won't lose or change their colors at inopportune times. Hopefully, you will find one that you like for the Halloween and Yule dances." He hesitated, then handed small leather pouches to Harry, Neville, Luna, and Hermione. "Mister Potter, if you wish you may return for your cheque book. I'm afraid only the robes have been taken care of. You should also bring one of your Hogwarts robes or your blazer."

"Sure," Harry said.

"I'll come with you," Ron said, standing up. He took off his robe, showing he was otherwise in his workout clothes.

"Please hurry," Jones said.

They did.

As Harry was going through his desk drawers looking for the cheque book, Ron said, "Harry . . . Harry I hate to ask. . . ."

"Not a problem," Harry said, holding up his cheque book and stuffing it in the inner pocket of his blazer. "How much?"

"Well . . . I don't know, to tell the truth."

"What do you want it for?"

Ron mumbled something.

"What?"

"To . . . treat . . . Hermione . . . like . . . she . . . deserves," Ron said distinctly.

"Oh . . . well . . . there's not enough money on earth for that, is there?"

Ron grinned. "I guess not."

Harry fished another leather pouch, this one empty, out of his trunk. "Here, split this and take half," he said, handing the empty one and the one Jones had given him to Ron. He took the cheque book back out and wrote Ron out a cheque.

"Harry, there's twenty Galleons here. Ten is more than enough."

Harry handed Ron the cheque. "Cash this at the Post Office. You might see something for Hermione's birthday or for Christmas."

"I can't take this, Harry!" a shocked Ron protested as they left his bedroom.

"Ron, I have more money than I know what to do with. If you want, think of this as an interest-free loan, to be paid in full by the time you're . . . forty. Borrow however much you need to make it through until we're working. Alright?"

"You swear I can pay you back?"

"I swear, Ron. Start a current account at the Post Office. Don't they allow small accounts?"

"Up to five hundred Galleons," Ron said as they jogged back to Mrs. Figg's.

"Guess I should have made it out for five instead of one."

"Don't even joke about that, Harry." Ron was still in shock from the cheque.

"Just one thing, when is Ginny's birthday?"

"Halloween, actually, why?"

"Neville's was yesterday. I don't want to miss Ginny's. Now I just need Luna's."

"The next day, the First of November. Ginny was born just before midnight, Luna a few hours later. Dad and Mister Lovegood have been friends ever since."

"Weird," Harry said. "Neville and I being born a few hours apart, Ginny and Luna the same, and our all going out."

Ron sighed. "Harry, you should know by now wizards don't believe in coincidence. You, Neville, Ginny, and Luna are obviously linked some how."

That gave them both something to think about.

It took Harry, Ron, and Neville all of fifteen minutes to choose their robes. It took the girls well over an hour. Not that the boys minded too much, since they actually liked watching the girls model the different robes.

At one point, Hermione came over to Harry and said, "You know, Harry, maybe we should have more wizarding dress than just Hogwarts and dress robes."

"They have some nice dragon hide suits," Ron offered. His brothers' style had grown on him a bit in early July.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "We would want to blend in, Ron, not stand out."

"Actually, Muggle dress would blend in at the Ministry or in Diagon Alley if you just make some small additions," Ginny said. "Most Muggles dress pretty plainly, like we have been, or like we look in our blazers. You two could probably pick out most of us at the station before we get onto the platform, but most other magical people wouldn't."

"That's true," Hermione said thoughtfully. "Even Mister Crouch, who would have looked perfectly Muggle in the City, looked out of place at the World Cup."

"Similarly, our eyes are drawn to anyone totally in Muggle dress, even what you would think of as inappropriate Muggle dress, in a magical setting," Neville told her.

"So, to fit into the wizarding world, we don't necessarily need a complete outfit, just something that won't draw attention. . . ." Hermione mused.

"Dragon-hide boots?" Ron suggested.

"Not many people look at your feet first," Neville pointed out.

"What about a cape?" Ginny suggested. "Do you think you would look dashing in a cape?"

"I don't think so," Harry responded.

"Then how about a cloak?" Luna suggested in turn. "Those are more practical than a cape, and look closer to a robe. A hooded cloak is also fairly practical."

"That's true," Ginny agreed.

"And we wouldn't look totally stupid wearing one in the Muggle world, at least in bad weather," Hermione mused. "But I don't think I have anything like enough money for a decent cloak."

"I have an idea," Harry said quietly.

"What?" Ron asked, suspiciously.

"What if I buy us all matching cloaks?"

"You don't have to do that," Ginny said firmly.

"No," Harry agreed, "I don't have to. I'd like to, though. None of you had to give up your summer to be with me." Harry raised his hand, "I know, you are all happy to, you're all my friends, and we're all learning skills we'll need. Still, you didn't HAVE to. Let me do this to thank you. And, if we buy them together, we'll match, and I think we should."

"Thank you, Harry," Hermione said. "That's very sweet of you. I'll do it."

"Me, too," Neville added.

"I will if you will," Ginny told Ron and Luna. "Luna?"

Luna hung her head. "They'll just steal it," she said softly.

"What? Who will steal it?" Hermione demanded.

"The Ravenclaw girls," Harry told them, putting his arm around Luna to comfort her. "They steal all of Luna's clothes, books, sweets, everything."

"Is that why you started wearing those mis-matched socks and things towards the end of our First year?" Ginny asked.

Luna nodded, a bit embarrassed.

"I'll talk to them," Ginny said fiercely. She and Luna had been childhood friends. They had drifted apart slightly after Luna's mother died, and even more so when they had been sorted into different Houses. As Luna's dress and then manner became more eccentric, Ginny had separated herself more and more. Now, she felt guilty.

"And I'll talk to Padma," Hermione added. "We'll have the cloak spelled as well. Anyone who takes it without your permission will make Marietta look good. You can also keep most of your things locked in the magical trunk this year."

"Thank you," Luna said softly, not quite crying.

"Miss!" Ginny called out.

"Have you ladies decided?" the rather haughty assistant asked.

"No, but we've decided we want six matching cloaks. We'll need heavy security spells on at least one of them," Hermione stated.

"We were only authorized to charge for the robes," the assistant said in a hesitating voice.

"Do you accept Gringotts cheques?" Harry asked.

"Do you have identification?" the assistant asked with a sniff. She had only been told six students were coming in for robes. She hadn't recognized any of them, and they obviously shopped in the Muggle world and Diagon Alley. Gladrags was, for the most part, a more expensive shop than Malkins, and this bunch didn't look very affluent. If they had come in

before, they came only on Hogsmeade weekend and browsed in the cheaper section of the store, which she was NOT interested in.

Harry gave her a dirty look and pulled the hair from his forehead. The woman gulped. "Yes, Mister Potter."

After that, no one bought anything extra at Gladrags, just the cloaks and their orders for the gowns. While southern England had been bright and warm, Hogsmeade was cloudy and chilly. The six wore their cloaks (dark Prussian blue with scarlet lining) out.

"Where next?" Ginny asked.

"I want to open a current account at the Post Office," Harry said. "There should always be two of us together."

"I'll come," Ron said. "Why don't Harry, Neville, and I go to Zonkos and then the Post Office, and meet you three at Honeydukes? Then we can go to lunch."

"Well, I wanted to go to Scrivenshafts," Hermione said doubtfully.

"Me, too," Luna said. "I'm out of their violet and pink ink."

Everyone blinked except Harry, who had received more than one note from Luna in the two-toned ink. No one wanted to pursue it.

"Where would we lunch?" Ginny asked with a sly grin. "Madam P"

"No!" Harry stated. "Three Broomsticks. Neville and I are the birthday boys."

"Today's your birthday, Neville?" Hermione asked, puzzled.

"Yesterday, well, right at midnight," Neville said.

"After lunch, we can go to Dervish and Bangs and the book shops," Harry suggested.

"Sounds like a plan," Ginny said.

"I think the boys are up to something," Ginny said as they walked into the writing supply store.

"Ron and Harry are," Hermione pointed out. "I don't think Neville was in on it."

"Ronald is borrowing money from Harry," Luna said, looking at some embossed parchment.

"Why do you say that?" Ginny asked. Knowing Ron so well, she and Hermione were both surprised by the idea.

"Ronald didn't have a money pouch before he went over to Harry's this morning; now he does. I would imagine he will also borrow enough to set up a current account at the Post Office as well."

"That doesn't sound like Ron," Hermione said, doubtfully. "He's always been very proud about accepting money." Ginny flushed. "I'm sorry, Ginny, but it's true."

"It's hard, being poor," Ginny said.

"And it's harder for boys to accept gifts," Luna stated. "I would imagine Harry will lend Ronald some substantial sum, allowing him to pay it off after we leave Hogwarts."

"That doesn't sound like Ron at all," Ginny protested, echoing Hermione.

"Why would Ron do it?" Hermione challenged.

Luna gave Hermione a sad smile. "Ronald loves you," she said simply. "He's swallowing his pride, so he can have the money to treat you well. I expect he'll try to pay for lunch."

"If he does, then we'll know it's true," Hermione agreed, knowing Ron would try just that if he had the cash.

Ron, of course, paid for lunch.

Chapter 07

Wednesday, August 7, 1996

Petunia Dursley looked up at the clock. The Boy would soon be back from whatever he did during the day. To her great surprise, the summer had not been as intolerable as she had thought it would be. It bothered her to wait on the Boy and his Freak friends, but she had to admit she was being paid fairly for it. And, of course, Vernon was making an even name for himself in the business world and Dudley was away from those undesirables he had outgrown.

The Freaks themselves hadn't been as bad as she had feared. James Potter and his friend Black had been nasty, even cruel, to her and Vernon. The girls who had visited had been even nastier. The only polite visitor had been Lupin.

This group wasn't nearly as bad. She still had her suspicions about the red-heads, especially the boy. The ditzzy blonde was an out-and-out flake. Petunia had rather hoped that the Boy, if he HAD to date someone, would be dating the dentists' daughter. No, he had to take up with the flake instead. The other boy was at least quiet and polite.

The Boy, the Ditz, the Dentists' Daughter, and the Nice Boy were coming over for dinner, while the two Red Heads were having dinner with that father of theirs, who had blown up their fireplace. The fact that the two head-heads were missing pleased Petunia a bit. She could put up with the Ditz with those three keeping the girl's attention distracted from the Dursley possessions. She had a tendency to Touch Precious Things.

She was surprised to hear the door chimes. Going to the door, she found Remus Lupin. "Remus," she said as politely as she manage.

"Petunia. May I speak with you?"

"Very well. Come into the kitchen."

"I have some good news for you," Remus said as he sat down.

"Really What might that be?"

"You know that Hermione Granger is leaving Friday to spend time with her parents?"

"And the two Red Heads are going too, correct?"

"One at a time, and Miss Lovegood is scheduled to go for the following weekend. We've decided that the wards here are as recharged as they are likely to get. We'd like to take Harry and the others to a safe house for August."

"Starting Friday?" Petunia asked eagerly.

"Yes," Remus answered, a bit disgusted with her, "starting Friday. Would you have any objection to Harry, and maybe a friend, coming to stay over-night one night over the Yule break?"

"Not the Red Head. That Nice Boy, Neville, can come. And keep that Di . . . blonde away from Vernon if you ever want the Boy allowed back!"

"Alright. I'll tell them when they come over. Harry will be home early tomorrow to pack. I'll tell Neville to make certain he brings anything of his or Ron's tomorrow morning."

"That's fine." She hesitated. "Would you like to stay for dinner?"

"Thank you," Remus answered, "I would."

Friday, August 9, 1996

The six students gathered in Mrs. Figg's front room at 8:30. Hermione, Neville, and Luna had thanked Petunia Dursley on Wednesday night, and now all six thanked Mrs. Figg. Remus took their luggage, while the students and Jones were portkeyed to a room in Gringotts. "The rest of the bank has anti-apparation wards and some rare anti-portkey wards as well," Jones explained. "Stick totally together. If one uses the toilet, the other two of the same gender go to. Otherwise, all six should stick together once you leave the bank." He turned to Ginny. "Your parents have authorized up to fifty Galleons for a broomstick for you. Pick one out. Also, you should all check out your robes and uniforms. Please be at the Leaky Cauldron by Noon." He paused. "Go on! Shoo!"

Harry first went to pick up some cash, Luna going with him. Then they planned their shopping spree. Since Luna knew the Alley best, they followed her lead. Leaving the bank, they visited The Quibbler, then hit the other stores in a looping arc.

Despite Hermione's hesitations, they made a longish stop at the twin's store. Hermione did manage to keep the boys from buying too many of the 'snackboxes' (pointing out that all the teachers would have them figured out by now), but they did buy a nice assortment of gags. They had their final fitting for their new school clothes, which would be picked up for them later that month. They picked up Ginny's new broom, and everything else they needed, although Hermione would have wished for more time in the new and used book stores. They made it to the Leaky Cauldron without incident right before noon.

After lunch, the group split. The Order had provided two cars, one to take Hermione and Ginny to the Grangers, the other to take the three boys and Luna to Headquarters. Harry was NOT looking forward to arriving.

Remus explained Headquarters to Neville and Luna on the way. Both felt surprised and honored at being allowed to stay with Harry. Harry had two questions, "Is the portrait still up and is that . . . elf there?"

"When Kreacher was told his activities had caused Sirius' death, he committed ritual suicide, although he seemed to think it was worth the price," Remus said, holding in his emotions. "As for the painting, Sirius and I managed to destroy it and that tapestry a few weeks . . . that is in late May."

