

To the Rescue IV: Winter Holidays

By

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Chapter I

Saturday, November 30, 1996
Malfoy Manor

Draco Malfoy sat in a small, plush study at Malfoy Manor, just before midnight. Anyone looking at him casually would see a handsome teen in a velvet dressing robe, holding a snifter of old brandy.

Looking closer, an observer would see the lines of exhaustion and deep dark circles around the young man's eyes.

Draco had had a bad November, there was no question about that. It had all started off just a few hours before the month had started, when three Seventh years had killed their two room mates. Hearing them shout the Killing Curse had been startling. Even more startling was when the three had stormed out of their room and started sending more only slightly less startling curses around the common corridor.

Draco still didn't know why he had been stupid enough to go and investigate. He had tried to tell himself it was because he should have still been the prefect, instead of Zabini, but he had soon admitted to himself he hadn't been that dedicated a prefect. He had just wanted to know what had been going on.

What he had seen was Crabbe Crucioing a First year. He had killed Crabbe when Crabbe had dropped the curse and turned that brainless grin on him. No one else remembered Crabbe being the one torturing that particular child, and the great oaf had fallen on his wand, snapping it.

Considering what could have happened to him, he had not been punished too badly. However, even though he had moved away from being a strong supporter of Voldemort, the attack had driven all the surviving Slytherins even further away. The House seemed to have a need to scapegoat somebody still alive, and Ted Nott had made certain it was Draco instead of him when Draco had returned from his first trial.

All so stereotypically Slytherin.

Draco had really learned who his true friends were: no one. Amongst the Slytherin boys, Zabini and Goyle protected him from physical assaults from Pritchard and some others, but that was as far as they would go. Nott had the knife firmly in Draco's back, to the point that even Pansy didn't like associating with him openly, although she still had privately.

And then the week before, he had had it out with Nott, and the House had decided that, for the most part, they didn't like either one of them. Draco had stormed out, and had been in exactly the wrong mood to run into Weasley.

'Damn him,' Draco thought bitterly, 'when did Weasel and even Longbottom get so good? I swear they should have been fumbling around, at best a step above Crabbe.'

Draco took a deep drink of his brandy, trying not to remember the terror and humiliation of his second 'trial.'

It had been so different at his first trial. Draco had not realized how dependent the careers of a large number of key Ministry people were on the support the Malfoy Trust. British wizarding taxation was amongst the lowest in the wizarding world. Services were cut to the bone, yet support had to be found for some types of public works and some types of research. These Ministry officials, most importantly Cornelius Fudge, had their careers because they found funding.

Funding keystone by the Malfoy Trust. Funding that the politicians needed even with the International hovering in the background.

This had all been explained to Draco on November 2 by the Trust Officer, a rather distant cousin. He had also explained that there were many claimants to the Malfoy fortune, and that if Draco died without a son, the Trust would finally end, after over 500 years of existence under various guises.

"How much would you get?" Draco had demanded.

"About the equivalent of three years pay," the distant cousin had said. "I'd prefer keeping my life-time contract."

The cousin had been a Slytherin, too.

No, the first trial had been a little nerve-wracking, because while the fix might have been in, no one can be certain the fix will work until it does.

The problem was, there was only one bought vote at the second trial. Tobias Jones had been a fairly intimidating presence in the classroom. His two seniors, Myrddin and Dorff, were terrifying on the bench. The others had given him no comfort, especially when he realized that the African wizard who had been questioning him was the man who had supervised his father's execution.

No just sitting in the chair this time, he had been chained and bolted in. The fact that the Weasel was in similar restraints hadn't helped much at all.

He had been asked polite questions the first time, to which he gave answers his advisers had prepared for him. This time he had been stripped to his underpants and had been painted with a truth potion within an hour of being caught. He had heard himself admit to things that made him flush to this day.

He had lost, and there were now a horde of accountants pouring over the books of the Malfoy Trust. His cousin had assured him that the Trust itself would survive intact, as would Draco (and the cousin). However, it was far from certain how many of the politicians would last much longer.

Draco found it difficult to care very much.

Draco finished his brandy and sat in the quiet. His mother had retreated to southern France in July, and was still there. There was no one in the huge manor except for himself, and of course a few house elves.

Draco threw the balloon glass into the fireplace. It was still a few minutes before midnight, and he was far from drunk. Still, he decided, that was enough for today.

Draco stood up, swaying a bit, and opened the door to the corridor.

And standing there was a wildly grinning, insane-looking witch who could only be his Aunt Bellatrix. And, if Aunt Bellatrix was there. . . .

Voldemort strode out of the shadows.

"Are you ready to serve the Master?" Bellatrix screeched.

Draco looked at them. Bella not only looked insane, she obviously was. "No."

Bellatrix looked flummoxed.

Voldemort laughed, and if Draco had not been completely terrified before, he was now.

"Stay here," Voldemort ordered Bellatrix. He swept into the room, dragging Draco behind him. He threw Draco onto a sofa and stood over him.

"Shall I kill you, have you killed, or have one of my dementors Kiss you?"

"What does it matter?" Draco managed to force himself to ask. "I'll be in hell, and you won't be any closer to whatever dream that half-blood mind of yours has invented."

"What did you say!" Voldemort said with a hiss. He only restrained himself from killing the boy because he needed his willing help.

"You heard me!" Draco said, gaining momentum if nothing else. "A half-blood cannot lead the pure-blooded world! The most you can hope for is for your family to work its way back to where it was once, generations past! Look where the movement has gotten with you as its leader! Reduced to you, my crazy aunt, and dementors!"

"Do you seek death tonight, Draco Malfoy?"

"What did I just say? Kill me and I suffer in hell; leave and I suffer here. Which is worse?"

Voldemort laughed. "There is no hell, boy. There is life, and there is nothing. No hell, no heaven, no reincarnation, no nothing. Perhaps some shadowy existence for a few hundred to a thousand years for those few people who become ghosts, but even then you fade away. Oblivion, just as there was before birth."

"Well, if you want to live longer, go ahead. Figure out a way to exist for a few thousand, or even a few million, years. You're never going to get power now. The Pure Bloods here don't want you, and the Pure Bloods from the rest of the world have united to hunt you down. The

Mudbloods wouldn't touch you. Go grab your extra-long life and try again in a few hundred years, and LEAVE ME ALONE!"

"You are foolish to anger me rather than follow me, boy."

"Yes, because my father is so well off this moment, having followed you."

Voldemort backhanded Draco nearly across the room.

"What do you want?" Draco demanded when he managed to sit up. "Even if I was willing and able to follow you, what could I do for you?"

"I want access to the small island your family owns in the Irish Sea."

"And no one can access it without the freely given consent of the Head of the House of Malfoy." Draco grinned and wiped the blood off his split lip. "You can't torture me or frighten me into giving you permission, or use the Imperius Curse -- even you'd be splinched."

Voldemort drew himself to his full height.

Draco laughed, and said, "Go. You and Aunt Bella both. You have my permission. Just remember, if I die, you can't go back. And if you have me killed and you're on the island when I die, you're trapped there forever."

"We shall talk again, boy. You had best get your priorities straight!"

"Right."

Voldemort again restrained himself. He needed that island. "Do you know what will happen to you if you betray me, boy?"

"I am not following you," Draco said. "I am not helping what passes for the Ministry, either. So, go away and try and kill Potter. You have what you want from me."

Monday, December 23, 1996

Draco managed to wake up before noon. Opening The Daily Prophet, which had come with his breakfast, Draco shook his head in amazement.

Potter had survived again.

No, he was not going to be Voldemort's follower, but that didn't mean he was going to help the other side either. No, he wasn't going to help either side.

Except for fun.

"Where are we?" Ginny asked.

"Where does it look it?" Lloyd asked.

"It looks like a rather small cabin," Hermione answered.

"Exactly what it is. Come here." There was a large window at one end of the cabin. Lloyd pulled the drapes open, and the teens could see they were on a steep hillside. It was just before dawn here, but the night was clear. The ridge sloped down nearly 300 feet from the cabin on a steep angle. Beyond the base of the ridge, about half a marshy mile away from it, the ground rose again to form a flattened hill with a small town on it, perhaps twice the size of Hogsmeade.

"That's Carantouan, which simply means 'village on a hill,'" Lloyd said. "The ridge we're on goes up another two hundred and fifty to three hundred feet. It's about two miles long, and I own it. Behind us, to the east, is about six miles of ridge and woods before you hit woods that Muggles hunt in, and another ridge beyond that is Muggle farmlands. The same is true to the west of the village. Actually, the same is pretty much true north and south of us, although the ridges, or mountains if you want to be generous, generally run north and south. There is a small Muggle road to our south, and a Muggle camp ground, which bring the Muggles to within three miles. We have a number of dairy farmers, and so do the Muggles in the region. We even have an arrangement to sell our surplus, although they think the middleman is merely a bit of an eccentric."

"And the village?" Hermione asked.

"Tradespeople and some traditional crafts as well. My family, meaning more some second cousins and such, pretty much run the town, but not the farms. My more immediate family run the main workshop."

"How do we get there?" Luna asked. "Floo?"

"Exactly, but not the way you think." The cabin seemed to be one large room at first glance, with a fireplace in the back, next to what appeared to be an inner door. The room held a small bed, two over-stuffed chairs, a side table with a lamp, and a rug. Around most of the room were bookshelves. The outside door was near the front on the north side of the front room. Lloyd opened the door, and a cold draft came in.

Outside was an enclosed porch, with a fireplace on the back end, built as a continuation of the main fireplace. "Most of the houses around here have these types of porches. They're all connected to the town floo network. There's a fire place in the town hall that's connected with a wider network, but for local traffic, you floo to the porch you want and knock on the door. Much more private than the British system. Now, come along."

He led them back through the cabin. The inner door took them to a small kitchen with a wood/coal stove much like the one at the Burrow. There was also a backdoor and a small room with a toilet and large cold water sink.

The back door took them into what looked like a very large woodshed. A set of stairs led to a cellar door, for under the kitchen and toilet. When Lloyd touched the wall opposite, however, a hidden door slid open.

"Come on," he said. The wide corridor led into the mountain. Magical smokeless torches lit as they approached, and went out as they left them behind, just like at Hogwarts. The corridor went well into the mountain, and then ended in a wide chamber, with four wide columns set equally around it.

"Is the whole mountain hollow?" Hermione asked.

"If it is, it's classified," Lloyd said simply. He tapped one of the columns, and a door slid open, revealing spiraling steps going up. "After you."

"How far up do we go?" Ginny asked.

"About a hundred and fifty feet."

When they arrived, Lloyd described the set up. They had three floors, spread over seventy vertical feet, and over a third of a mile long. Plenty of the area was still solid rock (including above the top floor), but there were fifteen bedroom suites on the middle floor (each with a 12x18 foot bedroom with a window set into the side of the mountain, a full bath, and an inner room that was 12x12, all lit by magical lighting panels, although the ones in the bedrooms didn't snap on until the shades were down, to prevent light from giving away the window's position to the valley), a large parlor, an even larger library, a smaller television room, a kitchen, and large dining room on the top floor, and a training area on the lower floor, along with the power plant and storage areas. Hermione was at first unhappy to see a pair of elves, until she learned they were free, and just preferred wearing togas made of dish towels.

The parlor already had a Christmas tree in it, although it wasn't decorated.

"So who exactly will be here again?" Neville asked.

"Well, let's wait for lunch and see."

"We haven't had lunch yet," Ginny pointed out, practically. "It must be about time for it."

"It's far too early for lunch here," Lloyd said with a smile. "You'll have to settle for second breakfasts. Then you can pick out your bedrooms."

The teens took rooms at the far end of the corridor, away from Lloyd's suite at the north end of the mountain. They all set up their things very quickly, showered, changed into casual Muggle clothes, and were still in the library by 9:00 local time.

"What do we do?" Harry asked.

"Relax?" Ginny suggested teasingly. They all knew Harry couldn't bear doing nothing. The most that could be done was getting him to sit down and read the scifi and adventure books Tabitha had picked up for him back in August.

"Here," Hermione said, handing Harry a pile of books.

"What are these?"

"Edgar Rice Burroughs. Read about Tarzan or Carter on Mars, but just relax. I bet come Boxing Day we'll all be very busy for the rest of the break."

"That's true." He looked at the books. "I don't know about these, though."

Luna sat down in the large chair, wriggling next to Harry. "Then read this aloud to us, Harry."

"Huh?"

"Read this aloud to us, please?" Harry looked Luna in the eye, and his heart melted. Luna was a very understanding, fairly affectionate, and undemanding girlfriend in most ways. If you allowed her her sometimes eccentric beliefs, she was happy not to challenge another's behavior, unless Harry was being moody. Then her quiet support and genuine affection helped keep him steady. She rarely asked anything from Harry, other than his acceptance of her and that he share himself with her -- the second was of course more difficult for Harry than the first.

In any event, in those rare instances when Luna asked Harry for anything or to do anything, he always gave it great thought -- and then gave in. Still, he tried to struggle. "This?"

"It seems like a good title, anyway."

Harry looked at the title of the slim volume again. "You don't know what it's about?"