"Good."

"Dumbledore had two of the Hogwarts house elves come in. They've really cleaned it up."

"Let me guess, Dobby and Winky."

"You know them?" Lupin asked, surprised.

"Dobby was Lucius Malfoy's; I helped free him. Winky was Barty Crouch's."

"Oh, Sirius mentioned both, just not by name," Lupin said.

"Where are we going?" Ron asked. "Didn't we just go past Grimmauld Place?"

"We did. There's an alley behind the back of the square. The Blacks owned this whole area back when this was part of southern Essex instead of Greater London. Sirius' grandfather didn't marry until he was over a hundred, and he was a pretty far-seeing, if nasty, individual. He developed this area as one of the early Muggle railway suburbs, and the family still owns all the land, on long-term leases. When he built the current house, he made certain his mews had good access. Sirius and I worked on the mews all spring, so now we can go in and out that way, and don't have to worry about Muggles at all, at least not honest ones."

The alley behind Grimmauld Place was shadowy, although wide. The windowless back of a long high warehouse took up the entire block opposite, and there were no stables, mews, or garages on the alley, other than the Black's, which was now obscured by the Fidelius Charm. The rest of the residential side of the alley was walled.

Remus handed each student a piece of paper, allowing them to see the back entrance. The driver let them out, and then sped off.

"This is where you'll be staying," Remus said, letting them in. "Except for dinner, there's no reason to even come into the main house." The mews took up three sides of a rectangle. The short side on the alley once held the Black carriages and stable. That, and one side which had once stored equipment, with a hayloft, was now cleared out and cleaned. That was where their training would continue. The far end of the longer side even had the gym equipment from Mrs. Figg's. The other side, once where the coachmen, stable hands, and gardeners had slept, now had an upstairs with two large bedrooms and two small baths. The downstairs had a small kitchen, a dining room, and a study area. Dobby and Winky lived in the small basement. Dobby would take care of the students, Winky the main house.

Remus sat the four teens down in the study and explained the next two weeks to them. They all had school work to do, especially Luna. They would also be practicing what they had learned and starting to catch up with the theory. Now that they had the basics of advanced defense and Occlumency, they needed to work on making it all second nature. Master J would still show up on Mondays, and Remus would spend each afternoon with them.

Current information still kept Voldemort in the Urals, now working on recruiting from some of the magical villages that had managed to remain hidden under the long Soviet oppression. If he succeeded, the war would likely begin in Russia, not Britain.

Asked about the giants, it appeared as if Hagrid and Madam Maxime, with Grawp as translator, had managed to urge the giants to neutrality. The execution of Lucius Malfoy and the others had discredited Voldemort's power with many, including the giants.

With that, the quartet settled into their new location.

It was a bit strange not to have Ginny or Hermione with them that week. They exercised early every morning, then Harry drilled them in Defense for the rest of the morning. After showers and lunch, Luna and Harry led Ron and Neville in Occlumency, and then they devoted the rest of their time to school work. Neville worked hard with Luna on her Herbology, and the three boys worked together to help her with Charms, Transfiguration, and Potions. Luna knew more about Astronomy, Divination, and History than the boys, so there was little they could do to help her there, other than tell her what questions they recalled from the O.W.L.s. Harry helped her with Muggle Studies as best he could, and only Hermione could coach her in Runes.

The boys had Charms and Creatures to study in common, and Harry and Neville also worked on their Anatomy lessons. Other than that, they worked separately, since neither Harry nor Ron wanted to bother with the Laws and Regulations class.

Each evening, they would go to the main house for dinner. Remus and Mr. Weasley were there most nights, but not every one. Twice over the month, it was just the teens and Mrs. Weasley. Tonks, Moody, and Fletcher made frequent appearances. The only non-Order member allowed in early August was Master J, who had sworn to keep the location secret.

The area between the house and the mews wasn't much of a lawn, and even less a garden, except for the lack of anything else to call it. There were a few stunted yew trees, and some weeds. Dobby, however, had found and moved a stone bench to between two of the trees, making a slightly secluded area. It was here, each evening when it wasn't raining, that Harry and Luna sat.

Sometimes they talked. Harry found himself telling Luna the complete story of his life, although it was done very much out of sequence. Luna hadn't been, and perhaps never would be, certain why she had first been attracted to Harry. Over that August, however, she learned why she loved him. Harry had been through more than any person she knew or had even heard of. Somehow, he was still a kind, caring, considerate, charming young man, despite the horrors and the abuse. He was heroic and shy. He reminded her of a neglected plant, which would bloom under loving care.

She determined to give Harry what he needed.

Harry also fell in love with Luna's straight-forward, if sometimes awkward, honesty. She saw people clearly, even if she had some rather odd ideas, perhaps drawn from reading The Quibbler most of her life. They had spent their little time alone at Little Whinging talking, holding hands and lightly snogging. By the time she went off to visit Hermione, they spent as much time as possible in hugging, snogging, and light petting.

Every night at 10:30, Ron would slip into the boys' bedroom and call Hermione on the spelled cell phone. That allowed Neville to do the same from the gym area. Both boys ignored what the other was doing, and only spoke to Harry about it when the other was not around.

Ginny Weasley's eyes were growing as wide and unblinking as Luna's as the limo approached Hermione's home. Her world had consisted of Ottery St. Catchpole, which was a small, slightly run-down village, and the magical areas of Hogwarts, Hogsmeade, and Diagon Alley. Harry's neighborhood had seemed foreign. The posh suburb they were now going through looked alien.

"What's the matter?" Hermione asked.

"Nothing," Ginny answered in a very small voice. She suddenly sniffled.

Enlightenment hit Hermione. She scooted over and wrapped an arm around the younger girl. "Do you know why Harry and I enjoy visiting the Burrow so much, other than because we're seeing you and Ron?"

Ginny shook her head.

"It's because it's so wonderful. My parents love me, but they don't really have much time for me. Harry was unloved. I have more material goods, even if they're all Muggle, but you and Ron have what we, and that probably includes Neville and Luna, wish we had. A loving, if boisterous, family. Never think any of us look down at you and your family. The only people who would do so are loveless bastards who only value money and wealth because that's all they have or want."

"It's hard to be poor," Ginny admitted.

"It is," Hermione agreed. "It's worse to be unloved." She turned to the driver. "It's the next drive."

"So it is!"

The house was a large, modern brick one. Ginny might have been tempted to call it a mansion. Hermione and Ginny moved their trunks in through the back door, and waved to the driver as he drove off. "Let me give you the tour," Hermione said.

To the right of the back entrance way were the backstairs leading to a landing and the kitchen. Beyond the kitchen, running half the depth of the house, was the large dining room. In the front of the dining room was a formal parlor. To the left of the entrance way was a library that ran the full depth of the house. In front of the kitchen were the stairs and front entrance hall.

"There's nothing in the cellar except storage, furnace, washer and dryer, and such," Hermione said. Upstairs, there was a master suite over the library and three bedrooms over the parlor and dining room. There was also a front bedroom between the side bedrooms and the master suite set up as a television room.

Hermione's room was the back bedroom. It was light, and a little frillier than Ginny would have expected. "Probably Hermione has just never bothered to redecorate since she went to Hogwarts," Ginny thought. There was nothing in the room that hinted at the magical that Ginny could see.

"My relatives don't know I'm a witch," Hermione said, guessing at what Ginny was looking for. "However, even though we of course weren't allowed active magic, this is passive." Hermione touched five of the six picture frames on a shelf with her wand. The photos of her parents disappeared, replaced by four that Colin must have taken: Hermione and Krum at the Yule Ball, two of the trio in relaxed poses, and one of the previous year's Quidditch team with the Cup; and one that Percy had taken of Hermione and Ginny at the Burrow.

"Don't let Ron see the one of you and Viktor," Ginny teased.

"Oh, right." Hermione tapped it again, and this time it was the previous Quidditch Cup team, with Harry in the forefront. "I'll have to change the order." She smiled at Ginny. "What shall we do first?"

"What are our choices?"

"It's hot today. Shall we go swimming?"

"You have a pond out back?" 'Nothing about this place would surprise me,' Ginny thought.

"No, a swimming pool. Do you have a swim suit?"

Ginny shook her head. Hermione pondered for a moment, and then went to a drawer in her dresser. "Here. You're a lot bustier than I, but we can adjust it a little, and no one will see us anyway."

Ginny stared. "That's . . . that's indecent!"

"It's just a two piece bathing suit. It's not even a bikini!"

"My undies cover more than that!"

"You're in the Muggle world now, my friend. If you've got it, flaunt it. We've got it. Strip, girl! We'll shave anything that needs to be trimmed, and then we'll swim and then slather on some sun screen and tan."

Ginny blushed, but did as she was told.

While the girls relaxed their first day, Ginny wasn't surprised that it didn't last. The next six days fell into a pattern. The girls got up at their usual time, and went running through the neighborhood for forty-five minutes. Hermione spent half the morning coaching Ginny on her O.W.L.s and the other half doing her own work.

They had been warned to do as little magic as possible. While they were now permitted to do the magic, the Order and International representatives were worried that the girls might attract attention. Therefore, after lunch, the girls took advantage of the warm weather and swam and sunbathed.

Ginny had been very embarrassed the first day, and shy the second. By the third day, she was enjoying the experience. Hermione's bathing suits were indecent by Molly Weasley's standards even on Hermione -- slim and with breasts of the size of medium apples halves. On Ginny, the same height but with more developed hips and breasts the size of large melon halves, Hermione's most conservative suit was stretched into something very skimpy. By Monday afternoon, Ginny was wearing Hermione's thong bikini that even Hermione didn't dare wear.

'I hope Neville has a strong heart,' Hermione thought as she saw her tiny bikini stretched to the point where it emphasized more than it hid.

Hermione's parents were happy to really get to know one of their daughter's friends. They thought Ginny cute, charming, and full of sparkling life. They would have loved to have taken the pair off to dinners, shows, and other amusements, but Hermione quietly discouraged them. She knew Ginny didn't have the wardrobe for the restaurants and venues her parents had in mind.

Once made aware of the situation, the Grangers adjusted easily. They were almost as happy taking Ginny to small informal bistros and the cinema (neither of which she had experienced) as they were going to the 'West End' restaurants and plays they preferred. Ginny's excitement more than made up for any loss they felt.

This experience reenforced the Grangers' determination that their daughter continue her education in a Muggle setting. They (and Hermione) had been shocked to learn there were no wizarding equivalents to Universities. There were a few institutes and associations that taught specific fields of study, but most professional training and 'higher learning' were still done as apprenticeships, especially in Europe.

Chapter 08

Tuesday, August 13, 1996

The one break in the pattern Ginny and Hermione had quickly established at been the Tuesday, when it had rained from just past midnight well into the afternoon. As the girls sat down to their salad lunch up in Hermione's room, Hermione asked, "What should we do this afternoon?"

"You mean you don't want to study?" Ginny teased.

"Don't act like your brother. I'm far enough ahead, even if he resists studying most of next week."

"You know he will," Ginny pointed out, "and you know what you will be doing instead."

"I don't know what you mean," Hermione grumbled.

"You mean you won't at least be snogging most of the day, assuming you don't go further?"

"Ginny!"

"Hermione!" Ginny shot back.

"You know witches should wait," Hermione pointed out.

"I know **I** have to," Ginny retorted. The blood/semen/secretions of 'the first time' was a powerful potions ingredient, used by couples to help insure their children, especially their first born, were magical, and also used in fertility potions and to cure impotency. Witches were spelled at birth to insure their hymens were not torn or broken before marriage.

"I have to as well," Hermione said. "Madam Pomfrey sends home a note to the parents of all Muggle-borns explaining the concept and offering the spells in the spring of our First years. My parents agreed to it."

"You don't seem too upset."

"I'm not thrilled about it," Hermione admitted, "but I've found some ways to break the spell if I really want to. And I would like any children I have to be part of the magical world."

"So you aren't planning on illicit relations with Ron any time soon?"

"I'm not planning on any greater physical relations with Ron any time soon!"

Ginny blushed, and whispered, "I've heard there are . . . other ways of . . . well, you know, besides, well . . . wanking."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "What?" Ginny demanded.

Hermione went over and plucked a book from the shelves. "I thought the four girls in my room were ignorant and innocent," Hermione said, "I should have guessed you'd be kept at least that much in the dark. Here, read this."

"Our Bodies, Ourselves?"

"Read!" Hermione walked out and came back a few minutes later. "Then we'll read this."

Ginny blushed even more when she saw it was called The Joy of Sex.

Needless to say, that was a very informative afternoon.

Wednesday, August 14, 1996

The sunny August weather returned the next day. After their swim, Hermione was spreading sun screen over Ginny's freckling body.

"Hermione?"

"H'mm?"

"Did you kiss Viktor?"

Hermione's hand paused. "I guess. Nothing serious, no passion."

"No tongue?"

"No," she said with a slight smile, "no tongue. You?"

"I never kissed Viktor in any way, with or without tongue."

"Very funny. You know what I meant."

"No, I haven't kissed, well, that way. I think Michael wanted to, but didn't know what to do or how to ask. Have you kissed anyone like that?"

"Actually, yes. Parvati and Lavender."

"WHAT!"

"Right before the Yule Ball, Lavender said we should all learn. She rather liked teaching all of us. She's a really good kisser," Hermione added, "much better than the one time Parvati and I kissed."

"Do you think Lavender's an . . . invert?"

"Invert? Oh, lesbian? No," Hermione said firmly. "She might be a bit more . . . hormonally driven than the rest of us, but she's not gay." 'Of course, she and Parvati could learn to do better silencing spells,' Hermione thought.

"Hermione?"

"H'mmm?"

"Would you teach me?"

"Of course," Hermione said. "What are best friends for."

Friday, August 16, 1996

Hermione waited with Ginny on the back stairs, Ginny's trunk on the walkway. "One last time?" Ginny asked.

Hermione put her arm around Ginny and they kissed gently. Ginny sighed and put her head on Hermione's shoulder. "I'll miss you," Ginny said.

"You'll be much too busy teaching Neville to miss me too much," Hermione pointed out.

"I guess. Of course, I can't start teaching Neville until Monday night."

"You'll probably grab him before the car is a block away," Hermione teased.

"Are you going to be snogging Ron all next week like we have, or are you going to go farther?"

"I don't know," Hermione admitted. "I'm not planning on going any further than heavy kissing. . . ."

"Laying around the pool, in next to nothing, for five afternoons, weather permitting."

"I don't think Ron would force me to do anything I'm not ready for," Hermione pointed out.

"True," Ginny admitted. "I think he might be a bit more persistent than Harry, or even Neville, would be though."

"That could be true," Hermione admitted. "I hope not too much so, though."

"Do you love Ron?"

"Of course I do," Hermione stated. "And I love Harry, and I love you. And I really like Neville and Luna. I'm not in love with any of you, and I'm not certain I'm in love with Ron. I'm attracted to him, but I don't know how I feel beyond that."

"Oh. . . . I guess that makes sense. That pretty well sums up how I feel about Neville."

"Have you really given up on your crush on Harry?"

Ginny shrugged. "I still . . . dream about him, think about him. But I think about Neville more. How about you?"

"Me?"

"You," Ginny said firmly. "Late at night, haven't you ever cast a silencing spell and thought of Harry, or has it always been Ron? Or has it been Ron and Harry?"

"Alright, I have, about both and both together," Hermione admitted. "But that's all they were, fantasies. Nothing more."

"Good thing. Ron would never share, especially not with Harry."

"No, no he wouldn't. Do you think they'll work out as co-captains?"

"They won't fight about Quidditch unless they're fighting about something else," Ginny said firmly.

At that point, they heard a car in the drive. A limo with tinted glass pulled in, and the boot popped open. Luna climbed out of the back seat, wearing a pair of tight jeans, a stretched out yellowish orange jumper, and sandals. She helped Hermione take her trunk out of the boot, helped Ginny put her trunk in, and watched with bemusement as Ginny and Hermione hugged tightly and kissed lightly on the lips. The two girls waved as the car swept Ginny back to Grimmauld Place.

"Welcome to my home," Hermione said.

"It's beautiful," Luna said simply. "It looks like you and Ginny have bonded even more deeply. I hope you don't mind that I'm here."

This was said simply, but Hermione had learned that Luna's display of passive acceptance partially hid a feeling of isolation and rejection. Hermione stepped up to the slightly taller girl and hugged her. After a moment's shock, Luna returned the hug. "You're my friend," Hermione said firmly, then partially releasing the thinner girl. Hermione leaned back towards Luna and went up on her toes slightly, kissing Luna very lightly on the lips. "Never think you're a bother."

"Thank you," Luna replied with some emotion. She shook her head, as if to clear it. "This has been a very emotional summer," Luna admitted.

"So what do you think of Muggle housing?" Hermione asked as Luna sat on Hermione's bedroom floor finishing a cup of soup for lunch.

"It's beautiful, but no more typical than the Dursleys is, is it?"

"I suppose not," Hermione admitted. "My parents are very well off, and the Dursleys are fairly well off."

"You seem to have been trying to guide our conversation at times, when you're not making small talk," Luna said suddenly. "Are you nervous, are you unhappy I'm here, or is there some subject you want to talk about that you're uncertain how to bring up?"

Hermione wanted to massage her temples, but refrained. Dealing with Luna was difficult, compared to her other friends. The two girls were more or less intellectual equals, yet approached the world in very different ways.

"Alright," Hermione said aloud. "I found Ginny was ignorant of . . . the technical side of intimacy. Have you seen these two books, or anything like them?" She handed Luna the same two books Ginny had found so informative (Hermione had brought The Joy of Sex from her parents' room that morning).

"Actually, Daddy gave me this one," Luna said, pointing at Our Bodies, Ourselves. "For whatever reason, there doesn't seem to be a magical edition. There is a magical edition of The Joy of Sex." She paused. "Daddy threw it away after Mummy died, but I saved most of the things he threw away."

"Alright. It's just that all of us seem to be moving into relationships and Ginny had questions."

"Were you and Ginny practice-kissing?" Seeing Hermione blush a little, Luna went on, "Most of the girls in my dorm have done that, although they didn't include me. It seems like a fairly normal thing."

"Well, yes it is, and yes we were," Hermione admitted. "Have you and Harry. . . ."

"Figured out the mechanics? Yes." She paused and thought. "I had always thought that it looked rather . . . revolting. I was surprised how wonderful it actually is."

Hermione couldn't think of how to continue that line of thought, so she changed the subject. "Have you kept up on your studies, or is there anything I can help you with?"

"I've pretty well cleared everything except Runes. Perhaps one morning we can work through some questions I have about the O.W.L. work." She looked longingly at Hermione.

"What?"

"I can't wait to be a Sixth year! After three years of Runes and Five of Charms, you'll finally be able to set magical runes! I don't know why, but that has always interested me."

"I am looking forward to that," Hermione admitted. "Why don't you show me what we need to go over tomorrow morning, and do it tomorrow and Sunday."

"Great! What do we do in the afternoons, then?"

"Ginny and I went swimming, and then sunbathed out by our pool."

Luna looked at herself. "Do you have any of the tanning potions available? I'll burn otherwise."

"No, but we do have the Muggle equivalents."

Luna nodded and finished her lunch. "Do you have a robe I can borrow?"

"Of course. Just let me slip this book back into Mum's bookshelf and we can go out."

Coming back a few minutes later, Hermione felt compelled to speak. "Err . . . Luna?"

"H'mm?"

"Aren't you going to wear . . . something?"

Luna cocked her head to one side and thought, puzzled. Then she looked down at her nude body. "Oh . . . you mean like a bathing dress? If someone can see us, I guess I should."

Luna, although taller than Ginny or Hermione, was much thinner. Hermione had dug out an old suit of hers that would fit. "Err . . . Luna?"

"H'mmm?"

Did you want to shave your legs and under your arms . . . and maybe have a little trim as well?"

"I suppose. Nothing has ever been shown before, at least not to anyone but me. That is the convention, isn't it?"

"It is, at least here. Some places in Europe have other customs."

"Alright," Luna said in her calm accepting way. "Could you show me how?"

"Of course."

"Hermione?"

"Yes?"

"Thank you for liking me, not just accepting me. I understand why Harry does, and why Neville does. And I think I even understand why Ginny once rejected me and accepts and likes me again. Ronald really doesn't like me. He accepts me only because he sees Harry wants him to, but he doesn't seem to like me at all. You disagree with me much more than I disagree with you, but you seem to like me now."

"I accept you, and I respect you, because you earned it," Hermione told her. "I don't agree with your outlook and opinions, but I've learned you're not always as wrong as I'd like to think you are. I like you because you are nice and caring, and because you care so much for Harry. Harry is the brother I never had. Even though he's a few months older, he's like my younger brother."

"Girls generally mature faster than boys."

"True. And you risked your life with us, for us really. Why did you do that? Ron was even more hostile than I, Neville was practically unknown to you. Harry. . . ?" She didn't quite know how to phrase what she wanted to ask.

"I liked Harry as a person, but had no stronger feelings for him at the time, at least none I was aware of," Luna responded. "Somehow, I knew when I saw Ginny and Harry outside my compartment last September that if they walked in, I would be called to help Harry fight the Darkness. The idea scared me, but as I talked with Harry, and then all of you, I realized you were all good people. And it was the right thing to do."

"So you came because you thought it was predicted?"

"No, I came because it was the right thing to do. You were called to the fight, too, back in your first year. Did you HAVE to go with Harry to save the Stone?"

"Harry told you all about that?"

Luna smiled. "He did. I did exactly what you did. I recognized the gathering Darkness. I recognized Harry as the person to follow. And I decided I should be a part of that crusade. I merely made a more informed choice than you were able to make at eleven."

"I have never regretted that choice," Hermione said.

"It could kill us, you know."

"Death isn't optional. We all die sometime," Hermione stated. "If there is any meaning to life, it's to do the best we can while living it."

"Then we do agree on something," Luna said. "Now, why don't we remove any hair you think unsightly or unnecessary, and then we can go swim."

Monday, August 19, 1996

Hermione thought that her long weekend with Luna went much better than she had believed it would. Her parents seemed to veer between bewilderment and bemusement, and her mother later confessed that Luna actually conformed to what she had imagined most witches would be like back at the beginning of Hermione's magical education.

Hermione had overcome some of her remaining shyness, and she and Luna had sunbathed nude Friday, Saturday, and Sunday (to her father's embarrassment). Hermione decided, as the pair sat in companionable silence on the back stairs waiting for Ron to show up, that Luna was still a very odd young woman, but a very smart, very sweet, very caring, and very likable one. Hermione vowed then to research every possible anti-theft spell. She would add more enchantments Luna's cloak and other possessions when she got back to Grimmauld Place.

"Looks like rain," Luna commented.

"Well, I wouldn't want to spring my bathing suit on Ron the first day."

"Or less," Luna commented.

"It will be some time between now and when Ron sees me nude, I promise you," Hermione swore. She decided to tease back. "Of course, if it rains, you can't snog Harry out on that bench you told me about."

"When Ronald is not around, I'm sure Harry will be more inclined to cuddle indoors, away from the flies. Perhaps, if Ginny is interested, I might even sleep with Harry and she can sleep with Neville."

Hermione's jaw dropped.

"Sleep, Hermione. That's all," Luna said.

Hermione wondered how Luna could say such things so calmly.

At the Ministry, Myrddin, Johnson, Dorff, Jones, Dumbledore, and Lupin were just sitting down to a meeting. "Before the rest of Council shows up, I wanted a few words with you about Mister Potter. I therefore asked Mister Lupin and Mister Jones to attend. Master J, why don't you start us off?"

"As you may know, Occlumency is a skill that must be practiced constantly. It can not be just picked up for random use. Mister Potter picked up the skills needed to prevent Voldemort from attacking him from a distance fairly rapidly. He has maintained those skills without constant supervision, but I believe he should be randomly checked by Professor Dumbledore here at least three times every month to make certain he at least maintains that level. I also believe a small room might be set aside, where Harry and his friends might meditate together."

"I shall look into that," Dumbledore promised.

"Do you think I might be able to visit the two boys that room with Harry whom I have not met? If they could also at least practice meditation, that might also induce Harry to spend more time doing it."

"I don't see why not," Dumbledore answered. "I can't promise you their interest, but they will at least listen."

"Then that is all for now. I shall finish off this month coaching Harry and his friends. Once school starts, I shall try to visit him at least twice a month."

"Very good. Mister Jones?"

"I have been fairly impressed . . . no, make that very impressed. Mister Potter has the greatest balance and fastest reflexes of anyone I've seen, and has a huge reserve of power. He has determination and compassion. He has the skills of a second year auror student but uses them like a veteran. The only reason I can beat him most of the time is because I know more tricks. He could beat anyone we know of on the other side except Voldemort. I believe, under the proposed training, he will be able to out-duel even him by his seventeenth birthday."

"But will he be able to kill Voldemort?"

"That I cannot answer," Jones retorted. "Fighting, dueling, come naturally to him. Killing is hard for most people, including Potter." He paused in thought. "Perhaps even particularly Potter. He is a very moral young man."

"What is this 'proposed training'?" Remus demanded.

"Potter is not just going to take Defense next year," Dorff stated. "He will also be spending several hours a week training, mostly with you if you will take the job. Those periods will be spent dueling. You will be at Hogwarts either as a security consultant or teaching some of the Defense courses, and will be expected to work with the Headmaster here in those capacities. Potter will also be doing physical training every morning." He turned to Dumbledore. "We expect that the times for Quidditch training will be adjusted so that Harry's team has equal access to the field, but at times that conform to Potter's schedule."

"Some will complain of favoritism," Dumbledore commented mildly.

"Do you object, Headmaster?" Myrddin asked.

"No, actually I don't."

"Then you may send any who object to see me," Myrddin stated in a harsh voice.

"For such a trivial objection?"

"Yes. Let them know where the favoritism comes from. And warn Professor Snape, since I imagine that's who you mean, that if I hear of him causing any trouble, he will also be coming to see me no matter what."

"Are you certain you wish to appear. . . ." Dumbledore stopped as Myrddin stood to his full height and glared.

"Was I unclear, Headmaster?"

"No," Dumbledore stated calmly.

Myrddin turned to Jones and Lupin. "Train him well for now. You stand in my place. You may go." Jones stood and bowed. Lupin took in the surprised looks on Dorff and Dumbledore's face, and followed Jones out.

"What did that mean?" Remus hissed.