"No, never heard of it. It must be Muggle, but it seemed right."

"It is."

"I wonder what it is," Ginny whispered to Hermione.

"With Luna, it could be anything."

"Out loud?" Harry asked.

"Please?"

"Yeah," Neville teased, "read us a story, Daddy."

"Okay. . . ." Harry said with a sigh.

Luna smiled happily. "Gather 'round, everyone," Luna told her friends. "Maybe we can start a tradition!" They all shrugged, and gave in as well. Hermione and Ginny were even more curious as to what Luna had picked out for Harry to read.

Harry cleared his throat and began to read. As he spoke the words, he got into the performance. "Marley was dead, to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that. The register of his burial was signed by the clergyman, the clerk, the undertaker, and the chief

mourner. Scrooge signed it. And Scrooge's name was good upon 'Change, for anything he chose to put his hand to."

"Old Marley was as dead as a door-nail."

"Mind! I don't mean to say that I know, of my own knowledge, what there is particularly dead about a door-nail. I might have been inclined, myself, to regard a coffin-nail as the deadest piece of ironmongery in the trade."

"A little late are we, Tabby?"

"What experience do YOU have in getting a teen-age girl packed?"

"None what so ever," Lloyd admitted.

"I never noticed you having any difficulties," Tom pointed out.

"I was never a typical teen of any sort. And I rather suspect Sabrina has plans she had to pack and repack to deal with."

"They've been warned that this location is **not** to be revealed?" Lloyd asked in a worried voice.

"Several times. Where are the others?"

"In the library. Harry is reading A Christmas Carol to his friends, believe it or not."

"Appropriate," Tom said. "Should I send them in?"

"Are you kidding? It's after Eleven-thirty," Tabby reminded them. "I'll take them to the dining room. You go get the reading group."

Lloyd opened the door to hear, "And God bless Us, every one," Harry finished.

Luna was snuggled onto Harry's lap. The other three were sitting together on the floor, leaning against a sofa with Ginny in the middle, also snuggled comfortably. Ginny's arms were around Neville and Hermione's waists. Ginny was leaning her head on Neville's shoulder, and Hermione's was against Ginny's. Neville's strong arm was supporting both girls, his hand on Hermione's neck. The group looked very happy.

"That was so sweet," Ginny said into the silence.

"It took you this long to read it?" Lloyd said.

"No," Harry said, "they made me read twice."

"It was . . . it was, so moving," Luna said.

"It was," Ginny agreed.

"But I still don't know why I had to be the one to read it," Harry complained.

"Well, you have the most experience," Neville pointed out.

"Huh?"

"All that reader's theater you did with Lockhart," Neville managed to say with a straight face.

"You're getting to be as bad as Ron," Harry muttered.

"Speaking of whom, guess who's probably attacking lunch even as we speak?"

Chapter II

For an instant, the announcement that Ron had arrived froze the five teens. Then Harry struggled to stand up, but not very successfully, as he managed to fall on the floor with Luna all over him. Ginny helped Luna to her feet, while Neville picked Harry up.

The group hurried to the dining room, where they found Professors Lawrence and Spellman, Ron, and a girl who could only be Sabrina Spellman -- she looked a lot like a younger, slightly shorter and bustier version of her mother. They didn't actually pause for the most part, however. Harry, Ginny, and Hermione engulfed Ron with a welcoming wave of affection.

It was therefore Luna who went over to greet the tall, frowning Sabrina. "Hello. My name is Luna. I take it you're Sabrina Spellman?"

"Yes, hello," Sabrina said, keeping her eyes on Ron. "Ronnie's written about us, I take it?"

Luna actually blinked at that, not something she did as often as most people. "No, no he hasn't, actually," she finally said. "Your mother has mentioned you several times, however."

Luna was thought by many to be a bit vague at times (although not by Harry). She often seemed disconnected to what went on around her only because she saw more of what went on around her than most people. She could always tell when a person was in pain, and usually had a good idea what they were feeling, especially if she allowed herself to be close to them.

Luna sensed quickly what had happened. This situation reminded her of some of the reasons why she had tried to stay out of people's lives for nearly her entire first four years at Hogwarts.

Sabrina put what almost passed for a smile on her face, and marched over to the group. Neville saw what was happening, and Luna could feel his panic rise as he turned to her and asked an unvoiced question.

Luna's answering look of panic was all Neville needed to wish he had stayed someplace safe. Like under a bed in a cave someplace. He moved back, dragging a surprised Ginny with him.

"Ronnie, dear? Aren't you going to introduce me to your **friends**?"

The entire room went silent for nearly fifteen very long seconds. Tabitha and Tom looked at each other in a panic, as the situation sunk into their minds.

Then Hermione stepped forward and held out her hand, saying, in her most formal and posh accent, combined with the coldest tones she could muster. This combination had, on various occasions had she known it, slightly intimidated Severus Snape, made Minerva McGonagall smile slightly in approval, and caused a misbehaving Slytherin First year soil himself, "Why yes, **Ronnie**, perhaps you should introduce us to your young friend."

The tone had never failed to raise the hairs on the back of Ron's neck in terror, but he knew when his back was to the wall. "Well, this is Sabrina Spellman, **Professor** Spellman's daughter," Ron said, hoping that reminding Hermione of Rina's relationship to a respected teacher would at least prevent Hermione from ripping the girl's eyes out or even worse damage from being done to himself. "Rina, these are my sister, Ginny, and my good friends Harry Potter, Luna Lovegood, Neville Longbottom, and . . . Hermione Granger."

"Charmed," Hermione stated, refusing to break eye contact with the girl, although she dropped her hand, which Sabrina had made no movement towards.

"Likewise, I am certain," Sabrina replied in the equally chilling tones of the Boston Brahman.

Tabitha stepped between the girls, forcing them to break eye contact before anything (or anyone) exploded. "Lloyd, I see your elves have outdone themselves. Let's eat." She guided the two girls to the table. Tabitha arranged the two girls far apart. This left Ron sitting across from them both. His eyes never left his plate for more than a few seconds at any point in the meal.

Ron ate like a condemned criminal, in large quantities but without seeming to enjoy it much. At the end of the meal, Tabitha whisked her daughter out to hunt up their bedrooms, while Tom took Hermione to the library. Neville, Ginny, Harry, and Luna, retired to their bedrooms as fast as possible.

"Weasley, just what are you up to?" Lloyd asked when they were alone in the dining room.

"I don't know what happened!"

"You mean you haven't started a relationship with Rina while not breaking off your relationship with Hermione? Because I assure you that's what everyone believes, including the two young ladies."

"Oh, shit."

"Well?"

"Well. . . ."

"Have you broken things off with Hermione?"

"Well, not exactly. . . ."

"Have you asked Rina to go out with you?"

"No. . . ."

Lloyd heard the hesitation in Ron's voice. "Did Rina ask to go out with you?"

"Sort of," Ron said, clutching at the straw, "Saturday morning, when the Headmaster said we'd be spending Christmas together here, wherever here is, instead of at the Ysgol. She said she was glad we'd be together, and I agreed that we . . . well . . . it would be nice to be . . . together. . . ."

"Well, which, if either, are you going to date, assuming either will talk to you after this?"

"I don't know!" Ron said desperately.

"Hermione?"

"Yes, Professor?"

"We'll get things sorted."

"I must say that I have no idea what you mean, sir."

Tom decided to leave things alone for the moment.

"When, exactly, did you and Ron start dating?"

"I thought we started Saturday. Either I was wrong, or he hasn't told that prissy little bi. . . ."

"Sabrina!" Tabitha warned.

"Young friend"! If she uses that snotty tone to me once more. . . ."

"I assure you, Hermione could beat you in a duel quite easily, and with the physical training she's had these past five months, she has a good chance of taking you in a fight, too, despite your having three inches and fifteen pounds on her. And if you ever dared hit her with a sucker punch, or hex, then you'd better hope I'm there to punish you, because you don't want to get Harry Potter mad at you, and hurting Hermione or Luna would be the one sure way to make him see red."

"**That** is really the powerful Harry Potter? That's the super-hero of the British wizarding world?" Sabrina snorted.

"You should know perfectly well that power is not a function of physical size," Tabitha scolded, "since you know I'm slightly more powerful than your father. That boy is more powerful than I am, and more powerful than your godfather, for that matter."

That shook the girl. "Really?" She hadn't met anyone more powerful than Tudor Myrddin.

"Really. He's out-dueled Toby Jones since early November, and me since late November. And let me remind you that I love you, but don't mess with Hermione if Ron chooses her."

"He's chosen me," Sabrina said with smug assurance.

"Have you been in his dreams?" Tabitha demanded.

"Yes," Sabrina admitted, "but he doesn't know it. I'll tell him tonight."

"I'm very disappointed in you."

"Do you know if I'll be allowed back to train with Harry this summer?" Ron asked.

"No and yes. No, you won't be back in Britain next summer, but you will be training with Harry, if you want to. You won't be graduating from Hogwarts, either. If you were allowed back, that would mean a great deal of pressure would have to be resisted to allow Malfoy back, as well as anyone else that's punished in the future."

"I see. . . . Is there any chance that Rina will be there, too?"

"That would be in large part between Sabrina on the one side and her parents on the other. If it were any girl in North America other than Sabrina, then I'd say there was no chance at all."

Ron started to pace. "Hermione has been my friend for a long time."

Lloyd made an encouraging noise.

"And I've liked her a long time."

"Go on."

"But the one problem has always been . . . she always wants to improve me. It's like nothing I ever do is ever quite good enough for her."

"Don't you think you're exaggerating at least a little?"

"Hermione cared more that I acted like a perfect prefect and got good grades than that I was a good friend. I know, it sounds like I'm just whinging, and maybe I am, but I can't think of one thing I've ever done that she hasn't said I could have either done better or shouldn't have done at all."

"And Rina?"

"She actually seems to like me the way I am."

"And do you like Rina?"

"Yes."

"Then I would say that your decision has been made. You just have to face the consequences."

Ron sighed. He hoped Trowbridge or Lawrence would put him back together after Hermione, and maybe Harry, hexed him.

Tom waited outside the library while Ron talked with Hermione. When the lad had left less than five minutes later, he knew things had not gone well, from Hermione's point of view.

He walked in, and wasn't surprised to see the teen standing at the library window staring out, arms folded, trying not to cry. With a touch of his wand, Tom transfigured two of the afghans into hooded cloaks (any friend of Tabitha's wound up with plenty of afghans). "Come on," he said.

"Where are we going?"

"To get you a little privacy from everyone else."

"Oh," Hermione said in a small voice. She followed Lawrence quietly, almost blindly. She never remembered the trip that took them back to the cabin.

As they stood outside in the half inch of snow on the ground, she was glad for her cloak, as it was slightly below freezing. She saw the clouds were gathering. "It's going to snow, isn't it?" she asked, pretending the stinging wind was all that was making her eyes water.

"Heavily by sometime after midnight, and then light snow for the next three days, or so the Muggle Weather Channel claims."

Hermione stood in silence, enjoying the cuttingly cold wind that hit her face as she looked to the northwest. Finally, she quietly said, "I can't believe how much it hurts. It hurts more than all that tattooing would have if you had done it on my soul."

"It does," Tom agreed. "I've lost friends, including a few I've seen killed. I saw my entire family die. Those all hurt, especially my brother's death, but for the greatest amount of pain hitting me at one time, it's still when I proposed to a girl and she laughed in my face." He moved a little closer. "It's alright to be hurt and angry, Hermione."

Hermione started to cry, and threw herself in Lawrence's arms.

Ron took a deep breath and knocked on the door. He was a bit surprised to see who opened the door. "Err . . . hi."

"Hello, **Ronald**," Luna said frostily. That gave Ron a strong clue where his reputation might be right now. He had never seen Luna act like that, and no one had ever succeeded in putting that much venom into the pronunciation of his name.

"May I talk with Harry?"

"Very well, **Ronald**." Luna stepped back to allow Ron into the small study, where Harry was sitting on a sofa with a copy of a Star Wars novel. Luna had obviously been sketching him. "Mister Trowbridge said we should come and decorate the tree at Three," she reminded Harry. "I'll be in Hermione's room." Luna glared at Ron. "You **have** talked with Hermione?" Ron merely nodded, and Luna left.

"Somehow, I think she's not happy with me," Ron commented.

"Very observant."

"You're angry, too, aren't you?"

"How would you feel if Neville had done that to Ginny?" Ron winced. "If it was anyone else but you, I swear I'd really really hurt you."

"Well, yes, I guess you could at that," Ron admitted. "Anything else?"

"Well, it's not like almost the last thing you said to me was to shove something up my arse. It's not like you then went off and did something so stupid it makes my behavior during Fifth year look almost acceptable." Ron winced again. "It's not like you left us without a keeper, me without my best friend, and Hermione without her first love. I have to admit . . . no, no I won't say it. I'm not so angry that I want to ruin us as friends forever."

"I'd like to train with you," Ron said. "Over break and next July."

"And after that?"

"I would imagine Vo . . . Vol . . . You-Know-Who will find some way to challenge you after your next birthday and before school starts."