Jones dragged Remus down to his office, where he then checked it for surveillance. Finding none, Jones put up his personal privacy wards. "Dumbledore is considered the most powerful wizard of this century in large part because he defeated Grindelwald, the most dangerous Dark Wizard of all time."

"Correct. Although Voldemort is a more powerful wizard, Grindelwald was behind a goblin rebellion and two Muggle world wars."

"Exactly. Well, Myrddin has defeated two Dark Wizards at least as personally powerful as Grindelwald, although nowhere as dangerous politically. He is probably the most powerful and best-trained hit-wizard on Earth, and even though he's not as broadly knowledgeable as Dumbledore, I'd bet on him in a fight against anyone, even Voldemort, prophecy or no prophecy. He trained Dorff and he trained me, and he can still beat me in ten minutes on his worst day. And I'm supposed to be one of the best active hit-wizards there is."

"And so?"

"So . . . what that meant is, next summer Myrddin will take up Potter's training. Harry Potter will be his personal apprentice. That means as much to us as his being Dumbledore's apprentice would mean to you."

"I see."

"I don't know if you like this Snape at all. If you do, warn him NOT to mess about with Potter. Myrddin will come down on Snape in an instant if he causes any more problems."

"Actually, I feel a little sorry for Severus, but I don't care for him too much and never have."

Jones smiled. "Then let him shoot off his mouth. It will only happen once if any of us hear about it."

"You actually like Harry, don't you? You don't show it."

"That's right," was all Jones would say.

Chapter 09

Monday, August 19, 1996

continued

Ron approached Hermione carefully as the limo pulled out of the Granger driveway. Hermione smiled and hugged him tightly. Ron gathered her into a hug of his own, and kissed the top of her head. "I've missed you," Ron said simply but sincerely.

"I've missed you, too."

"Were Ginny and Luna very bothersome?"

Hermione released him and gave him a dirty look. "No, not at all. Ron, you have to learn that only you look upon Ginny as a bothersome little sister. She's my best friend, she's Luna's close friend, she's Neville's girl friend, and even Harry thinks of her as a close friend, not your little sister. And yes, Luna is a bit. . . ."

"Loony?"

"Calling her that is almost like Malfoy calling me a 'Mudblood,' Ron. Think about that." Ron flushed at Hermione's snap at him. She paused for a moment, and went on with a less scolding tone. "I really do like her, and Harry loves her. Accept her as a brilliant eccentric, help Ginny and me cajole her into slightly more conventional behavior if you want, but never call her that again."

"I'll try," Ron promised. "What do you mean, 'cajole her'? And yes, I know what the word means."

Hermione chose her words carefully. "I think she acts a little off because she probably does have some of that Inner Eye that Trelawney goes on and on about. She sees things the rest of us don't. Add in living alone with her father, who's at work twelve hours a day, seven days a week for almost two years after her mother's death and then on every vacation. It's no wonder she hasn't learned how to interact with people better. Then she's sorted into Ravenclaw, where every one starts picking on her, hiding her clothes and books and things. She was alone, lonely, and sad, with no one sticking up for her for four years. It was just easier to wear a pair of mis-matched socks than to cause a big stink that her dorm-mates had hidden all the matching socks -- she's not comfortable drawing attention to herself."

"You've got to be kidding! The way she dresses does nothing BUT call attention to her!"

"Attention to the way she's dressed, not to her," Hermione pointed out. "Everyone just dismisses her. Ginny and I went through her clothes with her at Mrs. Figg's and took away the mismatched socks and threw away anything that doesn't fit or seems too odd. Mum took us shopping Saturday morning and we got her some new things, and I'm going to put hexes on them so strong that if one of those bitches steal anything, they'll make Marietta look normal!"

"Hermione!" Ron said, shocked at the viciousness he heard in Hermione's voice.

"She's my friend! No one mistreats one of my friends!" Hermione took a deep breath and went on. "Harry let me send Hedwig to Padma and Lisa last week, asking if they could help at all. I don't want this to become Gryffindor versus Ravenclaw, after all. I hope I hear back soon."

"Did Harry, Ginny, and Luna know this?"

"Luna doesn't. Harry agreed I could mention he and Luna are dating."

"Are they? It's official, not a summer thing?"

"It's official. Get used to it."

Ron sighed. "If she has to be with us, why couldn't she date Neville, and Ginny date Harry?"

"For the same reason I don't date Neville and you don't date Luna. That's not the way things have worked out. And be glad Harry isn't dating Ginny. What would you do if Harry shagged Ginny?"

"WHAT! I'd k . . . err, beat the crap out of him!"

"Harry could easily defend himself against a physical assault, and he'd crush you in a duel and you know it. If Harry was dating Ginny, she could never say 'no' to him, and you know that, too."

"I guess."

"In fact, even if they didn't shag, Ginny would probably want to. . . ."

"I get the point!"

"Ginny can, and will, say no to Neville, if it's ever even necessary. She would be begging Harry to let her su. . . ."

"I said I get the point!"

"Sorry, Ron," Hermione said. "Ron, we have to do something about how we, and I do mean we, communicate."

"What do you mean?"

"We argue too much. Even if one of us is more at fault than the other, and I'm not saying that's true. . . ."

"You mean me," Ron pouted.

"Ron, do you think we argue too much?" Hermione asked softly.

He sighed. "Yes."

"I don't really like it. Do you?"

"Sometimes it's fun to tease and argue," Ron admitted, but went on, "but no, not most of the time."

"And you probably think it's more my fault than yours, that I don't see that you're teasing, or that I take things too seriously, or whatever. And I think that sometimes you're just being obstinate or deliberately dense. But I really like you, Ron. Neither of us is going to completely change, so we'll both have to work at not fighting, if we're ever going to be more than friends."

"I guess you're right," Ron agreed, somewhat reluctantly. "I have to learn not to say everything I think, don't I?"

"Yes, and I have to learn not to get so upset, and we both have to learn how to tell the other when we've seen or heard something we don't like." She put her hand on Ron's arm. "I don't know where our relationship might go, Ron, but we won't get anywhere fighting."

"You're right," Ron admitted. "I guess we should try to work something out this week, when it's just us."

"Good idea!"

Ron smiled, then squinted over his shoulder. "Looks like you have an owl."

"Great!" Hermione said. "You can wait until tomorrow morning, after it rains, for an answer, can't you?" Hermione asked the owl as she took the letter. The owl looked at her, and then flew into the garage.

Ron sighed.

"Oh, Ron, I don't have to read it, or answer it right now."

"Sorry," Ron said.

Hermione stuck the letter in the back pocket of her jeans and held out her hand. "Come on. Let me show you our home, and then I'll fix us lunch."

"Seems like a time-consuming and potentially wasteful way of storing and serving food," Ron commented a short-while later.

"It is, but it's better than having to hunt and gather every day," Hermione agreed, putting a salad down for her and two sandwiches and bowl of soup down for Ron.

"Go ahead and read the letter if you want," Ron said, who then went down to drink down the soup and refill it from the pot.

Hermione watched him with amazement and turned to the letter. "Lisa is staying with Padma, so they both wrote," she told Ron, glancing over the pages. After skimming through the letter, Hermione gave a disgusted snort.

"What?"

"There's apparently a small clique that is really behind this persecution of Luna and a few of the girls in other years, although Luna's been the main target. This year, there will be two Seventh years, two Sixth years, a Fifth year, and two Fourth years in the group. Luna's roommates, with that one exception, have stood firm against most practical jokes, and make certain no one takes Luna's school work or books, but don't, or can't keep the harassment lower than that. They say that the two of them, plus Morag McDougal, have been fighting a losing battle against the clique to try and help Luna and the others. Apparently there's also a lot of nasty remarks and teasing, which I guess we should have expected."

"Let me guess, Cho and Marietta?"

"Cho was the leader last year and will be again this year," Hermione agreed, then added, "the manipulative little bint."

"Hermione!"

"How badly do you treat Colin?"

"Huh? Colin? Well, he's an annoying little poof at times, but once we got him to stop staring at us, especially at Harry, in the showers and to tone down his photomania, he's not so bad."

"What's the worst thing you ever did to him?"

"Told him if he peeked in the showers one more time, we'd get him expelled."

"You didn't hurt him, harass him, embarrass him?"

Ron laughed. "You can't embarrass Colin Creevey! I mean the boy was playing with himself under his towel as he watched Harry bend over to pick up the soap!" He sobered a bit. "But no, we have never hurt him, although we may have hurt his feelings. Sloper threatened him once and Harry reminded him that Gryffindors don't act like that. And we've never singled him out for pranks more than anyone else in his year." Ron grinned again. "He even got Fred and George once, in front of Katie and Angelina."

Hermione looked puzzled.

"Fred and George had switched off -- you know they like pretending to be each other."

Hermione nodded. The two could actually pass for each other when they tried, although normally it was easy to tell them apart from the way they acted.

"Well, they'd been teasing Colin pretty badly for a few days, so when Colin went past them, he called them by their right names. When they protested -- you remember how much the girls hated it when the twins switched on them -- Colin pointed out that Fred . . . err, dresses left, George right."

Hermione thought about that for a second, then smothered a giggle.

"Then Colin added that even though the twins didn't, well, 'pack much', their uniforms were so tight even Snape could tell them apart."

Hermione shook her head. "The point is, Colin is a lot more annoying than Luna could ever be, but we don't harass him a tenth as much as Luna is by Cho and her group. Cho and her group are a lot like Malfoy; they make themselves feel important by trying to look down on others."

"So what are you going to do about it?"

"First, they asked if it was true Luna had been one of the students with Harry. I'll tell them yes. Voldemort -- Ron, you need to stop wincing at the name, even if you don't want to say it -- Voldemort and his followers already know Luna was there, so it shouldn't hurt to confirm that. Second, I need to tell them that yes, Harry seems serious about her. They want the DA to continue at least as a dueling club no matter who the next Defense teacher is. They like and respect Harry, and it should up Luna's standing a little."

"Not with Cho and her group," Ron pointed out.

"What? Why?"

"Cho and Harry didn't work out. How is she going to take Luna succeeding where she failed?"

"You're right," Hermione agreed. "I hadn't thought of that. They'd never acknowledge that as the reason but they'll harass Luna even more and badmouth the pair of them. I'll remind Padma and Lisa to look out for that. Third, I'll tell them about the hexes. It apparently took the people at Saint Mungo's three weeks to totally cure Marietta. They'll think twice before stealing Luna's stuff."

"Wow -- I know you said that hex was powerful, but I figured Pomfrey and Flitwick didn't cure her to teach her a lesson."

"Actually, they couldn't cure her any more than the healers could. I'm sure Flitwick and Dumbledore knew right away what would cure her and just didn't tell her."

"And that was?"

"I got a letter from the little chit in early July, apologizing. Once she apologized, THEN they only needed a week to finish cleaning up the mess."

"So, if they steal Luna's things. . . ."

"They'll be branded a thief until they apologize to Luna. Sort of defeats the purpose."

"Are you going to write now?"

"No, it's raining. Let's do the dishes . . . and then we can take a nap."

"A nap? But I'm not tired!"

"Together."

"Boy, am I tired!" Ron stood and yawned.

"Don't worry, Harry, Luna will be back soon," Ginny said to Harry as Ron was driven away.

"I know," Harry said stoically, if distractedly.

"Harry, you don't have to be like this," Neville told him.

"What do you mean?"

Ginny took up the argument again. "Harry, I know you have to practice Occlumency, but that doesn't mean you have to close yourself off to everyone."

"I know," Harry said in the expressionless voice he'd fallen into in the short time Luna had been gone.

"Harry. . . ."

"Yes?"

"Why don't we take the rest of today off?" Master J had shown up early that morning, and there was nothing else they had to do until dinner.

"And do what?"

Ginny thought she detected a hint of interest. She turned to Neville, embraced him firmly, and kissed him deeply. "I've wanted to do that since I got back!" Neville looked dazed. Happy, but dazed.

"No," Harry said turning away, "I don't feel like snogging Neville, and if I snogged you like that, Neville would punch me."

"Not us, idiot! Luna!"

"Oh . . . I guess we'll see how she feels about it."

"Fine, you stay here and stare at the empty alley for an hour and half. Neville and I will be using your bench, if you don't mind."

"Snog away," Harry said absently.

Ginny put her hands on Harry's forearm, which at least fully drew his attention. "I know you have a lot to worry about, Harry, but you still worry too much." Ginny kissed his cheek and led Neville away.

Harry decided to practice his physical conditioning -- Jones had been shocked at Harry's incredible balance, and had given Harry some advanced exercises to do. Harry changed into his exercise gear and went into his routine.

Ninety minutes later, Luna opened the alley door to the mews and was confronted by Harry in a handstand. Seeing Harry was concentrating, she went over and did a headstand in front of him. "Been here long?" she asked.

Harry had been aware on some level that a friend was near, and so he wasn't very startled. He opened his eyes and was a bit shocked to see Luna, also upside down, looking back. "You're back!"

"I am. Shall we do this some more, or have lunch?"

Harry rolled out of the headstand and then gave Luna a hand up. She was a bit surprised when Harry drew her into a passionate hug.

"I've missed you so much," Harry said in a small voice.

Luna now returned the embrace. She understood then that she had been a little worried Harry would NOT have missed her. "You did?"

"Of course," Harry said. Before he could say more, Luna was kissing him passionately and deeply.

When she let go, Luna said, "And I've missed you, too."

"What do you think they're planning?" Neville asked in a worried voice.

Harry shrugged. "I doubt if Luna is planning anything. It's more likely Ginny is planning something and trying to get Luna to go along."

Neville looked at Harry. It was often difficult to read Harry any more. He was distant during his many workouts, and over the last few days he had mostly withdrawn the rest of the time as well. He had been more animated during lunch, due to Luna's return, but had retreated again when Ginny had dragged Luna into the girls' bedroom.

'Is this what I would have become if Voldemort had selected me as the one fulfilling prophecy?' Neville wondered. Neville had had a hard childhood, although nowhere nearly as bad as Harry's. His first four and a half years at Hogwarts had been even more difficult, although not as bad as what Luna had endured. Now, even Neville was recognizing life could be great, and filled with many more good things than bad.

He knew that was largely because he was gaining confidence and ability, because of his friends and his relationship with Ginny, and because Harry carried a crippling burden that could have been his. Neville was grateful that he was only called upon to help Harry, which he was now more happy to do than ever before.

Ginny and Luna came into the common area, and both Neville and Harry recognized the look on Ginny's face. It was the same one the twins had when planning something. "What are we doing this afternoon and tonight, Harry?" Ginny asked innocently.

"We are going to meditate and practice our Occlumency. Then I thought should shoot stingers at each other for an hour, to practice our different shields, followed by ninety minutes of physical training. Then Neville can work with the two of you on Herbology, and we could then tackle some Potions work until dinner."

Ginny's face dropped. Harry went on. "After dinner -- it's supposed to just be your Mum and Dad and us tonight, remember -- we're going to study some more. Now, why don't you tell the two of us what you two plan on having us study? Or would you prefer to keep it a surprise?"

Ginny smiled. "I think now we'll keep it as a surprise."

By dinner time, the rain had developed into a heavy thunder storm. Dobby therefore brought the teens dinner, as Mrs. Weasley didn't want them coming through the monsoon. When Dobby left them to eat, Harry asked, "So, what's the plan?"

Ginny and Luna looked at each other, and then Ginny looked away. Luna therefore took up the story. "Ginny had an idea. After much discussion, we decided on this. Ginny and Neville are going to our room. Harry, you and I are going to your room."

"Yes?"

Luna shrugged. "That's all there is to it," Ginny said.

"How long are we . . . staying like this?" Neville asked, sweat breaking out.

"Until Ron and Hermione come back," Luna stated.

"Nothing much will happen," Ginny emphasized.

"But we will be closer," Luna added.

"If you two agree."

Harry and Neville merely nodded their heads. It was the most they could do.

Tuesday, August 20, 1996

Although still asleep, Harry Potter knew he'd only had pleasant dreams. He had managed to slowly train himself over the last three weeks to stop reacting to his nightmares, with Master J's help. The dreams would start, and then Harry could step back. Harry couldn't consistently stop them, but instead of participating in the nightmares they were now like watching a movie.

No, he had had no nightmares that night. Instead, his dreams played and replayed the evening before. He watched Luna take off her clothes in front of him; he watched them shower together; he watched them kiss and explore. At Luna's suggestion, they had touched

themselves more than they had touched each other -- watching and especially doing had been embarrassing to Harry, but very instructive to both. Maybe the next night, Harry hoped, they would touch each other more.

The rain had ended around 9:00, and by 10:30, the night had become hot and humid. Towards morning, Dream Harry imagined himself seated at the foot of the four-poster bed, the bed curtains open, just looking at himself and Luna, still nude, laying above the covers and holding each other, while a nude vision of Luna sat opposite and looked on as well. Both Dream Harry and Dream Luna seemed to be slightly transparent.

At 6:00, Dream Harry and Luna leaned over to kiss, just as sleeping Harry and Luna did as well. Luna opened her eyes, and Dream Harry and Luna disappeared. "Welcome to my dream world, Harry."

Harry blinked, accepted, and embraced Luna as they kissed deeply.

Ginny and Neville had been a little more adventurous than Harry and Luna, but not by much.

In all, it was four happy (if slightly embarrassed) teens who met over the breakfast table. "I think we'd all better start off with some Occlumency," Harry said.

"No need to broadcast our feelings," Ginny agreed.

After Ginny and Neville went to their respective rooms to change, Harry looked into Luna's eyes. "We were in a Dreamscape together?"

Luna nodded.

"Have you ever done that before?"

Luna nodded again, and then added, "But no one has ever realized I was there. I mean, that it was really me instead of them dreaming I was an observer."

She looked very worried. Harry kissed her forehead and said, "Then we'll learn to share dreams."

Chapter 10

Tuesday, August 20, 1996
continued

After their Occlumency and exercises, Harry and Luna sat down together and wrote Master J a letter. Both would have preferred to keep their actions private, but Harry had learned his lesson, and now knew when to ask for help. Both teens also had great respect for Master J, and knew he wouldn't inform on them on moral grounds, although he would if there were any safety concerns.

Harry then posted the work schedule for the rest of the week. Although he and Neville needed more work on their Anatomy (there would be a major exam at the first class in September which would determine if they could continue the course), the Sixth years had now completed (or in Ron's case, claimed to have completed) all their other summer work. Although Ginny and Luna had also finished revising for the O.W.L.s, both were willing to keep working on them. Harry and Neville were determined to help them now, so that they would have slightly more time with their girlfriends during the school year.

Hermione had helped by leaving a list of her Fifth year assignments, and the boys tried to recreate their Divination assignments. Although they knew Firenze might be teaching, he would likely have to teach more to the O.W.L.s this year than he had the year before.

Still, this left the quartet at Grimmauld Place free from 1:00 until 3:30. The couples retired to their separate rooms to 'rest'. From 3:30 until 4:30, they would have another dueling session under Harry's supervision, then half an hour of Occlumency followed by showers and dinner.

That night, Harry was even more nervous than he had been the night before. He realized this was more because of his potential Deamwalking than because of the romantic aspects. Luna recognized this, and therefore spent less time seeking her own pleasure and satisfaction than in giving both to Harry. Both were shy, careful, and very tentative in their explorations, and Luna showed she knew how to use scouring charms.

Afterwards, and she laid in Harry's arms, Luna whispered, "Just meditate and fall asleep as usual. I will be waiting, my love."

Ron did not enjoy quite as enjoyable a Tuesday through Friday as the boys at Grimmauld Place mews. The day had started off on a bad note when Hermione got an owl stating that Snape had turned down her request to take Potions as an eighth course. The fact that she had been allowed to take Law only partially cheered her. Hermione reviewed her anatomy all morning, and had made Ron work on his Divination even though he had claimed to be finished with it (he hadn't, and so gave in). He wasn't thrilled by the idea of doing the same routine everyday, but gave in on that as well.

He wasn't certain if he was glad or upset that Hermione had actually scheduled 'snogging time' every day, from 11:00 until noon. He would have preferred it to be more spontaneous and longer. Hermione was determined to make certain things didn't get out of hand.

At noon, Hermione would stop them, straighten out their clothes, and then lead Ron to the high street. He had to admit that this was almost as interesting and fun as snogging in some ways. There were a number of fast food places, and Ron got to try food he had mostly just heard of. He decided to suggest some Italian and Chinese food be added to the Hogwarts menus at the next year's prefects meetings.

There was both a small cinema and a multiplex cinema nearby -- one just off the nearby high street, the other a 25 minute bus ride away. Ron enjoyed the movies more than he did the television, and decided that although Muggle buses had nothing like the range of the Knight's Bus, they were a lot more comfortable to ride.

Ron found the evenings with the Grangers more uncomfortable. They operated on a level that he found rather strange, talking about ideas he just didn't understand. Hermione's parents were not boring or unpleasant in any way, but Ron couldn't imagine someone acting up at their table, or at the restaurants they went to two nights, like the Weasleys did at home or like people did at places like the Leaky Cauldron.

As much as Ron liked Hermione, and thought the wizarding world somewhat superior to the Muggle, he was starting to wonder if he was good enough for Hermione Granger.

That Tuesday night, as soon as Harry fell into a light sleep, he again found himself watching himself sleep. Luna wasn't asleep yet, but watching his sleeping self. Harry watched as Luna kissed him and fell asleep.

Within seconds, she was sitting next to herself as well. "How do you feel?"

Harry frowned. "Well, I don't feel sleepy, but physically, I don't really feel much at all."

"That's true," Luna admitted. "We can Dreamwalk while our mind is dreaming and our bodies sleep, but the temptation is to Walk all night. You really don't get much mental rest that way. You won't have much concentration at all the next day."

"Why do it?" Harry asked.

Luna frowned. "Do you generally like your dreams, Harry?"

Harry shook his head. "No. No, my dreams are actually fairly scary. It's not quite as bad in some ways now, since I just see them, so I don't actually feel them any more, but in some ways, they're worse."

"Because now you remember them better."

"Exactly."

"Well, I feel the same way. My dreams are, or were, often . . . ugly. I prefer Walking to seeing those dreams, when they come. Now, our minds need some cleansing deep sleep. When you are dreaming, if they are bad, simply stop watching. Tell your subconscious to let the bad

feelings go, and then visualize yourself in bed. As for the Dreamwalking, I saw your ability to do this, and awakened it." She frowned. "I think I should apologize for that."

"For doing it without my permission, or because you must have spied on me in my sleep?"

"Both," Luna acknowledged. "I am sorry if you feel I've invaded your privacy. I've tried not to Dreamwalk inside of people too much, and leave when it gets too personal."

"I'm sure Master J will have something to say about all this," Harry said, "but I forgive you."

"You're the only person I've met in my nightly wanderings who seems to have the ability," Luna said. "Not that I've seen everyone at Hogwarts," she hastened to add.

"Is that where you first Dreamwalked with me?"

Luna nodded. "It was the night we talked by the notice board. I walked through Gryffindor looking for you. You had looked so sad, I was worried about you. When I found you, you were having a nightmare."

"Which one?" Harry asked anxiously.

"You were locked in the cupboard under the stairs at the Dursleys, and you were trying to get out to save Sirius. You were . . . upset. You were crying out for your mother to help free you."

Harry had often done just that when he was younger and trapped in the cupboard. "And what did you do?" Harry asked in a small voice.

"I held your dream-self, although you saw me as Every Woman in some ways."

Harry looked puzzled, so Luna explained. "You didn't see me as me. You called me the feminine names that brought you comfort. Mostly you called me 'Mum' or 'Mummy', but you also called me Hermione, and both Mrs. Weasley and Mother Weasley, and twice you called me Luna. And you told us how much you feared going back to your Aunt's and how sorry you were to have failed Sirius." Dream Luna put her hand on Harry's cheek. He couldn't really feel it, just a bit of pressure, but he could tell it was there. "I decided then I would write to you from Sweden. You just managed to write me first, for which I am very happy."

Luna gently pushed Harry down onto the bed. "Now sleep, my love. If we both Dreamwalk at the same time, we will talk more. If we don't, we will simply watch."

"Come into my dreams any time you want," Harry told her, his eyes shutting. "I trust you."

Most of Harry's dreams were quiet, and when he fought out of them to Dreamwalk, he saw Luna was asleep. It was only around 5:30 that when he Dreamwalked he found Luna waiting for him. "Have you been waiting long?"

"Just a few minutes." She stood. "Come. Let me show you how this works."

"How it works?"

"Yes," Luna replied. "True masters of the art of Dreamwalking may soar to many other places, even other planes of existence. Right now, I at least am limited to where I may walk, although with a little concentration I am able to walk through doors and even walls."

"Is that how you came to me?"

"Yes, Harry." They joined hands. "Close your eyes. It's easier that way."

Harry wasn't certain what she meant, but trusted Luna. They walked much further than Harry thought possible, and when Luna told him to open his eyes, they were in the girls' room. Harry would have blushed a bit had he been 'in body', considering that Neville and Ginny were also sleeping in the nude atop their covers.

"Look carefully," Luna said. "What do you see?"

"Neville looks like Neville. Ginny seems to have some light, like a slight silver aura, around her head."

"She's dreaming. You may not have noticed, but you and I have a slight violet aura around us when we dream. Now, touch Ginny's aura with me."

Harry did so, and they were observing Ginny's dream from a distance, as the Harry of Ginny's dream flew her around the clearing at the Burrow, holding her tightly. Luna drew Harry out of the dream.

"Interesting feeling," Harry admitted as Luna led them back to the boys' room. "Did you every find out why the Ravenclaws pick on you?"

"It's mostly just a small group," Luna answered. "The girl who started it was a Fifth year my First year, and even she was just a part of the group, and she just didn't like me. They tend to be the pretty girls who want to be popular, but who don't have much else going for them, and their hangers-on."

"What do you mean?"

"Ravenclaws are expected to stand-out in class, but in reality, that just means being in the upper two-third to upper half of the class standings. So these are girls who would rank under the top quarter in any class if they're attractive, and those who want to be seen with them. Marietta, for example, is barely in the top half of your class, and not outstandingly attractive. Margot Smythe is the only one in my room that's part of the group. She's probably the prettiest of us, but below the half-way mark in class standings. She's barely a Pure-Blood, she has no special talents that I have ever seen, her parents are well-off but not rich. All she has are her looks and her membership in what even the members call 'the Clique'."

"Does any of that really matter?"

"Any of what?"

"Pure-Blood, special talents, whatever that means, or any of it?"