"True," Harry admitted.

"I'll be with you, if I can."

"Thanks. It would be easy for you to just stay away."

"I wouldn't do that."

The two boys sat there in silence. Finally, Ron said, "So, who are you thinking for keeper?"

"Have you seen Hermione?" Luna asked Ginny and Neville. The pair was sitting on the sofa in Ginny's room.

"She not in her room?" Neville asked.

"No; the door was ajar, so I even checked her room."

"You think my git of a brother kicked her over for Spellman's daughter?" Ginny asked.

"Yes," Luna said simply.

"Damn him," Ginny snarled, "and her, too!"

"Do you really think she could get Ron interested, if he didn't want to be?" Neville asked.

"Neville, this is not the time to be excusing male behavior."

"I'm not. I'm excusing female behavior. She might have liked Ron, but it was Ron who chose her. We shouldn't be mean to her."

"Especially since we do like Professor Spellman," Luna reminded her friend.

"True," Ginny admitted. "May I at least slap Ron around a bit?"

"I believe Harry might be taking care of that," Luna said.

Ginny snorted. "Harry might do that to some boys, but probably not to Ron."

"You may be right," Luna agreed. She thought for a moment. "No, I'm sure you are right."

"Well, then, I wish Sabrina the best of him," Ginny stated firmly.

"What do we do now?" Neville asked.

"Hermione's room is more or less across the corridor," Ginny stated. "We'll wait for her." She patted the sofa and Luna joined them, cuddled together to fight their worries for their friend.

"So, is this Sabrina angry with you?" Harry asked.

"Huh?"

"Well, you talked with Hermione, right?"

"Yeah."

"And then you talked with Sabrina, right?"

Ron's expression was priceless. "Oh . . . shit."

Harry rolled his eyes, a little sad for his friend as Ron raced from the room, and a little sad that, without Ron around Hogwarts, there was always the danger that he would win the 'most clueless boy friend' award.

Tabitha Spellman was an enigma to everyone who knew her. She was beautiful, brilliant, driven, dangerous, and at times, engaging, caring, concerned, and sometimes even sympathetic. As Henry Dorff and a number of women could attest, she could also be sensual

and innovative in bed. None could swear they actually knew her, although Henry Dorff came closest, and Tom Lawrence had some shrewd ideas.

Tom Lawrence stood back and admired the clever way Tabitha organized the decoration of the tree, keeping Sabrina and Ron well-away from Hermione, Ginny, and Luna. He was also watching Lloyd. Few people knew of Lloyd Trowbridge's continuing service in Britain. Fewer knew that Lloyd had been not just been working for Tudor as his private field agent in Britain, but had also been an agent of the Wyverns, the Confederation version of the CIA. Hermione had guessed well. The entire mountain was riddled with secret passages, most of which were used by the Wyverns as one of their secret communications bases. Even fewer people had been in the 1/5 of the area which was Lloyd's personal space in the mountain, Tom being one of them. His friend was even more of a loner than he was, and it was good to see his face aglow with playing host.

Tom glanced over the teens. Sabrina, always something of a hyper-active, bouncy girl from the time she could crawl, was beaming at claiming her first boy-friend. Ron looked a little dazed by the day's events. 'I wonder if he has any idea that Sabrina is as controlling as Hermione, even if on different subjects.' He grinned.

That attracted Tabitha's attention, which meant Tom was enlisted in levitating Hermione while Tabitha levitated Luna (it's always best for the most experienced people to levitate the lightest people in any given situation) to decorate the highest branches of the Christmas tree. Everyone then spread around the room, while Lloyd arranged for their presents to appear. Tom saw Sabrina grab Ron's hands, which made the teen jump a little. Neville and Ginny and Harry and Luna were already holding hands, and, as Tom watched, he saw Ginny take Hermione's right hand while Harry took her left.

At that moment, a lute appeared in front of Tabitha. She rolled her eyes and said, "Alright, alright, I give in!" She looked around the room. "Christmas carols, anyone?" They sang Christmas carols while presents appeared around the tree.

Dinner was early, and afterwards as they sat at the table, despite a slight stimulant, the teens from Britain were starting to wind down. To the surprise of the British teens, Ron suggested television.

"You watch entirely too much television," Sabrina scolded.

"How can you watch telly at the Ysgol?" Hermione demanded, perking up. "You can't get television or radio reception through wards, and strong magic, especially wards, disrupts electricity."

"On a large scale, you're right, but small closed systems can either be shielded or run magically," Tabitha agreed. "I'll explain the technicalities to you later, if you want."

It was clear that Hermione would want.

"As for the other, you're right. Television and radio waves can't make it through wards. But Hermione, you know that some electro-magnetic waves can make it through easily."

It was clear that Hermione was the only teen following this, because after a moment she said, "Light can."

"And heat and any other number of waves. Some are interfered with, including standard radio and television frequencies, but most aren't. High frequency short wave makes it through, for example, but you would need a huge antenna."

Hermione frowned, and then said, "Satellite?"

"Exactly. The wizarding wireless is actually a two-hundred and ten band audio satellite system. There are currently twenty-seven visual channels as well, nine in English. For what ever reason, the British have banned television, but not radio."

"There's a nice little black market, though," Lloyd said with a grin.

"We do **NOT** want to know," Tabitha scolded. She knew that Lloyd was a major source for the equipment.

"The Ysgol gets all those, and some Muggle satellite channels," Sabrina added.

"Do you get ESPN here?" Ron asked Lloyd.

"Yes, but not tonight." Lloyd turned to the other students. "There's a tv concealed in the parlor, a really large-screen tv and video system in the tv room, and there're small tv's in the credenzas in each bedroom and study. But not tonight."

"Before you think about going to your rooms," Tabitha broke in, "let me remind the Faithful of tomorrow morning's sunrise service, and the same for Christmas. If any others wish to come with us, rising time is Five-thirty. Breakfast will be at Eight. It's not quite Eight, local time. You should all try to stay up until Nine at the earliest."

Chapter III

"What's up?"

"I'm staying with you tonight."

"Really?"

"Really."

Hermione frowned. "But why?"

"Because I know you were planing on sleeping with a Weasley tonight, and you should."

"So was Neville," Hermione pointed out.

"I'm not quite ready to show him my tattoos," Ginny admitted. "I'd forgotten how shocking they really are until Mum saw them."

"I know what you mean," Hermione agreed.

"Now, my sister by ritual, may I share that lovely bed, like we did last summer?"

"Exactly like last summer?"

"I'll kiss your tattoos if you'll kiss mine."

"Alright," Hermione said, shutting the corridor door and moving towards the bedroom. "I really need a Weasley to snuggle with, if you're sure Neville won't mind."

"I promised to make it up to him." Ginny paused at the entrance to the bedroom. "Did you and Luna do this, too?"

"A little light snogging and petting, nothing more. You?"

"A little light snogging, no petting," Ginny answered. "Harry probably wouldn't mind if Luna slept with you some nights."

"I'll be fine," Hermione said, "I'm just glad I won't be alone tonight."

Ron was in the middle of a very confusing dream, when he suddenly found himself very centered. "Hi, Ronnie."

"Hi, beautiful."

"Ronnie?"

"H'mm?" Ron said, leaning forward to kiss Rina, something he hadn't dared do yet in real life.

"Ronnie, stop that! This isn't just a dream."

"Then what is it?"

"This is a visitation."

"A what?"

"A visitation. You see, I've inherited this power called Dreamwalking. . . ."

After nearly fifteen minutes, Ron had finally figured out what was happening, and understood exactly what Sabrina's powers were. "So you've been in my head before?"

"Yes," she admitted. "Now, the only times I was here, you were dreaming of me. I had no idea you had been going with Hermione, let alone had any feelings for her."

"I wasn't sure what to do," Ron admitted. "I mean, while I was awake. I wasn't trying to hurt you, or Hermione. I do like Hermione; I have for two years. But then I met you, and well. . . ."

"You wanted to date me, but weren't sure what to do about Hermione, since she wasn't just your girl friend, but a close friend."

"Exactly. She, Harry, and I were a team, a really good and effective team. And I messed that up."

"It's hard to let it go, isn't it?"

"I have to let go of part of it," Ron admitted, rather disappointed in himself. "I won't be allowed back for a year and a half. Still, I won't let Harry down. Harry has to face Voldemort." Ron was surprised how much easier it was to say the name like this.

"Has to?" Sabrina suddenly found herself forced from Ron's mind. To her shock, Ron was sitting up in bed, although it was clear he wasn't either awake or dreaming. He opened his eyes, and turned to look straight at her dream-self, although his eyes were unseeing.

*"The Dark One Hides and Plots,
EM>Dreaming of Revenge against the One-He-Has-Not-Killed.
The-Boy-Who-Lived Finds Strength
From the Ones Pledged to His Soul.
Let No One stand between them when they Clash,
For if they do, they shall not last.
Let the Boy Prepare, let the Dark One plot.
When the Time Comes, only One survives."*

Ron fell back on the bed, exhausted.

"Oh, shit." Sabrina fled to find her mother.

Ron woke up at little before 8:00. To his surprise, Sabrina was sitting at the foot of his bed.
"Hi."

"Good morning," Sabrina replied. "First of all, thanks to you I missed the sunrise service. This will cost me some penance, not that I blame you at all. It does mean I can't kiss you today like I was planning to -- that was the penance I was assigned. Secondly, I really was in your dreams. I am a Dreamwalker. Do you remember that?"

"Yeah," Ron answered, surprised that what he remembered was true, "but then it went away."

"Yes, well, it turns out that you made your first prophecy."

"I made my what?"

"Your first prophecy, o seventh son of a seventh son."

"Oh, shit."

"You know, that's exactly what I said this morning. Now, get up and get dressed. After breakfast, there are going to be some revealing discussions. I've already had to swear my general silence about anything I hear."

"I made a prophecy?"

"Yes, dearest Ronnie. You are a prophet." Sabrina smiled sadly at him, for she knew this could become a burden. "Get used to it. Now, unless you need some help in the bathroom, let me get out of here so you can get dressed. Everyone is waiting for you."

Ron blushed a little, but did as he was told.

None of the teens from Britain were sure what had happened in the night, but it was obvious something had. The group, augmented by Henry Dorff, ate in near silence.

After breakfast, they all went into the parlor. The teens arranged themselves in pairs in the large chairs, except for Hermione, who was sitting on a footstool between Harry and Ginny.

"Please keep you attention on me," Tabitha started off. "First, let me tell you the outline of how we came to fight in Britain, and what we found when we got there."

Tabitha outlined her experiences and interests in Voldemort, and how the Confederation, pushed by the Old Believers, had sent previous teams into Britain to help in the underground

struggle, and then how she and Tom Lawrence had been recruited by Henry. Lloyd then told the story of how he and his brother's group had come into it, and how he had found the residences for the North American groups.

Tabitha took up the general story, of the initial conflicts and then growing friendship between herself, Lily, and Alice, and of the slow improvements in the fight against Voldemort from Halloween until Easter, and then the reversals after Easter which showed, especially after July, 1981, that there was a traitor somewhere in the ranks.

"Later, Dumbledore decided that the main targets were going to be Neville's and Harry's families. We now know that a Prophecy was made in June, 1981."

"The one Voldemort was after last year?" Hermione asked.

"Exactly."

"It was lost," Ginny pointed out.

"No, the record of it was lost. It was made to Dumbledore, so he remembers it."

Tabitha quoted: "*The One with the Power to Vanquish the Dark Lord Approaches. . . . Born to those who Defied Him, Born as the Seventh Month Dies . . . and the Dark Lord will Mark Him as His Equal, but He shall have Power the Dark Lord knows not . . . and either must Die at the Hand of the Other for Neither can Live while the Other Survives. . . . the One with the Power to Vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the Seventh month dies.*"

"One of Voldemort's minions overheard part of the prophecy, but not all of it. Voldemort decided to take Harry and his family out first, although his followers didn't know why. At that point, we performed an ancient rite of protection for both boys, seven of us swearing to protect them. One was killed over the next weeks, the other a few years later."

"And the four besides you?" Hermione asked.

"Tudor, Henry, Tom, and Lloyd, of course. Tudor was the main sponsor of Harry, Henry here of Neville. While we formed the inner circle of protectors, a larger group formed the witnesses. That included all three of your father's friends, Harry."

"Pettigrew," Harry spat.

"Exactly. His report made Voldemort hesitate a few weeks. In that time, the decision was made to hide you both away for at least a year under the Fidelius. Pettigrew betrayed the secret, and we all know what happened."

"Is everyone certain that Harry's the one, not Neville?" Ginny asked.

"I wasn't Marked," Neville reminded her, "Harry was."

"Exactly. However, only Voldemort and whomever the spy was knew anything about the Prophecy. We think that's why the Death Eaters went after you and your family after Voldemort was defeated, Neville. They knew there was something about you the Dark Lord was interested in. They tortured you and your parents. . . ."

"They tortured Neville?" Ron blurted out.

"Neville has only recently overcome the lingering effects on his memory," Tabitha said. "The Head of the Department of Magical Catastrophes decided to use a memory charm on Neville, to help him cope with the memories of the torture. He'd forgotten that you shouldn't use that spell on anyone under three."