"Oh, Harry, you should know better than that. Look at your House year. You're the Boy-Who-Lived and brilliant Quidditch seeker. Ronald is your best friend, and well-known as a chess player and now Quidditch keeper. Dean is a well-known artist and Seamus a comedian. Hermione is close to you and the most brilliant student in fifty years or so. Patil and Brown are two of the prettiest girls in school, and are well-off and relatively friendly. Lavender is a Pure-Blood, and if foreigners counted so are the Patils. Only Neville and the other two girls are considered ciphers, and Neville probably won't be for long."

Harry shook his head. "I'm sure you're right, but it just seems wrong."

"You don't have that kind of behavior in Gryffindor?"

"No, not really. Not that I've seen, anyway." Harry frowned. "I'm surprised Flitwick tolerates it."

"I doubt he's aware of how wide-spread it is."

'He will be,' Harry thought. 'I'll talk with Hermione about it.' The pair went off to sleep.

Wednesday, August 21, 1996

Remus came to the news at 8:15, summoning Harry and Luna to the main house at 9:00. As they both suspected, Master J was waiting for them. The Australian looked at them silently for several minutes, as if evaluating them and thinking of his response. Finally, he spoke. "I must admit, I cannot decide if I should be proud of you or angry."

"Then be proud of Harry and angry with me," Luna told him. "Harry told you about his new ability as soon as he discovered it. I'm the one who has always kept quiet about it."

"It is unusual for one as young as you to have even this limited ability. How was it awakened?"

"Just as you know it was," Luna answered politely. She turned to Harry. "One way to awaken the dormant ability like yours is for a Dreamwalker to sleep with him. My mother had the ability; I'm not certain but I believe it to be a traditional power in witches of her line. She always walked in my dreams, so far as I know."

"You may be correct, Miss Lovegood. There are several such families, including one in America. I took a few hours last night to see what Hogwarts had in its library, and found little which would help you. What you are both doing is literally Dreamwalking. Your spirit separates from your body while you are dreaming, and you are able to walk much like a ghost. Astral-projection, which we also sometimes call Dreamwalking, is a somewhat different, although related, experience. I supplied Dumbledore with a list of books, and he assures me that a friend of his who is known to you, named Dung, will be delivering copies soon. This is the same person who supplied you with those other books and your trunk, Mister Potter?"

"Yes, sir."

Master J nodded. He turned to Luna. "Have you seen Harry's worst nightmares?"

"I doubt it. I know he hasn't seen mine."

"Do not reveal this ability, even to the other four students. I know of it; Dumbledore knows of it. We are likely to be supplying new teachers and perhaps some who will be known as 'research fellows' to Hogwarts. Fortunately, one we hope to recruit is a rather clever protege of mine. I shall inform her, and she shall coach you in the mundane aspects you currently have the power to do. Perhaps, if you desire and if you show the spiritual maturity, I shall coach you on the more glorious aspects of the art after the war is over. For now, please limit yourselves to walking in general and exploring each other's dreams."

To that, both students readily agreed.

Henry Dorff looked across the desk to the Headmaster, who was not looking happy. "Is this really necessary?" Dumbledore asked.

Dorff shrugged. "After your experience with Umbridge last year, I can understand your doubts, but yes, this is necessary. Even though some of us still doubt the centrality of Harry Potter - I mean, hell, we saw the kid born! -- there is little doubt that Voldemort believes in it. Therefore, we must place people at Hogwarts. After studying the needs of the school and the faculty, this is our initial suggestion. If you have counter-suggestions, please memo them to us, along with explanations." Dorff literally shook his finger at the Headmaster. "You can't just object as you usually do! Give us some good reasons, however, and we should be able to work things out. You should know me well enough after all these years!"

"Actually, I have an idea, or rather a set of them." Dumbledore pulled out a blank sheet of parchment, and three minutes of quick writing later handed it to Dorff.

Dorff looked it over, nodding a few times and frowning a few as well. "We'd feel safer with more people there."

"Then send them to Hogsmeade. The academic changes and aurors should be enough."

"Lloyd Trowbridge would be one of them."

Dumbledore thought, but then shook his head. "No, I only want faculty and our aurors here. If Lloyd is in charge in Hogsmeade, it would make me feel better about them, and better able to work closely with him, instead of merely through these people, whomever they are."

"Alright. I'll agree. About this associate faculty member of yours. Are you sure you want him here?" Dorff asked. "He could cause more trouble than he's worth."

"No," Dumbldore admitted candidly, "I am not certain. I do feel he deserves the chance. If I am wrong, I shall have to deal with it, just as I shall have to deal with these three persons to teach parts of our curriculum. Do you really think one will really be accepted as a mentor by Harry?"

Dorff smiled. "Don't worry about Tabby Spellman."

"Is that who it is? Why didn't you tell me! In that event, I'm not worried about her at all. Her I know. Who are the others?"

"Jones and Tom Lawrence."

"Very well. I take back my objections."

Dorff shrugged. "I'll pass your suggestions on to Myrddin, Das, and Turgot this morning, and if they have no serious objections, I'll get the ball rolling this afternoon."

"I take it you have none?"

"None whatsoever. If you want Percy Weasley, you can have him!"

"Harry. . . ."

"Yes, Neville?"

"Is Ron coming back Friday or Saturday? It was sort of left up in the air."

"Oh, Remus told me this morning that Ron and Hermione will actually be back Sunday." Harry looked out the window. It was now a rather chilly and blustery day for August. "Hermione's parents are taking Ron to some kind of cook-out picnic Saturday, if the weather is nice. Why?"

"We won't be able to, well, you know, keep the . . . arrangements we have, will we?"

"If you mean the sleeping arrangements, I doubt it. Hermione would have to be willing to sleep with Ron, because you know if he's not he certainly wouldn't go along with us doing it and neither would Hermione. If Hermione IS willing, then Ron would only go along if we slept two couples in one room and one alone, and he'd go crazy if it was you and Ginny alone."

Neville sighed. "Too bad. Even though we're not doing much -- in fact, in some ways it's almost torture -- I still like it."

"We're not doing much either," Harry admitted, "but I really like it, too. Of course, if we got to like it too much, going back to school would be rather difficult!"

"Good point."

"Is this a joke?"

"No, it is not a joke, Mister Weasley," Dorff stated coldly. "While we acknowledge you have some bureaucratic skills, we do not think highly of your flexibility or judgement. Considering

the great ability of your father . . . yes, Mister Weasley, your father! There is a magical community of some sixty thousand in the British Isles, yet your father kept his department working at a very high state with only a fifth of the staff he should have. The fact that neither he nor his department were highly valued by this Ministry highlights some of the problems this Ministry has had for the last thirty years or so. So, since you lack his skills, we have kept you on at your present level only as a favor to him. We have not found you very helpful these past weeks, although you are far from being a problem. Therefore, when Dumbledore made this suggestion, we decided to approve it. Now, here are your choices. Take a year from the Ministry and work at Hogwarts, or join your father's old Office. We're expanding the Office from two to ten, and you would be the number four person there."

Dorff waved Percy out. "You have until tomorrow morning to decide to take up Dumbledore's offer. We will likely be in charge of this Ministry for at least the next year. If you succeed at Hogwarts to the satisfaction of Professor Dumbledore, the staff who are also our people, and two students, you may return to the Ministry for another try at near your current level."

"Which two students?" Percy asked from the door.

"Harry Potter and Hermione Granger." Percy grimaced and left. "And we'll see if you understand if that means teaching well, or if you'll just be toadying up to all these people," Dorff said softly.

Chapter 11

Saturday, August 24, 1996

Salem Witches Institute

Tabitha Stephanie Spellman was an enigma, even to herself. She knew little for certain of her heritage, except that it was magical. She had appeared on the steps of the Ysgol, the first witching academy in the Americas (founded in what is now northern Maine in 1524, nearly a century before the Muggles started establishing colonies in that part of North America) nude and wrapped in blankets on July 4, 1968. She had been a ten or eleven year old child, whose personal memories had been wiped. In their place, she had been given a vast knowledge of wizarding and Muggle history and culture, and was fluent in many languages. More than enough money had been left with her to sustain her through school in near-luxury and to give her a good start on life.

The only clue to who she might be was the note that came with her, claiming she was born on June 21 and had no Muggle blood. Debate had raged on if she was a tallish 10 year old or shortish 11 year old, but she had shown enough magical ability to start school the next September. The general consensus was that she likely the product of a powerful, wealthy wizard (which would account for the powerful memory modifications and the large lump sum left with her) and either a Squib or Muggle mother. Years of research finally showed one powerful Old Believer clan had produced a Squib of the right age and general appearance to have been Tabitha's mother. This Squib had disappeared in 1956, when she'd been kicked out of her home (for her family did not tolerate Squibs) at 17. When finally traced in 1971, it was discovered she had indeed had given birth to a daughter in June 1958, had lived in the Muggle world (which might account for the use of such an obvious Muggle pseudonym for the child), and had died in March, 1968, from injuries sustained the month before in an auto accident. Her daughter disappeared from her Muggle school on the Florida Gulf coast right after the funeral.

Tabitha resembled the descriptions and Muggle photos of the daughter, but that wasn't absolute proof. If Tabitha had a good idea who her mother had been, she had no idea who the father was. Her mother's family claimed no official knowledge of her heritage, but did send her a small allotment, 'just in case'.

The Ysgol had been founded by a group of scholars who had, for the most part, been educated at Hogwarts. They therefore followed the same curriculum and had a similar House structure, named the Orange, Green, Blue (corresponding to Gryffindor), Red (Slytherin), White (Ravenclaw) and Brown (Hufflepuff) dragons. She had been sorted as a Green Dragon, more cunning than the ambitious Reds, intellectual without being as scholarly as the Whites.

She had earned twelve of the Ysgol's version of the O.W.L.s, and a N.E.W.T. in all seven of her subjects (Charms, Transfiguration, Potions, History, Muggle Studies, Runes, and Arithmancy). Despite not taking the last two years of Defense, she had been on her House dueling team. After graduation, she had gone to Muggle universities, getting BA's in Classics and Anthropology, and MA's in modern history, history of science, and political science. At the same time she was getting her first degrees at various Boston universities, she was an

apprentice in spell weaving and potions at the Salem Witches Institute, one of the few centers of advanced magical training in North America. She had gone past the level of Master in both.

She had volunteered to go to Britain in 1980 to help fight Voldemort. Between 1985, when she had finished her magical and Muggle training, and 1992, she had worked part-time as a researcher at the Institute and part-time for the North American Confederation as a trouble-shooting investigator. After helping to bring down a would-be Dark Wizard in Utah, she had retired to a full-time research position back in Salem.

Now she had letters she couldn't ignore, calling her back into battle. She glanced through the package of letters and files until she found the ones she had to reread.

**THE TEMPORARY GOVERNING COUNCIL
MINISTRY OF MAGIC
FOR BRITAIN AND IRELAND**

8/21/96

Dear Tabby:

Enclosed you will find a one year teaching contract for Hogwarts. Please sign and come over quickly; we need you. Why we need you in Britain you no doubt can guess. Why at Hogwarts? Because it really does seem as young Potter is and will be at or near the center of events. There also seems to be a fair amount of intrigue amongst the Pure-Blood students, aimed at Potter, his friends, and the school in general. We will need several people here to keep an eye on things. I have written to Hilda, just in case she does not want to let you go.

What would we have you do? Officially, we are shaking things up a bit, and bringing in several people to teach. This will give all the faculty more time to look after the students in general. It will also give selected people (including you) extra time to tutor young Potter and perhaps up to five of his friends. If the pattern of the last several years is repeated, Voldemort will attack Potter at some point during the year, and we want him and his friends prepared just in case all other defenses fail.

Most specifically, what shall you teach at Hogwarts? A chunk of the Fifth and Sixth year curriculum: Charms (5th-two sections & 6th); Potions (5th-two sections); Muggle Studies (5th); Runes (5th & 6th); and Arithmancy (6th). You will therefore be teaching Potter and his five close friends, and the apparent leader of the pro-Voldemort students, who is named Draco Malfoy (enclosed are copies of their student files).

Tabitha reread each of the files carefully, noting that she would only be teaching Potter (and his friends Weasley and Longbottom) Charms, while she would be teaching Granger and Malfoy Charms, Runes, and Arithmancy. She would have the two Fifth year girls for Charms, Potions, and Muggle Studies, plus Lovegood for Runes.

We would have liked to have given you Fifth and Sixth year history, but decided we needed you to be able to devote some time to security. (Tabitha snorted. This wasn't a heavy schedule, but it wasn't terribly light, either, since she'd never taught these subjects at this low a level.) Obviously, we will be paying you a full salary. We need you not just for your academic skills,

but for your dueling and research skills and logic and, we hope, to help mentor these teens. Toby will be leading our efforts at Hogwarts, and Tom Lawrence will be there as well. I'm sure you know Harry Dorff in on the Council; his brief includes keeping an eye on Hogwarts.

yours

Tudor Myddin

**THE TEMPORARY GOVERNING COUNCIL
MINISTRY OF MAGIC
FOR BRITAIN AND IRELAND**

8/21/96

My Dear Tabitha:

I promised Tudor to write, to implore you to come to help us. I have been given a long list of reasons why you should come, which I shall ignore. Come because we need you. I have just learned that one of Harry Potter's friends is, like you, a long-time mundane Dreamwalker, who has just awakened the same power in young Harry. They will need your help, especially Harry, who has reasons for nightmares that few others could withstand.

your friend J

**THE TEMPORARY GOVERNING COUNCIL
MINISTRY OF MAGIC
FOR BRITAIN AND IRELAND**

August 20, 1996

Dearest Tabby:

I don't know why Tudor wishes me to write and ask you to come to Hogwarts to help us. We need you, and you have never failed in your duty.