"Dumb bastard," Henry growled.

"Fudge," Hermione said.

"What?" Sabrina asked.

"Not 'what', 'who'," Hermione said. "Cornelius Fudge, late Minister of Magic, was the Junior Minister of the Department of Magical Catastrophes, which means he was the head."

"Exactly," Henry said, "just in case any one wonders why we weren't about to cut him any breaks right from the start."

"Let's go back to the Prophecy," Hermione said. "You mean. . . ."

"Either I kill Voldemort, or he kills me," Harry said. "Neither of us can live in peace until one of us is dead."

"And what's this power, or aren't we allowed to know?" Ron asked.

"It could any one of a number of things," Tabitha said. "We'll be exploring some after Christmas. Now, let me explain about something called Mundane Dreamwalking."

When she was done, and had answered a few questions from Hermione about it, Tabitha went on. "This gift may appear spontaneously, or it may be passed down. A few people even manage to acquire it through rituals. It is most commonly found in families of witches. It is possible that Harry's mother had the gift, but it was not awakened. Left on its own, it generally awakens when one is in their thirties. However, in families of witches, mothers often awaken the gift in their daughters spontaneously. This was the one magical talent my mother had, and she awakened it in me, as I awakened the gift in Sabrina. Luna's mother awakened it in Luna, and Luna awakened it in Harry. Even if I had not sworn to protect Harry and Neville, I would have come to help Harry and Luna understand their gift. That is why I showed up before the start of the school year, however."

"And is that the 'power'?" Hermione asked.

"It might be," Tabitha agreed. "There are some other possibilities. Anyway, this morning, Sabrina decided to reveal her gift to Ron. It turns out Ron also has a gift. He made a prophecy."

Everyone looked at Ron with shocked surprise, except for Tabitha and Sabrina. Ron reminded himself that he didn't like being the center of attention.

"It doesn't tell us much that we didn't already know. Still. . . ." Tabitha quoted, "*The Dark One Hides and Plots*,

*Dreaming of Revenge against the One-He-Has-Not-Killed.
The-Boy-Who-Lived Finds Strength
From the Ones Pledged to His Soul.
Let No One stand between them when they Clash,
For if they do, they shall not last.
Let the Boy Prepare, let the Dark One plot.
When the Time Comes, only One survives."*

"Not very helpful," Hermione agreed.

"Sorry," Ron said in a hurt tone, "it's not exactly something I can control!"

"I didn't mean it that way!" Hermione protested. She frowned as Sabrina started to rub Ron's shoulders to help him calm down.

"Now, even if no one can safely insert themselves between Harry and Voldemort, to go with the just most obvious meaning, that does not mean Harry faces Voldemort alone!" Tabitha stated. "Our job," she said, indicating the adults, "is to help Harry, and the rest of you, train, so that you are all prepared. It is all our jobs, except for perhaps Sabrina's, to prepare and fight with Harry. Even if he must face Voldemort alone in the end, it's our job to make certain he gets to fight that fight in the best condition possible, and to clean up afterwards. Neville and his family, and others, suffered after Voldemort's first defeat because the Ministry didn't clean up properly. We will, this time."

"Will you be in a position to?" Harry asked Dorff. "How much longer will you be running the Ministry?"

"Probably only until the end of next June, July, or August. If Voldemort hasn't been defeated by then, we'll still be running security."

"But . . . but won't the Ministry be back in full control?" Hermione asked.

"We've struck a deal returning limited sovereignty until Voldemort is defeated," Dorff replied. "That gives a lot of local control back, while enabling us to keep up the fight. Some in the Ministry don't like it, but since their only other alternative is Voldemort . . . well, we hope we've weeded out those who might support him."

"Now, I want you each to return to your bedrooms, and I do mean alone!" Tabitha instructed the teens. "Think about what you've learned. This afternoon, after lunch, we'll try to answer any questions we have answers to, and then it's time to tell Harry and Neville more stories of their parents, and the war."

Right before lunch, Harry had a visitor. "Professor Spellman. Come on in."

"Full day already?"

Yes, it has been. It was . . . odd, hearing about Ron's prophesy, even if it didn't say anything really new."

"No, it didn't, but prophecies often reenforce one another if you associate with those with the Gift."

"I wonder how they're all taking it."

"Ginny is a bit upset about the prophecies themselves, Hermione and Ron aren't happy that you didn't tell them about the original one. Neville had a good idea of what the prophecy said, and Luna knew, of course. None seemed surprised."

"I was," Harry said in a grumbling voice.

"Well, the rest of us have a greater appreciation of you than you do, Harry."

"I'm sorry your vow dragged you back to Britain."

Tabitha glared at Harry, which made him squirm a little. "If I weren't your teacher, I'd slap the back of your head! Harry, do you want Voldemort to win?"

"What? Of course not!"

"Now, he's the most powerful Dark Wizard in a few centuries. Why do you think you should be able to beat him and his forces by yourself?"

"I don't. . . ."

"Then smarten up! Yes, you have to defeat Voldemort, but if you keep pushing us away, you'll be facing Voldemort and whatever allies he picks up!"

Harry nearly shouted, "I know, and that doesn't mean I can't hate it, can I?"

"No, hate it all you want, but you have to move away from that feeling. It doesn't do anything except make you miserable, and you've had a miserable enough life without your adding to it."

"That's easy for you to say."

Tabitha frowned. "Come here, boy!" she commanded.

Harry's eyes went wide. Tabitha walked over to him and grabbed his head between her hands. Harry was too startled to do any of his Occlumency exercises, and they wouldn't have helped much, since Tabitha was sharing knowledge, not trying to take it from him.

Harry felt the terror she had felt when she had woken up for the first time at the Ysgol, not even knowing if she was a boy or a girl. He felt the thrill and fear she had felt when Marcus Malfoy had tried to kill her. He saw the Death Eaters who had attacked the Old Believers being burned alive in the distance. He felt the losses of her friends killed over the years, the pain of childbirth, emotional pain from the betrayals of her lovers. He felt her adrenaline and fear as she fought in fire-fights that made his experiences at the Ministry look tame. He felt her revulsion at cleaning up the scenes of several massacres. Tabitha paused between the horrors, allowing Harry to wonder for a moment if the Patil twins even knew they had been triplets -- the third girl was being partially butchered for a dark ritual just as the Confederation

forces had arrived. Harry felt the revulsion Tabitha had felt for herself after she had angrily killed the two Death Eaters who had just cut out the baby's liver. He felt the terror Tabitha had felt when the alarm announcing the attack on Godric's Hollow had sounded, and her relief when she had arrived and saw Harry safe in Hagrid's arms.

Tabitha picked Harry up and tossed him onto the sofa. "Do you still think you have a monopoly on suffering, Harry? Shall I ask Neville to relive being a two year old under the Cruciatus? Ginny to relive the terrors of waking up with blood on her hands? Lloyd losing his brother? Tom witnessing a human sacrifice?"

"No," he mumbled, ashamed.

"I would think not. You have a burden, Harry, but you are far from the only person in this home to have one. You have to face and kill Voldemort. That is not an easy thing to live with, but a number of us live with worse."

"I think it's going to be harder living with it now that everyone knows about it," Harry grumbled.

"Probably the number went from about fifteen to nineteen. Not exactly a horde of people. Probably the only one you think you can't trust, although I know I can, is my daughter." Tabitha caught Harry's chin with her right hand. "You're a good person, Harry, but sometimes you just get too introspective and moody for your own good."

"I was a lot worse last year," Harry retorted.

Tabitha frowned. "I'm sorry about that. I wish we could have arrived at least a year sooner."

"I would be happy if you had arrive just a few weeks sooner," Harry retorted. "Politics, right?"

"Right."

"You said you didn't really know my father or Sirius, right?"

"Right again. I met Sirius in passing, and that was it. The same was true of Remus and Pettigrew. I knew your father slightly. Henry spent a Christmas with the Marauders, you, and your mother. You'll want to talk with him. I spent the day with Neville, Alice, and Frank. I knew Alice fairly well, although I was a bit closer with your mother. I'd even say we were friends, although in large part because we were stuck together a lot of the time. Here," she held out a present.

"Bit early, isn't it?"

"We Old Believers exchange presents from the solstice through Twelfth Night. So, just open the present."

As Harry suspected, it was a photo diptych. One side showed infant Harry sitting on Tabitha's lap while his mother supported him. The other side showed a larger group -- the six North Americans, Alice Longbottom, his mother, and the two babies.

"Lloyd took those. I gave something similar to Neville, along with this." She produced a match box from her pocket, and enlarged it into a large photo album. "All your friends will be here in a moment to take you to lunch. Enjoy -- we all took photos, and Lloyd's been working on putting these together. We'll be in the library, if you have any questions. If not, we'll talk with you all after dinner. It's time we told you some of our happier stories."

"Thank you," Harry said, a bit confused by all that had just happened.

Chapter IV

The teens enjoyed looking through the photos from 1980 and 1981. Lloyd Trowbridge had labeled and dated all of them to some degree. As Harry and Neville had predicted long before, the girls all cooed over their baby pictures. They had expected it mostly from Ginny, but to their surprise, Luna, Hermione, and even Sabrina all acted pretty much the same. The teens all managed a good laugh of the wizarding photo of Neville spitting up on Toby Jones.

To their surprise, Tudor Myrddin joined them for supper. For two hours after the early dinner, the adults thrilled the teens with tales of the first war against Voldemort (mostly drawn from the months they had been winning), as they toasted walnuts and hickory nuts, and drank locally produced fresh cider and perry.

Finally, a little after 8:00, Luna turned to Myrddin and said, "Isn't there some special reason for your being with us tonight, sir?"

"As a matter of fact, there is, although it won't directly interest any of you at the moment," he admitted, giving Tabitha a glance.

"The Masters finally finished their analysis?" Tabitha asked eagerly.

"They have."

"Let's see it!" she demanded.

"But. . . ."

"And I assure you," Tabitha declared, "Miss Granger can follow most of it." Hermione of course looked interested.

Tudor shrugged and said, "Alright. Push all the furniture back." As they did so, Tudor said, "If you don't know a lot about arithmancy, this will make no sense what so ever." He sat a crystal down, and suddenly multi-colored interconnecting lines, surrounded by abbreviations and equations, filled a block roughly nine feet by three feet by six feet.

"What do you think of that, Miss Granger?" Tabitha asked.

Hermione stood back up and walked around the block, mumbling to herself, tracing connections with a finger. This was by far the most complicated spell-block she had ever seen. After a mere three minutes of study, she looked up and said, "It must be Harry, or at least his connections with Voldemort."

"Very good, Ms Granger." Tudor was obviously impressed. "What does it say?"

She pointed to each point as she made them. "This set is the protection spell Harry's mother put on him. This connecting set is the spell the group of you put on him. It's really amazing that they meshed so well, reinforcing each other instead of interfering with each other. It **was** the two spells acting together that kept Harry alive that Halloween, although it was Mrs. Potter's spell that kept Harry hidden at the Dursleys."

Hermione frowned. "But **why** did they reinforce each other?" She pointed at several connecting points. "What do these mean? These aren't standard symbols recurring at each contact point."

"They are, just ones you haven't learned yet," Tabitha explained. "They are all love symbols. The love of Harry's mother, the love Harry had for his mother, the love we had for Harry when we set up the protections. Because these loves reinforced each other instead of conflicting in Harry's life, their magic reinforced each other as well." She pointed a red symbol. "This, however, is Pettigrew. Without his betrayals, it's possible that the link with Voldemort might not have been forged. Because of Pettigrew's Dark Mark, Voldemort was in a minor sense at the ceremony, and so could slightly affect the links."

"That makes sense," Hermione admitted. She went on, "This represents the Killing Curse that rebounded from Harry back onto Voldemort -- there's the feedback loop that created the scar, the mental link, and the transfer of powers. This group over here, though, is Harry's blood and the ritual that rebuilt Volde. . . . Oh, shit!"

"What?" Harry demanded.

"You can't use the Killing Curse on Voldemort, Harry."

"Uh-uh!" Tabitha corrected, pointing out an equation that was partially hiding behind a line.

"Oh, sorry. You can use the Curse on Voldemort, but if he uses it . . . oh, Harry, if he uses it, it will kill both of you."

"Well," Harry said after a moment, "I guess that means even though I may not win, I can't lose."

"Perhaps," Tabitha cautioned. "It could disembody either one of you or even the both of you."

"Not if we do more than reflect the curse back. Add the last part," Tom called out. Tudor waved his wand at the crystal again, muttering a word of power.

"What did you add?" Tabitha asked as the space taken up grew slightly, but became much more intertwined, with lines of power feeding into the block.

"A very old community ritual," Tom answered. "In ancient times, even before writing, there were spirits and demons roaming the Earth. Representatives from a community could designate a warrior. They would partially protect him by linking him to selected members of the community. He could draw power for certain types of spells and rituals, and would in turn be protected from certain types of attacks. See here? This means that not only can Harry destroy Voldemort, he can also destroy the dementors."

"What does this sub-set mean?" Hermione asked.

"It wouldn't protect Harry from all magic, of course, but it does protect him from the full impact of harmful magic. And, as I said, it also allows him to draw some power as well."

"How many people do we need to make it work?" Luna asked.

"Thirteen. The champion, nine points of power, a center, a protector who acts as a mentor, and the caster."

"Harry is the champion, I am the center, you are the caster," Hermione stated. "We just need nine others and the protector."

Harry, Luna, Tudor, and Tabitha all protested that idea.

"Quiet!" Tom demanded. When he didn't get it, he simply raised his voice and talked over everyone. "Hermione would indeed be the best person for the center. Tudor should be the protector. Tabitha, Henry, Lloyd, Ron, Luna, Ginny, Neville. We would need two more points."

"I'll do it!" Sabrina called out. Henry and Tabitha's protests increased.

"Right. Who are we missing?" Ginny demanded.

"Harry, who would you feel close enough to to ask?" Tom asked over the yelling. "It should be someone no one would suspect, who can get away easily for a few days after Christmas. It must also be someone you are close to, or who has a close blood or emotional tie to you or at least one of the other points."

"Professor Lupin or Tonks?"

"I don't think it would work with a werewolf, and Tonks would be missed."

Harry thought, despite the continued arguments that had broken out all over the room.

"Ask Percy Weasley," Luna said.

The room went silent.

Harry nodded. "I agree, if Professor Dumbledore pre-approves the idea. If not, if he doesn't agree, or if we end up two short, ask Fred and George Weasley."

"I'll see to it, Harry," Tudor said. He saw more than half the room take a collective breath to start yelling again and one glare quieted them all. "It's Harry's decision. Think about it. There will be oaths of a power most of you have never sworn before, and the consequences for breaking those oaths will be fearsome."

"The rituals will also involve pain," Tom added. "And Harry, that will just be the first step for you, although the other steps won't be quite so fearsome."

"Are there any better alternatives?" Hermione demanded.

"If there are, no one has found them," Tudor admitted.

"Then we should. . . ."

"Think about these ideas carefully," Tabitha stated, breaking in on Hermione's thoughts. "I think we can all use some rest." She rounded on Sabrina. "I expect you to be alone in your bedroom, and to stay that way all night. No dreamwalking. Understand?"

"Yes, Mother."

"The rest of you . . . SCAT!"

The teens promptly scattered.

"What's wrong, Ginny?"

"There's something I've, well, I guess I have to say I've partially kept from you."

"What's that?"

"Sit down, Neville." Neville sat on Ginny's bed.

"I told you about Hermione's and my tattoos."

"Yes," Neville said in a puzzled voice.

"Well, they were pretty . . . extensive."

"How extensive."

Ginny had just been wearing a thin robe, her dressing gown, and slippers. It only took a moment to remove them.

"Oh, my. . . ."

"I'm ugly, aren't I?" Ginny said, starting to tear up.

Neville sprang up and held Ginny in his arms. "No, you're not ugly. You have to admit, though, it is startling."

"Yes, I guess it is," Ginny admitted.

Neville took Ginny's left wrist in his hand. He raised it to his lips and kissed the small tattoo with great care and passion. "May I kiss your other tattoos?"

"Only if you kiss all of them."

"That I can promise."

"What do you think, Luna?"

Luna looked troubled. "Hermione. . . ."

"Yes?"

"Thank you for sharing this with me. I don't know if sharing with Harry would be very good idea at this time."

"I'm not trying to take Harry from you, or even share him."

"I know. I can also see how proud you are of your body and the tattoos, even if you're also worried about how we might regard them. Harry has issues about scars, as you can no doubt understand. He'll either be so overwhelmed by your body that he'll be confused, or he'll think you've had to mutilate your body because of him."

"You're right," Hermione admitted. "Knowing him, probably both."

"Most likely." Luna thought for a moment and then continued. "We'll bring him around in a day or two, it will just take a little preliminary work. Now, come along."

"Where are we going?"

"To shower and bed."

"But. . . ."

"We all love you, Hermione, if in different ways. Neville almost worships your competence, and is still attracted to you, although that pales to what he feels for Ginny. Harry and I love you in part like a sister and in part with a near-platonic perfection. Sex between either of us and you would be almost redundant. Ginny partially loves you as we all do, and is also a little in lust with you, although she is even more heterosexual than I am."

"Then why. . . ?"

"Because we love you. We won't leave you alone, Hermione. And, if you will allow us, Harry and I will also visit you in our dreams. Now come along."

"But. . . ."

"Besides, Harry needs his sleep. He still has trouble going to sleep most nights, and usually he has to get up too early. I know you want to go to the Yule service, and this way Harry is more likely to sleep in."

"But we should talk about this ceremony. . . ."

Luna gave Hermione a superior look that most people would more associate with the bushy-haired brunette. "Why discuss it? We both know that if it eases Harry's burden, we will do it, no matter what the cost to us. We also know that we all feel the same way. The 'adults' may need to discuss this, but they know what we know. We are Harry's supporters, and we will all do what needs to be done."

Hermione hated it when Luna was right.

Harry did sleep in. Luna had left a note on his door, swearing to hex anyone who woke him up too early (which Ron would have, wanting to get at the presents as usual).

When he did wake up, Harry thought he was having problems breathing. Then he realized Luna was on top of him. When he tried to move, he realized Hermione and Ginny were now on either side of him. All three girls were giggling, which was unusual behavior for all three -- but then they, unlike Harry, had been awake for some time.

After some light Christmas kissing, they let Harry retreat into the bathroom to get dressed, and then they joined the rest of the group in the parlor, where they could all have toasted egg, bacon, and cheese sandwiches, cookies, and hot chocolate while they opened their presents (although Lloyd was missing, since he was spending the morning with some of his relatives in town, while Tudor was in the Capitol).

Harry was very happy with his haul. Mrs. Weasley and Hermione had both knitted him jumpers, Hermione's a heavier, looser one that he could wear in cold weather instead of a jacket. Ginny had knitted him a hat and muffler which matched Hermione's scarlet and gold jumper. The note said that Neville had bought the yarn for Hermione and Ginny's presents. He also received a scarlet and gold afghan with deep green trim from Professor Spellman.

Ron had given all his friends maple sugar candy. ('Oh,' Hermione had said, 'my parents would faint.') The adults had clubbed together to buy Harry the latest Trek and Star Wars novels. Luna had given him a sketchbook filled with Muggle and wizarding (moving) drawings -- self-portraits, his friends and teachers, his fellow security prefects, and many scenes from in and around Hogwarts. She knew Harry had so few happy memories other than at Hogwarts, at the Weasleys, and from that previous summer that she wanted to help him remember those that she could.

Harry was also glad to see that his gifts were appreciated. He had consulted with Remus as well as Professors Spellman and Lawrence on books for Luna and Hermione. In addition, he gave Luna a copy of Lewis Carroll's two Alice stories, various earrings, and a matching set of natural grey pearls (two strings of pearls and a pendant, a ring, and two pairs of earrings). He gave a pair of a new brand of broom servicing kits to Ron and Ginny and a Neville a note saying a sack of expensive dragon dung fertilizer was awaiting him back at Hogwarts, which completed the gifts he had brought with him.

Although a simpler meal than a Christmas feast at Hogwarts, the Christmas dinner was more sophisticated. Each of the teens was allowed half a glass of the claret (Chateau Malartic-Lagravière, 1945), the taste of which floored Hermione, who thought she had learned a little bit about wine from the little sips of plonk her parents had given her.

When the various pies had been devoured for dessert, Tabitha called for everyone's attention. "It's now a little before Two o'clock. Tom and Lloyd have social calls to make in town, and Henry and I are not to be disturbed. . . ."

"Does this mean you're finally back together for good?" Sabrina asked.

"We're working on it," Henry answered.

"That means you had all best take care NOT to disturb us," Tabitha warned. "You all know where the kitchen is when you get hungry. You all know what you should and shouldn't do. That includes NOT leaving these corridors. If I have to come out after **any** of you, it will **NOT** be pleasant."

The teens all nodded their heads.

"Well? Buzz off!"

The teens left.

"Have fun," Tom teased.

"Yes, do try and keep some attention on the wards, not just on each other," Lloyd added.

"You two were included in the instruction to 'buzz off'," Henry growled.

The two friends gave them a mocking salute, and left.

About an hour later, there was a light knock on Hermione's door. "Come in!"

"Hi, Hermione," Harry said, coming cautiously into the room.

"Hi. What's up?"

"Luna sent me over to talk to you."

"About what?"

Harry mumbled something.

"What was that?"

"About your tattoos." Harry frowned. "Why would I find them shocking? Are they that large or that . . . well, inconveniently placed?"

"Both."

"I see."

"Harry, it's not your fault, and it wasn't your decision."

"It wasn't my decision," Harry agreed. "If you weren't my friend, would you have needed this extra protection?"

"Yes."

"As much as you need it now?"

"Yes; well almost. You . . . you have to remember Harry, I'd still be a target even if we weren't close."

"Why?"

"Okay, let's say the Sorting Hat had gone the other way and put me in Ravenclaw. Would my grades have been higher or lower?"

"Could your grades have gotten any higher?"

"Yes, especially in Potions. The point is, however, that I have spent a fair amount of time helping you. How much would the Malfoys have liked me if I had beaten Draco in EVERY subject by an even wider margin than I did? Remember, he was the number two student of our year. I beat him in every subject our first year except for Potions and of course Flying. I beat him in everything our second, third, and fourth years, except for Potions, and I tied him in that our fourth year. Now, would you have had any chance of stopping Voldemort our first year without me?"

"No," Harry admitted.

"So there we are. Voldemort restarting his fight three years earlier. When they went after prominent Muggle-borns, and they would have sooner or later, who would Lucius Malfoy have had near the top of his list? Me. They would have killed me or put me under the Imperius. Well, they can come after me now. They may even kill me. But they are **NOT** going to make me hurt or kill someone I love and then either be punished for it or have to live with the guilt. Don't you think I feel the physical discomfort I underwent and the fact that I can't wear a bikini are small prices to pay for that peace of mind?"

"But. . . ."

"But what? Harry, you're getting better, but sometimes you still have these unreasonable lapses into thinking that everything is your fault and your responsibility."

"I wish people would stop telling me that!"

"Then stop doing it! Alright? Just try not to do it again. And while it was very sweet for Luna and Ginny to sleep with me these last two nights, I'm not going to fall apart just because Ron picked some other girl. So that stops, too!"

"But Hermione!"

"What?" she nearly snapped.

"Tonight was my turn," Harry pouted.

"WHAT!"

He grinned. "Gotcha!"

"Harry. . . !"

"Seriously, Hermione. We care for you. It's not about sex, at least not for me." He finally sat down next to her, having been standing the entire time. He put his arm around Hermione, to her shock. "You're very important to me. You're very important in a similar way to Luna and to Ginny. Take some advice from someone who is learning the lesson himself. Don't push away the people who care about you the most."

"Harry . . . thank you."

"You're welcome. Now, come along."

"Where am I going?"

"Luna and I have already, well, fooled around. . . ."

"Too much information, Harry!"

"And therefore, we just need to be close. With you. That nice elf should have reconfigured the bathtub in Luna's suite by now, so the three of us are going to relax and soak until dinner. You can show me your tattoos, and I'll show you the scar I got from the rusty nail Dudley made me sit on when I was eight."

Hermione smiled and punched Harry lightly on the shoulder. "Git."

Chapter V

Thursday, December 26, 1996

"Professor Lawrence?"

"Yes, Hermione?" All the group had been working out, but Tom had given up first. He kept an eye on the others as Hermione approached him.

"May I talk to you in private at some point today?"

"Sure. We can go back up to the cabin after breakfast. Is that alright?"

"Yes, sir."

Tom started a fire in the fireplace and sat down in one of the two soft chairs. He had a huge mug of coffee, while Hermione had a similar mug of hot chocolate. "What's on your mind?" Tom asked.

Hermione dove right into what was bothering her. "Does my tattoo protection against possessions and the Imperius Curse also keep Dreamwalkers out of my mind?"

Tom thought about that a few moments. "Yes, I would think it should. I take it Harry or Luna tried?"

"Yes; both actually. They said they could see my dreams, but not enter them."

He frowned. "They shouldn't have even been able to do that . . . unless. . . . Were they in physical contact with you as well as astral?"

Hermione blushed slightly. "Yes, they were. It was purely platonic," she hastened to assure him.

"Alright. Even so, I'm surprised they were able to see into your dreams. Of course, Harry always seems to be able to do things no one should be able to."

"I knew that the first time I saw him fly," Hermione said simply.

Tom was curious, "Any regrets that you chose Ron instead of Harry?"

"No, not really. I love Harry, but I'm not terribly physically attracted to him." She sighed. "Losing Ron like that, without any real notice. . . ."

"You mind the way it was done more than the fact itself?" Tom asked.

Hermione sighed and admitted, "Yes. It's not that I wasn't attracted to Ron. I was. And I admit I was wondering what he might be thinking, considering the lack of letters, but then, that's just Ron." Her mouth went into a slight twisted smile. "I wish Sabrina lots of luck. She'll need it."