Yes, it may be hard for you to work indirectly under my supervision. I assure you, I have no control over you in the class room, and I think you would be as willing to follow me as I will follow your advice. Working with Toby at the school will be more difficult, but I'm as certain he will be professional in professional situations as I am he will be a gentleman in private, unless you finally give in to his infatuation (if you do, you know he will try to go from lap dog to top dog, right?). Tom will be there, and you can always use him as a buffer, in the unlikely chance you need one. I shall not try to restart our relationship without a direct invitation.

I also wrote to Sabrina, so she can put all the blame on her godfather instead of me. Tudor can take it.

*all my love **Harry***

8/20/96

Dear Tabby

Please come to Hogwarts. Even if you refuse me yet again, I can think of no other person whose intelligence, bravery, and knowledge could help us more. If you wish to remain just friends, we shall. If you wish for me to fall at your beautiful feet and worship you, I shall do that, too.

Toby

Tabitha sighed. Henry, Tom, and Toby, especially Toby, were complications she did NOT need in her life again. Teaching students in their mid-teens, instead of the young women at Salem, was not something she desired either.

She stood and looked in the mirror. Witches age at very variable speeds compared to Muggles. A witch of 75 could look anywhere between the Muggle ages of 35 and 75. A witch of 150 could look like a healthy Muggle of 60 or an aged crone. So far, Tabitha was lucky and at 38 still looked young enough that the cruelist Muggle woman would guess her age as 24 or 25. Men were often an unwelcome distraction to her, especially persistant ones like Toby Jones. Still, she decided, she couldn't say no.

After a final sigh and a grimace, Tabby went off to see the Headmistress, only hoping Hilda had already read her letter from Myrddin.

Sunday, August 25, 1996

Ron and Hermione returned to the Grimmauld Mews a little after 10:00 Sunday morning. Over Ron's objections ("It's the last week of vacation!") the other teens had quickly worked out a study and workout schedule for the rest of the week. They would be returning to Diagon Alley one day that week, but the exact day had not yet been announced.

Dinner was a formal affair that Sunday. Besides Molly and Arthur, Fred, George, and Bill were present, as were Dumbledore, Tonks, Remus, and six members of the Order that the teens only knew by sight. There was also one stranger.

She was a tall, young, willowy, very attractive woman with slightly blondish red hair and green eyes even more startling than Harry's. The two male Order members, and the twins, seemed to be awe-struck by her, and even Neville and Ron seemed to be sneaking glances at her when they hoped Ginny and Hermione weren't looking. Remus and Arthur, who had strong senses of self-preservation, managed not to stare, although they also snuck looks. Compared to a quarter-veela, Bill at least did not find her terribly fascinating. Dumbledore seemed amused by this by-play, and some of the females gave the newcomer dirty looks.

Harry was just curious. Harry judged the beauty of redheads by his mother, and this witch didn't come close in his opinion.

"I would like to introduce one of our new American colleague," Dumbledore stated. "Miss Tabitha Spellman."

Hermione gave a rather undignified snort, which drew some odd glances towards her.

After Dumbledore introduced everyone, he went on speaking directly to the teens. "Miss Spellman is a very respected member of the Dark Forces Defense League, a Master at Spell Weaving and Potions, and very knowledgeable in areas of culture, charms, and defense. We are quite fortunate to have one of the premier researchers and teachers from Salem to help us out. She will be teaching some sections of the Fifth and Sixth year curriculum, and along with Remus, will be your unofficial tutor and supervisor."

"What will you be teaching?" Harry asked, directing it to both Spellman and Remus.

"Fifth and Sixth year Charms and Runes; Fifth year Potions and Muggle Studies; and Sixth year Arithmancy," she answered, and then glanced at Remus.

"I'll be doing First through Fourth year Defense," Remus answered.

"We are doing this to allow the staff more time for security work," Dumbledore explained. "Professor Flitwick, for example, will not be taking on any other formal classes, but will coaching a Third and Fourth year Dueling Club, while Remus here handles and First and Second years. Another visitor will be helping out as well."

"Meaning the Fifth, Sixth, and Seventh years?" Harry asked.

"Mister Jones will be teaching the Fifth and Sixth years, Professor Snape will be teaching the Seventh. Mister Jones shall also be coaching the Fifth and Sixth years who wish to learn dueling, of course, and we do not think the Seventh years will really have time for dueling."

"I think we can talk over dinner," Molly interrupted. "Everyone sit and enjoy."

"Thank you," Tabitha said, in a way to include both Molly and George, who had held her chair. She turned to look at Molly. "Salem is probably the institute most integrated into Muggle customs, but we never get food like this. It's been a while since I've had a genuine British full roast beef dinner."

"You're familiar with British customs then?" Hermione asked.

"I was a student at the Ysgol, which maintains a number of British customs, at least by North American standards. And I spent well over a year here in 1980 and 1981, as part of the American Light Force Volunteers." This was a group who had joined in the fight against Voldemort between 1978 and 1981. The Ministry had opposed their involvement at the time.

"The Volunteers were a great help to the Order," Dumbledore said quietly. "They fought hard, and took many casualties."

"Yes, we did," Tabitha said sadly. "Still, I think we hurt them more than they ever hurt us!"

The other members of the Order seemed to relax with that information. Tabitha was accepted as one of the group.

After dinner, Tabitha walked the teens back to the mews. They sat in silence for a few minutes in the little common area. "Nothing to ask?" she finally asked.

"What's your real name?" Hermione asked. Tabitha smiled.

"Alright, I'll bite," Ron asked. "Why wouldn't Tabitha Spellman be her real name?"

Hermione didn't roll her eyes, but instead looked at Harry. "Don't look at me! Whatever the reference is, I don't get it either!"

"My name is actually two separate references to American Muggle culture. There was a comic book character called Sabrina, the Teen-age Witch, and her last name was Spellman. There was also an American television series called Bewitched, about a witch named Samantha who married a very muggle Muggle named Darrin Stevens. The characters later had a daughter named Tabitha. My name is Tabitha Stephanie Spellman. To put things briefly, I am a foundling. After years of investigation, it has been shown I am most likely the child of a wizard and a Squib. I have everything but legal proof of who the Squib was, but she is long dead. Her family, a very powerful magical clan, do not fully accept me, since to them a Squib is no longer part of the family. I've no idea who my father might have been. Does that satisfy you, Ms Granger?"

Hermione flushed, but nodded.

"What did you do with the Volunteers?" Ginny asked.

"I assisted in shifting through intelligence, and fought in three pitched fire fights. I was perhaps the fifth person to arrive at Godric's Hollow, not that there was anything to do by then. The Ministry managed to ship us out in mid-November."

"Did you know my father, or Sirius?" Harry asked eagerly.

"I never met Sirius Black. I knew your father slightly, and knew your mother. After all, the Fidelius was only done in early October, 1981. We may talk about that time of my life after we know each other better."

"Why did they ask you to come?" Ginny asked. "Other than because you were here before, that is."

"As opposed to any number of other witches?" Ginny nodded. "In part because Tudor Myrddin, Master J, Harry Dorff, and Toby Jones all know me fairly well. While I was a foundling, I was a ten year old foundling. My personal memories of my childhood were destroyed, presumably by my father. They were overlaid by a great deal of useful information, but I'm sure I could have learned most of it the conventional way. I was already talented enough to start school. Tudor was a Seventh year my First year, the School Prefect, our version of Head Boy. Harry was in my House and year, while Toby a few years behind us and in another House. Now the Ysgol always has at least a few students staying over the summer, and Tudor was staying that summer. Since he was also in my House, he helped to look after me that summer. He's a bit like my big brother. Master J was later one of my teachers, and Harry and I dated many years ago. Toby would like to."

Ron grinned. "Toby?"

"I would advise you not to call him Tobias, let alone Toby," Tabitha warned.

"Toby," Ron said with a smirk of satisfaction.

Tabitha turned to Hermione. "He doesn't listen, does he?"

Hermione smiled back. "Not too well or too often."

"Now, why don't you fill me in on where everyone is in their preparations for the fall."

"Whose fall?" Neville asked.

"Sorry, for the autumn," Tabitha corrected herself. "Fall is the English term for the season, and its usage carried over to American English. Autumn is the French term, and like many words has replaced the Anglo-Saxon root in modern British usage."

"She talks like Hermione," Ron grumbled.

"Thank you," Tabitha and Hermione said together, which made everyone except Ron laugh.

Tabitha reviewed everyone's academic status and looked over the study session schedule for the rest of the week. She talked to the teens about their hobbies (the students had looked at her blankly -- Luna, Harry, and Ginny didn't have any, and Ron didn't think Hermione's extra reading or Neville's extra gardening really counted, which just left his chess). She then played Ron a game of chess, beating him rather easily, to his surprise. Then she sighed and tore up the schedule.

"Now, from the time you wake up until Ten-thirty, you need to do your workouts and Occlumency. From Ten-thirty until Eleven-thirty, you'll be dueling with me. From Six-fortyfive until Seven-thirty, you can study or read as you like, although the only thing I think any of you actually NEED to study to for your three to keep working on the anatomy." They had told her there would be an anatomy test their first week which they had to pass to continue the course.

"This year is going to be stressful, just like your last. You each need a hobby. Think about that tonight."

"I can't do chess?" Ron asked.

"Do you wish to play seriously, or just play, like you do know?"

Ron frowned. "Seriously," he finally answered.

"And I can't garden?" Neville asked.

"Yes, and I have an idea about that. And no, Ms Granger, you may NOT read. You wouldn't read for fun, and you need something to take your mind off your studies and your problems."

"She could knit," Ron teased.

"You knit?"

Hermione flushed. "Not very well."

"It's a perfectly acceptable past time," Tabitha stated.

"Do YOU knit?" Hermione demanded.

"No, I crochet."

"Oh . . . alright."

"No more elf caps," Harry pleaded. "Since you don't own the house elves, picking up one won't free them. All it does is make them feel you don't care about their feelings. Dobby had to clean the entire tower himself last year."

"Really?" Hermione said, now even more embarrassed. There had been a detailed reference to S.P.E.W. in her file, so Tabitha understood the reference.

"Really."

"What about you three?"

"Actually, I rather enjoy knitting, too," Ginny admitted.

"The only thing I enjoy doing is flying," Harry said.

"Have you ever worked with your hands?"

"Not to make anything."

"And I just enjoy doing rune puzzles and the like," Luna complained.

"Well, we'll work something out for the two of you. I'll see you in the morning."

"Wait!" Hermione demanded. "You haven't said what we're going to be doing in the afternoons!"

"No, I haven't, have I?" Tabitha smiled and left.

Chapter 12

Monday, August 26, 1996

Dream Harry found himself sitting on the foot of his bed. A glance at his clock showed that it was a little after 5:00. He glanced around and saw that Luna wasn't present, so he walked towards the wall that separated the two bedrooms, closing his eyes at the last minute.

Opening his eyes, Harry decided he wasn't totally surprised to see a Dream Professor Spellman talking with Dream Luna. The Professor looked up. "Hello, Harry. I was wondering where you were."

"I guess I half expected you," Harry admitted.

"Good. When we're done with your Dream-training, you'll be able to defend yourself against other Dreamwalkers and similar attackers. It may also allow you to spy on Voldemort without his knowing it, and perhaps even attack him in this state."

"That's good news," Harry admitted.

"Let's get started. We'll do half an hour today."

"You two both look tired today," Hermione remarked to Harry and Luna at breakfast.

"Just restless," Harry remarked. That was true. Even before his Dream-training, he hadn't slept well. He missed sleeping with Luna.

"Shall we do our jogging?" Luna asked, to divert attention. The group agreed, and went to the treadmills.

Tabitha was impressed by the students' dueling abilities, especially Harry's. She decided that she could let them continue to self-direct themselves, with just some general supervision.

At 11:30, she sent the students to the showers and told them to 'dress Muggle'.

The group of teens, plus Tabitha, portkeyed to a hotel suite in a somewhat commercial neighborhood. They ate in an adjoining restaurant and then went shopping. Hermione's eyes lit up as they went into a large Muggle bookstore, but she frowned a little when they stuck to the section on chess strategy.

Their next stop was a hobby shop, where Hermione and Ginny were sent firmly to the knitting section, while Harry and Luna looked around for something to do.

After nearly an hour, Ginny and Hermione were ready and Harry and Luna still not certain, although Luna was leaning towards sketching. They walked a few blocks to a different shop, where Neville's eyes went very wide at the concept of creating bonsai. Tabitha arranged for his supplies to be sent to Hogwarts.

The next shop was another hobby shop, where Harry and Luna were again looking about, while Ron, Ginny, and Neville tried to help them decide on a hobby.

"There are two flaws with your plan," Hermione said to Tabitha.

"What are they?"

"The goal seems to be finding us something calming to do in our common room or dorm, and to be truthful, I don't know if we can ever get Harry to relax. Second, I don't know if Luna's Housemates would leave her at peace long enough to do anything in either place."

"Luna's not allowed into any of your rooms?"