"She's slightly more than two years younger than Ron," Tom pointed out. "People mature emotionally at different rates. Ron and Sabrina might be at a more compatible stage right now."

"Maybe. Enough of 'Ronnie,' back to my current problem."

"Are you sure you would want to share dreams with the two of them, then?" Tom asked in a warning tone.

"Yes," Hermione said firmly.

"Difficult," Tom said, frowning in thought.

"There's not some rune, or set of runes, that you could add?" Hermione said hopefully.

"Are you sure you want to share dreams, or do you just want more tattoos?"

"Why would I want more tattoos?" Hermione demanded. She wilted at the look she got for that. "Well, won't I get more if this ceremony comes off? I assume that's what was meant by pain being involved, and I don't need many more than what I have."

"Yes, there will be ritual tattoos and scarring, and some cutting for blood, involved. As for why I asked. . . . No offense, but after a few minutes, you really seemed to enjoy the process. There's no shame in that," he hastened to assure the embarrassed teen.

"I did enjoy it, but I'm not a masochist, or an exhibitionist for that matter."

"Then why did you enjoy it?"

Hermione averted her eyes and admitted, "Because you were the one touching me. You were the one I was exposed to."

"Oh. . . ." Tom said, startled. "That's something I didn't expect."

"I'm sorry. . . ."

"Don't be. I mean that."

Hermione looked into his eyes, hoping.

"No," Tom said firmly, "you know it's impossible now."

Hermione admitted, "You're a teacher. . . ."

"And you're underage, and I'm twenty-two years older than you," he reminded her. "It couldn't work, even if I were in Lloyd's position instead of a teacher at your school."

"At least you're not my teacher."

"A distinction that doesn't matter, as you well know." They sat in silence for almost five minutes.

Finally, Tom stirred. "As far as the first problem goes, I need to do a little research. There might be a solution. As for the second . . . no matter what happens over the next two years, barring a complete disaster, I will be at the Leaky Cauldron on the third Saturday of August in the year 2000. If you're still interested then, meet me there at Four o'clock. We'll see if anything is possible at that point."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Why?"

"What do you mean, 'why'? You know why we shouldn't meet before then. Even after you leave Hogwarts, you would need some exposure to life before even thinking of getting involved with someone so much older than you."

"No, why would you want to meet me?"

Tom looked her in the eye. "Because you're everything I ever dreamed of in a woman, except that you're too young. You're intelligent, inquisitive, caring, and beautiful. If you were a nineteen-year old volunteer for the cause, I'd take you to bed this instant, despite the age difference, because I find you very attractive and yes, I really like you. That would probably be a mistake on both our parts, by the way, since we don't know each other very well."

"Oh. . . ." Hermione said in a small voice.

"So, if you're still interested in just over three and a half years, I can wait. If it works out, we could still have over a hundred years together."

"Why not a Saturday in July, then?"

"Alright, second Saturday in July then."

"Until then, everything is up to you," Hermione said.

Tom stood and held out his hand. Hermione took it and stood.

"Until July, 2000," Tom murmured. He squeezed Hermione's hand and lightly kissed her.

"Until then," Hermione agreed, smiling broadly, dropping her hand. The two went back into the mountain.

Early that afternoon, a larger group assembled in the parlor. Tudor was back and Percy Wealsey was present, as was a very wild-looking warlock.

"This is Cadfael ap Tudur ap Mawrth ap Rhys, a chief druid, speaker for the Danadl clan, and a leader of the Hidden, holders of the Heart of True Belief," Henry said, introducing the warlock.

"It is good to see you again, Tabitha," Cadfael said. He spoke with a standard Canadian accent, but it was obvious that he hadn't spoken English recently.

"And you. Thank you for helping us." She turned to the British teens. "The Hidden rarely concern themselves with what happens in the wider world."

"True," Cadfael agreed. "However, the dementors should have been destroyed long ago. Their alliance with this so-called Dark Wizard gives us a chance to deplete an old enemy, and me a chance to help some old friends. And of course I wanted to meet Mister Potter, here."

He turned his attention to Harry. Luna and Ron shuddered. There was something very remote about this druid. He was not evil, or even amoral. Still, they could feel he stood apart from the rest of humanity, or at least the vast majority of humanity. Had they known the Muggle comparison, they would have said he observed them as a scientist watched rats in a maze. Luna, who could See deeper than Ron, Saw a being with nearly as much knowledge as Tabitha Spellman, with nearly as much raw power as Harry, and a raw intelligence which could easily match if not surpass anyone else in the room. She could also See that he had perhaps as much Sight as she did.

Cadfael could feel Luna reading him. He glanced at her, which made her recoil a little, and then turned back to Harry, who stood and returned the powerful stare as an equal. "Mister Potter. You have chosen to become a spiritual warrior. I shall help you gain the power to defeat the dementors and to destroy this Voldemort. If you agree, however, that does imply you will be willing to dedicate your life to fighting such evil."

"So to win, I have to give up my life?" Harry asked.

"No, no you do not have to become some sort of fighting hermit. Think, Mister Potter. . . ."

"Harry, Mister?"

"Thank you. You may all just call me Cadfael. Harry, even if you had destroyed Voldemort last June, could you have just retired from your world?"

"I could hope I could at least lead my own life, couldn't I?" Harry said in a mournful voice.

"You could hope, but you know in your heart that is all it would ever be. You're a very active, caring person -- that is one of your strengths as a person."

Cadfael studied Harry a little more, then added, "All people have a fate, Harry. For most, it is to live in relative obscurity, find a little love and satisfaction if they are lucky, and then die. Some people struggle against their fate, as you are now. Some embrace their fates and even push it to extremes, as Tom Riddle did. We believe your fate to be a hard but satisfying one, Harry. Drive some of the evils from your world. Make life a little safer for those people,

Muggle and magical, who are the little people who have no dreams other than to get through life with as little pain as possible. Help us destroy, or at least deplete, the dementors, and we will help you destroy this Voldemort."

"How would I hurt the dementors?"

"The ritual Lawrence told you of will give you the power to command the dementors. Your command will send them into one of these." Cadfael held out a hand-carved stone bottle.

"When that happens, any souls they have captured will be released. The dementors will then be transported to a holding place we have set up, connected to the capture bottles. Then, we shall destroy any sent to us." As an afterthought, he added, "It will only work on dementors, ghosts, and similar entities."

"It's possible the dementors will leave Voldemort's service once you capture the first few," Tom added.

"I can't destroy them like you did?" Harry asked Tom.

"That would take three months of training, after reaching a level of religious consecration which cannot be hurried," Tom answered.

"Lawrence is the only person I know of outside my fellow druids, some masters in Buddhist and Hindu temples, and a few African tribal wizards who can do what he did at your family's house," Cadfael said.

"And you **will** destroy the dementors sent to you?" Tudor asked. "And by 'you' in both cases I mean the Hidden druids."

Cadfael smiled. "Myrddins do not trust the Hidden. The Hidden do not trust the Myrddins, and so it has been since the one you call Merlin himself. That is actually a good thing. If ones such as this Myrddin, or those very few such as Dumbledore, Tabitha here, or especially you, Harry, were all of the Hidden, we would be so powerful as to throw the balance of the world out of order."

Cadfael turned to Tudor and spoke so rapidly in Old British that Hermione and Luna could only catch a few phrases. What he said satisfied Tudor, however, who bowed slightly.

Cadfael turned to Harry. "Do you accept Thomas Lawrence as the caster of the power, the consecrator of your community?"

"I do."

"Do you accept Hermione Granger as your center, your heart, as one you would trust with your very soul?"

"I do."

"Do you accept Tudor Myrddin as the protector of your community and as your guide?"

"I do."

"Do you accept Tabitha Spellman, Sabrina Spellman, Henry Dorff, Lloyd Trowbridge, Neville Longbottom, Luna Lovegood, Percy Weasley, Ronald Weasley, and Genevra Weasley as your community?"

"I do."

Cadfael then went and asked each of the others for their pledge of loyalty to Harry. They all gave it.

Cadfael then handed Harry a long piece of parchment. "Tell me, as I name the names again, which term or terms describe each person. As I call your name, please step forward. I shall take a fluid ounce of your blood. When this ceremony is over, next Tuesday, you will be bound together. Harry will draw strength from you. You must be strong for him, so that he may be strong for all of you and your worlds. If any are not certain, speak now. Even death cannot spare you these responsibilities once you have sworn. When you die, your powers will stay accessible to Harry. Only his death can totally release you, and if you are in any way responsible for his death, you will suffer agony for a century. Even if you die, you will suffer as a ghost until your century of agony is over. Does anyone wish to quit?"

Percy felt more than one set of eyes on him, but he merely lifted his chin and shook his head. It was time to reclaim his position as a Weasley, as a Gryffindor, as a person on the right side, by doing what he knew was right, not what the rules said was correct.

Harry conferred with Cadfael for a few minutes about wording his responses, and then they began.

"Thomas Lawrence, caster."

"I claim you as a mentor and friend of my family." They touched the tips of their wands together, and then Harry touched the tip of his wand to Tom's forehead and heart, as Harry would do with each person in turn.

Cadfael drew the blood and put it in a gold cauldron, as he would for the others as well.

"Tudor Myrddin, protector."

"I claim you as a mentor, as a sworn protector of a friend, and friend of my family."

"Hermione Granger, center."

"I claim you as a mentor, as a sister of my heart although not of my blood, as my friend and companion, and as a sister of my beloved although not of her blood."

"Luna Lovegood."

"I claim you as my beloved and my friend and companion."

"Ronald Weasley."

"I claim you as my brother, although not of my blood, and as my friend and companion."

"Genevra Weasley."

"I claim you as my sister, although not of my blood, and as my friend and my companion."

"Neville Longbottom."

"I claim you as my companion, and as my friend since infancy."

"Henry Dorff."

"I claim you as a sworn protector, as a mentor, and friend of my family."

"Tabitha Spellman."

"I claim you as a mentor and friend of my family, and as a sister, although not by blood, to my mother."

"Lloyd Trowbridge."

"I claim you as a mentor and friend of my family."

"Sabrina Spellman."

"I claim you as blood daughter to one who is a mentor and friend of my family, and who was a sister, although not by blood, to my mother."

"Percy Weasley."

"I claim you as blood brother to those who are a brother and sister to me, although not of my blood."

Cadfael drew the last of the blood, and then looked at Harry. Harry held out his wrist. Cadfael cut it as he had the others, and then sealed the cut. He added Harry's blood to the cauldron.

"Tabitha, Thomas, please assist me in the potions lab."

The trio started to exit. Cadfael stopped by the door. "Drink nothing with distilled alcohol in it. Try and take at least five minutes today to think about each person -- that's five minutes or so per person. If you do not know someone, introduce yourself. You shall be as close as a family should be for the rest of your lives now."

Percy winced at that. When they were gone, he took a deep breath and went over to Ron and Sabrina. "Hello, I'm Percy Weasley. I understand you're a good friend of my brother's."

Hermione knocked lightly on the ajar door. "Come in, Hermione."

"Harry said you wanted to see me?" Hermione said hopefully.

"Yes. I need to outline the twelve runes we'll be needed for the ceremony. Harry will need the same number as well, and I just finished him," Tom told her.

"Where will they go?"

"Normally, they'd go over the heart. However, since you and Ginny already have tattoos there, they'll go over the ribs under your left arm for all of you."

Hermione pulled off her jumper and started to unbutton her blouse. "Are you sure you're not just doing this to see all of us topless?"

"I've dreamt about Tabby topless since we were twelve, but it's merely a bonus. An especially welcome one in your case, if you don't mind my saying so."

Hermione took off her bra. "I should be embarrassed, but I'm not with you."

"Thank you. Lift your arm." He started to draw with a set of Muggle markers.

"Do you do this other than for ritual purposes?"

"I have," Tom admitted. "I even worked in a Muggle tattoo shop just outside of New Orleans for six months, and actually took a year to bum around the Muggle world, doing tattoos and piercings."

"I'll be certain to use you for all my piercing needs."

"I wish I never had to mar your perfect skin, but if you really want me to, I will."

Hermione blushed slightly. "Really? You'd prefer me unmarked?" She had thought perhaps tattoos and piercings appealed to him.

"I would prefer you only marked by necessity," he told her. "I can add the tattoo for the dreamwalking. I was afraid it might interfere with the ceremony, but Cadfael assures me it won't. The one I'd like to add will allow entrance at first only to those dreaming in physical contact with you. Only when that connection is made can they then make regular contact. We should wait, however. It's possible that the connections Luna and especially Harry will have with you after the rituals are complete might be enough to allow dream contact in any event."

"Alright. I'll do my best to leave the rest of my skin unmarked for you." She smiled. "You could pierce my ears, though."

"I will before we leave. Alright, I'm done. Lie on the sofa with your arm over your head until it dries."

"Alright. Do you know this Cadfael very well?"