"Of course not. Were you allowed to at the Ysgol?"

"Our physical plant was different from Hogwarts, I guess. Yes, we had a common room no one else was allowed into, but we also had one where they were, and some rooms for smaller get-togethers. And friends of the same gender could come to our floors until House curfew. We had individual or two person rooms or four person suites."

"Well, we don't. Students can really only meet across House lines in the library and during study times in the Great Hall, and even that is discouraged. And you'd better be studying."

"Let me guess, you can't eat together, either."

"Sometimes at breakfast or lunch someone will cross-over, but not too often."

"And Luna isn't treated well by her Housemates?"

Hermione explained the situation. Tabitha's eyes narrowed dangerously. "I'll go over her possessions, too. And I'll speak with her Head of House and Dumbledore. I don't care if they don't get along, but I won't tolerate bullying by anyone."

"You don't know many Slytherins, do you?"

"No, but you don't know any Red dragons -- that would be the Ysgol equivalent."

"True." Hermione paused. "Of course, I don't know how the nastier Slytherins will act this year. Most of the their fathers were executed last month." She shuddered.

"Death makes you uncomfortable? Well, that's understandable. Try not to dwell on the subject too much. It will either make you depressed or lead to a great deal of existential angst, which can be worse."

"The voice of experience?"

"Yes, and let's leave it at that."

Hermione turned to fully face the professor. "Why exactly are you here?"

"Someone has to be. Lupin will be, but he's going to be missing at least a day or two a month, so they needed someone else. They needed someone who could be at Hogwarts, who can train you in and out of class. Hopefully, you will come to confide in me, since Lupin will not always be available and Toby isn't exactly the warmest person around. Apparently, my name came up, which is unsurprising, since I know Myrddin, Dorff, J, Toby, and Dumbledore. This gives Harry an extra alternative. Last June, all you had was this person Snape, whom I gather was not a good choice."

"THAT'S for certain!"

"So, this year you'll have Lupin, myself, Toby, McGonagall Flitwick, Snape, and probably a few others, in case Dumbledore's not available." Tabitha smiled. "I can't answer for the others, but I'm not easy to get rid of."

"And what special training are you giving Harry? There must be something."

"J is on the Council. He can't spend so much time supervising Harry, let alone the rest of you. I'm not as good, but I should be adequate."

"And the hobbies?"

"You each need something to relax over. If you're working, even researching, Harry will feel he has to work on something, or brood. He's a good brooder, isn't he?"

Hermione gave the professor a wan smile. "One of the best."

"So, if you want Harry to relax, YOU have to relax. You need it almost as much as he does, but how can you get Harry to relax when you're zipping through a stack of reference works to research something to help him? That would just make him feel guilty. I want the five of you in the common room for a few hours a couple of nights a week, relaxing, because Harry needs it. So if that means you and Ginny have to look a bit more traditionally feminine than you like, and Ron has to study some chess books, then that's what you're going to do."

"Sounds reasonable," Hermione agreed. "What? You thought we'd put up a fuss?"

"I thought it likely, especially you."

"Harry might never be my boyfriend, but I love him in every other way there is," Hermione said seriously. "I really do love him more than life itself. So does Ron. So does Luna. Ginny and Neville aren't that far behind. Understand?"

"Actually, I do." Tabitha looked over Hermione's shoulder. She turned to fully face Harry as he came up to them. "No luck?"

"No. Luna's going to get the sketching pads, though." Harry frowned. "I understand why you don't want Hermione reading for fun, but why can't I?"

"What subjects?"

Harry looked embarrassed.

"What? Dirty books?" Tabitha teased.

"NO!" Harry steeled himself with a shameful look at Hermione. "I . . . kind of like, well, Star Trek and Star Wars and Doctor Who and movies and shows like that. I understand there are books, too."

"There are. I saw a bookstore down the street. Let's see if we can find you some books."

Harry was staggered by how many Doctor Who, Star Trek and Star Wars books there were. Tabitha made certain he had them all, plus many other novels, from Tolkien to the **Hornblower** stories.

Tuesday, August 27, 1996

"What are we doing today?" Ginny asked Tabitha after the morning dueling session.

"Good question. Lupin, Moody, and I are taking you to Diagon Alley. We have a parlor at the Leaky Cauldron reserved for Twelve-fortyfive, so get moving! We'll stay until Five, so plan on getting any shopping done that needs to be done! Don't forget to pick up your blazers and anything else at Malkins." She looked at the six. "MOVE!"

Early that evening, it was Ron and Hermione's turn to use the outside 'snogging bench'. After they had calmed down a bit, they leaned against the garden wall and relaxed, arm-in-arm, hand-in-hand. "Penny, well, knut for your thoughts," Hermione said.

"Just thinking how sad it is that city Muggles never get to see the stars." Sensing Hermione's surprise, Ron said, "What? Just because I wasn't all that great at astronomy doesn't mean I don't like just looking out at them. Until I went to Hogwarts, I didn't realize how much even the stars at home were, well, washed out."

"Muggles would call it light pollution."

"Glad they have a name for the problems they create. What were you thinking about?"

"Professor Spellman."

"She's great, isn't she?"

"She's different." Hermione thought a moment. "Maybe it's because she's an American, and from the more liberal side of American magic."

"Can you imagine what an Old Believer teacher might be like? Especially a strict one?" Ron shuddered.

"True, although I guess she could be from one of the more integrated groups. But even though she went to the Ysgol instead of the radical school in California, she's also at Salem. At first I thought they were exaggerating how good, and how liberal, they were at the Institute, but if she's an example, it might be true."

"I'll miss you," Ron said.

"Miss me when?"

"When you go off to Salem for advanced training. Once she gets to know you, Spellman will certainly make certain to recruit you."

"Ron, I really care for you. Yes, I love you. But you have to know I'm not going to be a traditional house-witch like your mum."

"I know," Ron acknowledged. "I don't know what that will mean, but I understand."

"That's something we can work out together. If we work things out, instead of arguing, I'm hoping we can stay together."

"I hope so, too." He frowned.

"What?"

Ron sighed. "How far do you think Ginny and Neville have gone?"

"Why? Are you planning on picking a fight with Neville?"

"No . . . but the way they look at each other. I know, I probably look at you a lot, and maybe I look like a demented sheep some of the times when I do look, but not as much as those two do! I think Harry and Luna are at least as serious as Ginny and Neville, maybe even as serious as I am about you, but they don't . . . simper? Is that the word?"

"It might be," Hermione agreed. "Of course, Harry and Luna are pretty reserved people, just like I am. Would it make you feel better to know that Ginny and Neville haven't gone any further than Harry and Luna?"

"How about not as far as you and me?" Ron was met by silence. "Well?"

"Ron. . . ."

"Hermione, I don't want to fight with you about this, but I do want to know."

"All right, but not now. I'll tell you later."

Ron frowned, but agreed.

That night at 10:00, the six teens were sitting in the ground floor area they used for their study. Harry and Luna, and then Ginny and Neville went upstairs to the bedrooms, leaving Hermione and Ron. After five minutes, Hermione held out her hand to Ron. He noticed that she was nervous. Still he followed Hermione silently up the stairs.

Ron was surprised when Hermione led him to her door. "Won't Luna and Ginny mind?"

"No; they're not in here."

"Then where are th . . . oh. Oh!" Then Ron's face darkened in anger. "OH!"

"No!" Hermione stated, and dragged him in the room, kicking the door shut. "Ginny and Neville have slept, as in just slept, together, as have Harry and Luna. No sex, Ron. No sexual contact. No mutual wanking, nothing beyond what we've done." 'Okay, so they've a lot more than we've done or are going to do, especially the wanking, but I'm not about to tell Ron that,' Hermione thought, before going on, "Now, they are going to be sleeping in the same room tonight, and yes, sharing beds. You may either sleep here, either in Ginny's bed or, if you promise to behave, with me, or you can go down and sleep on a sofa. If you try and break into your room, Harry will be very upset."

"Do you think I'm afraid of Harry?"

"Voldemort is afraid of Harry, Ron. Now, what will it be?"

"Really, the same bed?"

Hermione took off her bathrobe and slippers, revealing pink cotton shorts and a thin matching top. "I'm going to bed. Please, Ron -- join me."

Ron looked at his room and then at Hermione several times. Finally, he took off his robe and got into bed. Hermione was asleep in a few minutes. It took Ron quite a bit longer.

Wednesday, August 28, 1996

"So, what are we doing today?" Hermione asked Tabitha brightly. She had enjoyed sleeping with Ron, although he was rather snappish with everyone but her that morning for some reason.

Tabitha smiled and took out a knut. "Call it, Hermione. Heads or tails, Muggle or magical." She flipped it in the air and watched it fall.

"Heads, Muggle." Hermione looked. "Muggle."

"Alright, everyone! Wash up. Muggle dress; be here in twenty five minutes!"

As the boys changed, Neville asked, "Ron, do you have a problem?"

"What do you mean?"

"You've been giving me looks all morning."

"I don't like the fact that you're sleeping with Ginny. Even if that's all you're doing, and I doubt it is, I don't like it! I know, it's hypocritical to snog Hermione and sleep in the same room with her, and be angry that you're doing the same with Ginny. I don't care; that's how I feel!"

"Ron, I love Ginny. If we keep feeling this way, we might even get married in three or four years."

"Isn't that young?" Harry asked.

"For Muggles, maybe," Neville said. "Your parents and Ron's parents both got married less than a year out of Hogwarts. About a quarter of magical marriages occur within a year of the girl leaving school."

"Why the girl?" Harry asked.

"Because if they aren't in the same year the wizard is almost always older," Ron said, grudgingly.

"Exactly," Neville said. "I know what I'm doing with my life, Ron. I'm not rich, but I do have a small estate, and I'm going to run it once You-Know-Who is defeated. And I want to share my life with Ginny. Maybe it won't happen, but don't ruin it just because you don't like me."

"It's not that I don't like you! I've always thought of you as a friend! If I could pick anyone, except maybe Harry, to care for Ginny, it would be you! Look, maybe I'm being unreasonable, but I don't want to see you two being . . . overly affectionate. I won't spy, and unless you hurt her, I won't, well, I'll try not to go over-board. Okay?"

"Okay."

"So, how many of you speak French?" Tabitha asked.

Hermione, Luna, and Neville raised their hands. Harry said, "I can read it, but I don't know if I can speak it."

"Well, we'll find out." Tabitha touched the portkey, and they landed in a Parisian hotel.

"Where would we have gone if it had come up 'magical'?" Ginny asked.

"Here, but instead of taking the Metro to shop along the river, we'd be walking ten blocks to the Rue de Batons, their version of Diagon Alley. Allez!"

"Oh, Ron! That feels soooo nice," Hermione moaned.

Ron grinned. They had walked a lot that day, and despite all their jogging, Hermione's legs and feet were hurting. He'd never given a massage before, let alone a leg-and-foot warm oil massage, but he decided giving them were lots of fun. He was just glad Hermione wasn't ticklish -- he knew he'd never be able to keep his hands off her, and this way she'd enjoy the contact as much as he did.

Ron was so concentrated on Hermione, he had no spare thoughts for what was going on in the other room. Had he known the four students there were doing complete body massages, and sensual ones at that, he would have been torn between attacking Neville and wanting to go as far with Hermione.

Harry had cast really good silencing spells on the beds, however, and so Ron never knew. The quartet had quickly agreed, and kept, to a 'don't look, don't tell' accommodation. They knew having Ron and Hermione in the same room with Neville and Ginny would never work, and Ron would never stand for Ginny and Neville being alone.

After the teens had done their Thursday morning workout, Tabitha ordered them to change early. This time, she had them cleaning, packing, and straightening up the mews. Dobby took just about everything except their Hogwarts blazers and a change of underwear with him back to Hogwarts. After lunch, Mrs. Weasley made a fuss over them, and then they were driven to the Leaky Cauldron.

After being shown their rooms, they were taken to a private parlor. To the teens' surprise, Tudor Myrddin, Henry Dorff, and Master J were waiting for them, as well as Jones, Remus, and Tabitha and a slightly portly wizard they didn't know.

When Harry had met Myrddin in July, he hadn't realized exactly who he was or how important he was. By now, The Daily Prophet had filled in the gaps. Myrddin was the Senior Deputy Minister for Security, Intelligence, and Law Enforcement in the North American Confederation, Dorff had recently replaced him as the Chief Hit Wizard, while Jones was perhaps the top active field agent. Master J was the number two wizard in the Australian branch of his Association. In addition, Myrddin and Johnson held top positions in the International, and Myrddin ranked a step higher than Dumbledore in the Warlocks.

"Mister Potter, it's nice to see you again. Ms Lovegood, Ms Granger, Mister Longbottom, and Mister and Ms Weasley, I am Tudor Myrddin. I believe you know everyone except Thomas Lawrence here. I was sent, along with some other very good people, to see what could be done about Voldemort. We have cleaned out most of the corrupt members of the Ministry, and hopefully put the more incompetent members in positions where they can actually make a difference. And yet, it seems as if it still might come down to you, Mister Potter. We will do our best to prepare you, and to see that you don't face this problem alone."

He looked at the other teens. "You have had over a month to think about what your friendship with Mister Potter means. If you want out, tell Ms Spellman, Mister Jones, or Mister Lupin by the end of breakfast next Monday."

To be Continued

Part II - Tabitha and the American Backstory

Part III - The Autumn of 1996