"Not well. He was in the same druidic training as Henry and Tabitha, a year ahead of me. He was sort of interested in Tabby, but as strong as her pull was, she wasn't interested in him other than as a friend. He buried himself into the mysteries the Hidden druids love to study. He has risen very high, very fast. I studied with the Hidden twice, and both times he was

always around. Like Tudor, I generally don't trust the Hidden, but he comes closest to being trustworthy."

"Could that be because you actually know him as a person?" Hermione suggested.

"No, I know about a dozen others more or less as well. I don't trust their agendas. He's the only one of them that I know who sees the rest of the world as something worthwhile, inferior to his own, but worthwhile on its own terms."

"They're not known as cultural relativists, I take it?"

"Not at all."

"Are you sure you're ready to wait another 1290 days?"

"I'm sure we should wait. Just imagine how thrilled your parents are going to be should you bring home someone just a few years younger than they are."

"I think by that point they'll be happy to see nearly anyone, and while you might be thirty-eight, you look well under thirty, so it won't be quite as shocking as it could be."

"You may be correct. In any event, put your blouse and jumper back on and get out of here before we start flirting. I'll see you at dinner."

Hermione made a show of doing just that, and then moved towards the door. "See you in 1290 days."

"I'll see you many times before then, and it's now 1289 days, twenty-three hours and forty-eight minutes. Do try and be prompt."

"I shall, Professor, I assure you," Hermione said in her poshest accent and with a wonderful smile.

Once she left, Lawrence leaned his head against the wall and said to himself, "Tom, if you get caught with these thoughts, you are sooooo screwed."

Chapter VI

Friday, December 27, 1996

"Good morning," Ginny whispered in Hermione's ear.

"Ah, good morning," Hermione replied, stretching as she remembered who was with her.

"It's going to be a hard day today, isn't it?" Ginny asked in a slightly frightened voice.

"No, just tiring," Hermione assured her. "I think the tattooing starts later on."

"Oh. I'm not looking forward to it, no matter when it starts."

"It won't be as bad as the first time."

"But this time, we know what we're getting in to," Ginny stated.

"Good point." Hermione smiled grimly. "It won't be nearly as extensive for you this time, and it won't be in as sensitive an area."

"That's good. Neville wasn't thrilled by what we had done."

"Did it turn him off?"

"A little, I think, but he's used to it now."

From 9:00 in the morning until 6:00 that night, Cadfael and Tom cast spells in ritual magic over the others, with very few breaks allowed. It was tiring to go through, and when they were finished, Cadfael, Tabitha and Tom checked on the potions.

"Enjoy your dinner. Eat nothing afterwards, and drink only water," Cadfael commanded on his way out. "Don't even brush your teeth in the morning. I will see to the administration of the first potions, and then after tomorrow I shall leave you in capable hands of Brother Thomas. I shall return next Tuesday to administer the final bindings and the final potion."

From 7:30 until 10:00 the next morning, the group went through more rituals, and only then drank the potions. Next, Cadfael and Tom arranged couches around the exercise area and then the group disrobed down to 'muscle' t-shirts and either sweat pants or shorts, which would allow Tom enough space to work on their rib cages. Hermione and Harry, however, had to be shirtless, to leave enough skin exposed. The nine points all faced outwards in a circle, while Harry, Tudor, and Hermione formed a triangle inside the circle. Cadfael sat outside the circle.

The tattooing took over four hours in total.

As far as Harry was concerned, the only thing worse than tattooing was the Cruciatus -- each needle-mark wasn't bad in an of itself, but there were so many of them. He heard the sharp intakes of breath, the whimpers, grunts, and small cries, at each stab into the flesh of his friends and supporters. It made Harry more determined not to cry out himself. Tom also had to use a knife to create some small ritual scars, which was much worse.

The nine points suffered the least. They only needed two small runes tattooed into them and six small cuts that first day, while Tudor needed three tattoos and six cuts. Harry and Hermione required one tattoo for each point, one each connecting them to the points and to Tudor, and two complicated ones connecting them to each other, plus nine cuts each.

Finally, after one final ritual and sips of a particularly vile potion, they were done for the day. "Make certain you read the instructions on taking care of your tattoos until they heal," Tom warned. "We can't use much magic on them; that would lessen the effectiveness of the rituals. Just remember, with nothing at all, it would take longer than two days to totally heal. Don't avoid each other. Harry, Hermione, try and have as much time together as you can. Everyone, go wash up. We're all hungry and there's a good meal waiting for all of us."

There was a soft knock on Hermione's door. She opened it, and saw Harry. He was dressed much as she was, in clean sweats and a muscle-shirt. "Hi, Harry." She had been thinking about getting cleaned up a second time and going to sleep early. She was nearly exhausted from the ordeals of the day.

"Hi."

"Are you just going to stand there?"

"Thanks." Harry came in, looking rather uncomfortable.

"What can I do for you, Harry? It's been a very tiring day for everyone, especially the both of us."

"May I stay tonight?"

"What? Harry. . . ."

"I am supposed to have as much contact with you as possible until the ritual is completed," Harry reminded her.

"Where's Luna?"

"She's probably asleep by now -- and she did suggest I come over."

"But why didn't. . . ."

"I think because she was so tired. Even though we had the worst of it in one sense, she was so in tune with everyone's emotions, I think it was actually more stressful for her, if less painful. She said we would probably want to sit up a bit and talk, and she wanted to sleep."

"We can talk, Harry, but you should go back there to sleep."

"Not without you." Harry smiled. "I have my orders."

Hermione frowned, but then smiled. "Fair enough."

Harry sat next to his friend. "Was this worse than the first time?"

"Only because I knew what was coming. The first time was more extensive, and on much more sensitive areas." She sighed. "I hope there won't be any more after Tuesday."

"I hope not, either." He frowned. "Other than the actual physical . . . change, have you felt different because the first set of tattoos?"

"Well, Tom . . . Professor Lawrence and Professor Spellman both tried to cast the Imperius Curse on me, and I didn't feel a thing. Master J will try in January."

They sat in silence for a few moments, then Harry asked, "I meant to ask Professor Lawrence, but you probably know. Won't Ron and Sabrina's being so far away make it harder for this to work in the field, so to speak?"

"Yes and no," Hermione replied. "It will put your drawing power from them on a bit of a time drag -- remember most magic doesn't travel very fast, and no-where near the speed of light. And the distance will weaken the amount of power you can draw -- a lot of it will dissipate in getting the power to you. But it will work the other way as well. If you're hit with a major curse, maybe even the Killing Curse, not only will it be split amongst everyone, it will be drawn towards the most distant points, and a lot of its power will go that way."

"Maybe?"

"Maybe," Hermione said. "That's the most anyone can say." She took Harry's hand in hers. "What else?"

"I heard Ron complaining he won't be able to sleep on his left side," Harry said with a small smile.

"Do all Weasleys sleep on their left side? I heard Ginny say the same thing. I couldn't sleep on my tummy for three days the first time."

"Neither could Ginny," Harry pointed out.

"Ginny can't sleep on her stomach anyway, so that didn't bother her, at least."

Harry frowned. "Why not?"

"Boys," Hermione said, rolling her eyes. She pointed to her chest and said "Sabrina is rather busty, but Ginny has as much here, if not more, than Luna, myself, and Sabrina put together."

"Oh," Harry said, blushing.

"You poor males," Hermione said in a teasing way.

"Why?"

"Think of where we were all tattooed. None of us will be able to wear bras for the next three days or so. All of us, especially Ginny and Sabrina, will be bouncing all over the place."

"Thanks a lot; now I won't be able to help but notice!"

"Come on," Hermione said, standing. "Let's go sleep over in Luna's room."

Sunday, December 29, 1996

Everyone was moving stiffly the next morning, especially Hermione and Harry. Harry massaged Hermione's back and side (except where the tattoos actually were), while she and Luna did the same for Harry.

The members of the group all ate large breakfasts. They would have six hours of rituals to sit through and six more the next day, although fortunately no one shift was longer than one hour. By the end of the day, Hermione and Harry were feeling the connections forming between themselves and between themselves and the others. While over half of the rituals involved the entire group, a third of that day's primarily involved Tudor or Hermione, and Harry, with the 'points' acting as witnesses.

Hermione remembered her objections the previous autumn about even learning about any ritual magic that involved blood. Those objections seemed far-away and irrelevant now.

That night, the teens all played a rousing game of 'double-snap' -- an American variation on exploding snap.

"Look at them," Henry said quietly to his mentor. "You'd never know what they've gone through just by looking."

"Henry," Tudor said, "sometimes it really shows that you didn't raise Sabrina. Look at how they're sitting. The three couples are in couples. Hermione is between Harry and Ginny. Every time there's a hesitation in her movement, or a twinge of pain, Ginny, Luna and Harry pick up on it, and both Ron and Neville notice some as well. Look at Harry. I have heard he stands aloof at school."

"Well, he does."

"Look at him. He's constantly touching Luna and Hermione, and they him. Not just as lovers, all the couples are doing that, but as companions of the heart. They are all more attuned than any group of teens I have ever seen."

"How many have you seen since you were a teen?"

"I have six children, although the oldest is Sabrina's age, and I have six wards," Tudor reminded his friend. Tudor and Gwen had taken in some of the British children who had been left without families. His only regret was that he hadn't been able to take Harry in as well. "Trust me, I have some idea of how they act."

"Well, this is good, right?"

"Is it?" Tudor teased as the teens relaxed between hands. Henry tensed as Ron kissed his daughter's cheek. "Having daughters is a real bitch, huh?"

"Yes," Henry hissed.

"Yes, it's a lot easier thinking of your son kissing a girl than your innocent daughter getting kissed. I wonder if they're sleeping together yet?"

Henry started to turn interesting shades of red and purple, so Tudor led him away, grinning to himself. While four of his wards had been girls (the youngest of his wards was now in his Seventh year at the Ysgol), all his remaining children were sons. It would be fun to tease Henry, based on his own observations and anxieties.

Two other adults had been observing all this. "Makes me almost glad I never had children," Lloyd said.

"Almost?"

"Almost. You never wanted a home that was more than where your books are? Someplace with more than a crup to come home to?"

"I loved that dog," Tom protested quietly.

"I know, but I'm sure it's nowhere near the same. Don't you agree?"

"No. No, it's not."

"So, what are you going to do about the lovely Ms Granger? You know can't do anything for a year and a half at the least."

"Three and a half," Tom said. "That should give her some time to grow up a little, and maybe find some one else."

"Maybe. She seems to be the loyal and determined type, if she's made up her mind."

"Yeah, we both have so much experience with women like that," Tom said softly, if bitterly.

"None, actually, but we've known about every other kind," Lloyd admitted. "Besides, I've met a nice witch in Hogsmeade. If we all survive this, maybe I'll get to know her better."

"Good luck."

"Thanks."

Tom frowned. "How did you know?"

Lloyd smiled. "I've been almost as close as a twin to you for twenty years. Don't ask stupid questions."

"And what do you think?"

"She's smart, nice, cute, and has a nice butt and nicer legs. If she were nineteen instead of sixteen, I wouldn't have a qualm. Just remember, no touching."

"I will. Don't worry."

"I do have one question, however," Lloyd went on.

"What's that?"

"Is that why you agreed she should be the center instead of Lovegood?" The center would, ideally, be protected, helping the champion keep in contact with the points and the protector.

"No, that was merely a side benefit I was happy to see. If Harry and Luna had been dating longer, then she might have been the center, but maybe not even then. The only person better suited to the job would have been Tabitha, and what are the odds of her sitting back in the castle?"

Lloyd merely snorted at the idea.

"Exactly."

"You know you can loiter back in the castle, too," Lloyd pointed out.

"Are you daft, or merely being insulting?"

"From the look you're giving me, I'd best say 'daft' and leave things at that."

"Tabby?"

"Yes, dear?"

"Is . . . is Rina sleeping with Ron Weasley?"

"Yes, dear."

"I'LL CASTRATE HIM AND THEN KILL HIM!"

"No, dear," Tabitha said, blocking his exit to her room.

"What do you mean, 'no, dear'!"

"First of all, Sabrina knows all the reasons why she should not engage in sexual intercourse. Secondly, she also knows that breaking the Maiden's Charm would be incredibly dangerous during these rituals, even if she were ready for that, which she's not, and she knows she is not. Third, she and Ron are so shy they haven't even gotten to heavy petting or partial nudity, let alone something like showering together or real sexual contact. I'm not saying their sleeping together is as innocent as what we did in our first two years of druid training, but it's similar."

"We were a lot younger, a lot shyer, and had druids looking after us."

"True," Tabitha admitted. "Now the others are a lot less innocent."

"Really?"

"Really. Ginny and Neville do just about everything a boy and girl can do without extra equipment or breaking the Maiden Charm -- and I bet her virginity will be gone within a month of her graduating Hogwarts, marriage or not. Harry and Luna are less innovative, but more sensual. Ginny and Hermione act much like Harry and Luna in bed." Henry looked very confused now. "Luna and Hermione are almost chaste. Luna, Harry, and Hermione are technically chaste, but there is an awful lot of non-sexual stroking and kissing."

Henry was so shocked he really couldn't speak.

"Come now, Henry, admit that had you had your way, we would have been much the same in school. And remember, I was that way in school, even if not with boys."

Henry was still trying to form words.

"We do not have to worry much about this group. The girls, and I do mean **ALL** the girls, know where to draw the lines, and none of these boys are going to cross those lines. There are plenty of teens who are not so responsible, but this group is."

Henry finally managed to form a word. "But. . . ."

"No, dear, no buts. I know most fathers, maybe all fathers, hate the idea of their little girls growing up and doing things with and to boys that they dreamed of having girls do with them when they were teens, but it's a fact of life."

He frowned. "But how. . . ."

"The girls talk to me a little, and I keep an eye on them. I am also a much better dreamwalker and dream-sifter than Harry or Luna, although I suspect Harry has more power in that as well."

"Dream-sifter?"

"Seeing their memories, rather than their fantasies." She grinned. "Shall I tell you what our daughter dreamed about doing with the Blue and Green Quidditch team in the showers?"

"No!"

"I came across that one last summer by accident, when I was giving her some instructions. I have to admit, I rather wish I hadn't."

"**You** are a voyeur."

"A little," she admitted, "and most of us with this gift are, from what I hear. And this vacation it's rather necessary. I'm sure I can trust them, but hormones are very powerful."

"So the reasons I don't have to worry are that the teens are totally trustworthy, and you're spying on them?"

Tabitha shrugged. "I'm a mother. It's part of the job description. **Your** mother gave me some very subtle hints about pleasing you, you know, and told me where she wouldn't interrupt us - - places where we could do all that we did but not really go further."

"She knew. . . ?"

"That, or she was an amazingly good guesser."

Monday went much like Sunday, although all the teens noticed that Henry was giving them strange looks whenever he thought they weren't looking. Even Ron and Neville noticed. It only made Ron nervous, however.

The group had more important things to think about than Henry Dorff's odd looks. Each 'point' now undertook their series of oaths. When the rituals were over, Tom, Hermione, and Henry were totally exhausted.

"Get in there and take a shower," Tabitha commanded.

"Why is everyone yelling at me this evening?" Tom complained.

"Probably because you've been bossing us around the last few days, not to mention all that torture you put us through."

Tom looked around to make certain no one was listening. "Don't tell the others," he said softly. "The tattoos don't mean anything, I just figured it was the only way I'd ever get to see all your tits."

"Ha ha, very funny," Tabitha said drily. "I think Hermione's already too mature for you."

"Dammit, does **everyone** know my business?"

"No, in this case probably just Lloyd, myself, and maybe Luna, besides Hermione herself," Tabitha said. "I don't have to tell you what I will have to do to you if you touch her before her seventeenth birthday?"

"No," Tom replied in an exasperated tone.

"Good. It's bad enough to have to worry about the three teen couples without having to worry about you, too."

Tom just snarled a little.

"Go on and rest," Tabitha again commanded. "You've done this brilliantly so far, you don't want to mess things up at this point."

"I'll show you my tattoo is you'll show me yours."

"Ronnie, they're the same tattoo."

"But. . . ."

"Ronnie, do you want to sleep alone?"

"No."

"Then my ground rules."

"Alright. . . ."

"Of course, if you **want** to show me yours you may, but that doesn't mean I **have** to show you mine."

Ron smiled. Rina was at least a little more interested in him physically than Hermione had been, and being younger, she at least had some excuse, in his mind, for not going faster. They'd get there, sooner or later (hopefully sooner), of that he was certain.

Sabrina wasn't. She was waiting to hear if she would be allowed to join Ron in Harry's summer training. She (rightly) suspected her mother wouldn't let on until after the Yule holidays.

Chapter VII

Tuesday, December 31, 1996

The potion based on the group's blood was ready Tuesday morning. The final ritual would involve the potion, more rituals oaths, and some slight mixing of blood. Tudor and the nine others would share their blood directly with Hermione and Harry, while Hermione would share hers with each of them, plus Harry. Harry would only be sharing his with Hermione. A final tattooing to finish the process, a final potion, and another oath would conclude the entire process.

The 'points' were glad to learn there were only tiny tattoos involved for them. This would be a small four-leaf clover tattooed over their base left collar bone. Tudor would have a small dagger tattooed over his right collar bone. Hermione would have a small blue nine-pointed star over where the collar bones met. Henry would need all three.

Again, they had nothing to eat more than twelve hours before the process started, and drank nothing but water. The rituals, oaths, blood-mixing, and tattoos went off without even a hint of a mistake. The final oaths were a bit frightening, as the power surging through the group showed that they had true meaning, instead of being just words.

At last, a little after 1:00, it was over. The group was exhausted and drenched in sweat, more from the emotional and magical exertions and the stress than from just the physical efforts involved.

Cadfael had them put on heavy robes, and led them outside. The air was just below freezing. The ground was covered with over a foot of snow, and it gave the trees a magical look of their own. The wind was coming from the village, and they could smell the wood smoke, and hints from the bakery and the food cooking at the tavern and in the homes.

"You can see and even smell a community," Cadfael told them, with a wave towards Carantouan. Dressed in full white druid robes, with a golden sickle, he seemed to somehow blend in with the forest on the mountain. "You now form a community, a family, of your own. In some senses, you already formed one before this ritual. A community had formed around Tabitha -- a mentor, a lover, two friends, and a daughter. Another had formed around Harry -- the Weasleys and Harry's other close friends. You know the connections between the two parts of the group even better than I. You should get to know them better."

After giving them blessings as a group, Cadfael blessed each in turn and whispered encouragements. He went to Harry first. "To be at the center of this skein of fate would be a burden to anyone. You bear it better than nearly anyone I have ever heard of. Do not push your community away. They all care for you, even the girl who barely knows you and the young men who nearly betrayed you through pride. Let them carry a little of your burden, and let your other mentors do the same. And never fear -- in this or another lifetime, you will be with those lost."

"Thank you."

"Is there anything else I can do for you, my child?"

"You know a lot of magic we don't, correct?"

"Yes. We know much of the magic available to you, but not all of it. Likewise, we have secrets not readily available to others."

"Could you help a friend of mine? Remus Lupin?"

"The werewolf?"

"Yes, sir."

He thought a moment. "We cannot cure your friend, alas. We do have a potion which I believe is slightly different than the Wolfsbane Potion. I shall seek permission to give the formula to Tabitha for consideration. I am sorry I can do no more."

"Thank you."

Cadfael went next to Tudor, whom he merely reassured would have the full support of the Hidden until Voldemort was destroyed. He went to Hermione next.

"You have been most impressive, daughter. I understand from Tabitha that you have many questions about the Open Belief?"

"Yes, sir, I have." As she got to know the Confederation people better, she had become very curious about the Old Belief.

"At least two acolytes must approve an application to the Open Believers for it to be considered. I shall tell her that should she recommend any of you, I shall approve it. And, should she recommend you to the Owls, although you do not have the training or the family ties, I shall work for your approval there as well."

"Thank you! That would be wonderful!"

"It would take some doing, with your lack of experience, but you at least partially make up for that in intelligence, courage, and even a little wisdom."

He left a smiling Hermione and went to Tabitha. After repeating what he had told Hermione, Cadfael went on, "You have made me very proud to know you. While Tudor has been the political force, you have provided the cohesion."

"Thank you, Master," she replied.

"Will you be joining young Harry in his summer training, assuming the end has not occurred before then?"

"Yes, Master, I shall."

"May I ask a favor of you?"

"Of course!"

"We are expecting another child in early July."

"Congratulations!"

"May I ask that you stand godmother?"

"An Outsider godmother to a Hidden child?"

"You are an acolyte, and a member of our clan. It is not usual, but it is permitted."

"Then I shall be proud to."

"Thank you. Have all these been touched in their dreams?"

Tabitha thought about that. "I'm not certain if Ginny, Hermione, or Neville have. Percy certainly hasn't. I'll try to dreamwalk with at least some of them tonight."

"Good." Cadfael moved next to Henry. "Your faith continues to shine brightly."

"Thank you, Master."

"Have you admitted to Tabitha your error in once putting your career above your relationships?"

"Yes," Henry admitted. "And she's finally allowed me back into her heart."

"Good. Don't let your great current responsibilities prevent you from making an official commitment to her."

Henry looked startled, but then admitted. "You're right."

"Thank you," Cadfael teased. "Remember, we druids are supposed to be wise, although few people ever treat me that way."

"Give yourself a few more decades," Henry teased back, for few Hidden had reached Cadfael's positions before the age of 60.

"True. Anyway, marry the woman. Try and have at least one more child after this is over, if I am correct about how both of you feel on the subject."

"Yes, Master."

Cadfael went to the last North American point, giving Lloyd just a few words of encouragement. He went over to Luna next. "How am I, my far-seeing child?"

Luna looked the druid in the eye. "Not as comfortable as you would like to seem. You wish you could come fight Voldemort yourself, and leave your world behind."

"But I don't."

"You don't because you believe, and because it's safe."

Cadfael grimaced. "Well, that's better than just because it's safe."

"It's safe for you, because it's your world, and it's best for your world, because you aren't a blind follower."

"Thank you, daughter. Harry is lucky in his love."

Luna frowned. "I shouldn't be Seeing this clearly."

"All your powers are heightened to some degree now, child. The power will partially dissipate and you will learn how to control the rest quickly enough."

Ginny looked nervously at the approaching druid. "What's the matter, daughter?"

"I'm sorry; druids don't have the best reputations with some old families."

"Yes, and the Weasleys and the Prewitts and all the others in your blood are old families," he replied with a smile. He signaled Ron and Percy over. "We're not certain, but we think some of your ancestors were some of the Belgics -- a people of mostly Celtic with some Germanic ancestry, who dominated northern Gaul and south-eastern Britain in the last centuries of Celtic and druidic power. They didn't always care for the druids, either."

He looked at the three. "You three are blood. Please try and work together. You know what has divided you in the past."

"That would be mostly my fault," Percy admitted.

"Mostly?" Ron demanded.

"You are all three proud people," Cadfael pointed out. "It is your one common fault. Your pride drove you to break with your family," he told Percy. He turned on Ron. "Your pride refuses to let him back."

Ron looked at the ground. "Percy, are you really sorry you broke with us, or are you mostly sorry you were shown to be wrong?"

"Both," Percy admitted. "I was too proud of my promotion. Still, I felt the way I felt, Ron. You know that it hasn't been easy for any of us to be raised poor. You don't know how much Dad is resented at work. And you should know that as many tricks Fred and George played on you, they hit me ten times worse. So all that came out at once. I can't feel too bad about blowing up, only about not being able to apologize. I've apologized to Professor Dumbledore, to Harry, and to Mum and Dad. I'm sorry I sent you that letter last year. I was only trying to help you, but I can see now why you hated it."

"I'm sorry I said you weren't my brother any more," Ron mumbled.

"I forgive you, and I hope you'll forgive us," Ginny added.

Cadfael moved Ginny slightly away. "Be good to Neville Longbottom. Give up your dreams of Harry and be satisfied with being his sister."

"I do care for Neville," Ginny said, "but there's just something about Harry. . . ."

"They are both special young men," Cadfael said. "Try concentrating on how special Neville is."

"Yes, sir," Ginny said with a small smile. She knew Neville was a special person.

Cadfael went back over to Percy. "You are redeeming yourself, Percy Weasley. Continue on your current course and you may find that your path may veer back towards where you hoped it would go. Do you have a love?"

"I did," Percy admitted. "We argued last year, too."

"Have you apologized to her as well?"

"No," Percy admitted. "I haven't found the words."

"Try, 'I'm sorry, you were totally right,' even if she wasn't."

"That's illogical, but you're probably right," Percy said.

"If men and women agree on anything, it's probably that the other gender is illogical," Cadfael said with a smile. "Tell her you hope she'll write back, and then leave it up to her. Try to see that even if she is no longer interested, she doesn't resent you."

"Yes, sir."

He turned to Ron. "And how are you, my hot-tempered young friend?"

"I'm never going to live that down, am I?"

"Should you?"

"Some day. . . ."

"Harry Potter relied on you to be his guide to your world, Ronald Weasley. Did you complete your greatest mission?"

Ron look ashamed. "No. No, I didn't."

"Work hard, Ronald Weasley. Be good to Sabrina. You will have a new fate. Look for it."

"Yes, sir."

As a student who had not yet completed her fourth year of druid training, Sabrina bowed low. "Wise Master."

"Tell me, daughter, why did you come, why did you volunteer for this?"

"Well, Dad surprised me with the offer to come here. I came to be with Ronnie, Mom, and Dad," Sabrina admitted. "I volunteered because it was the right thing to do. The Hidden might

not always care about the evil in the world, but Mom and Dad, and Uncle Tudor and Uncle Tom and Uncle Lloyd have always made one thing clear, and that is it's everyone's job to fight evil. This Voldemort is evil. My family have devoted their lives to the cause. How could I say no? Why would I say no?"

"I hope you never, never receive answers to those questions, my child. Don't rush your relationship with Ronald Weasley. If he is the right one, you will know it by the end of the summer."

"Yes, Wise Master." She bowed low and stepped away.

"Well, Neville, I am pleased to meet you."

"Really?"

Cadfael smiled. "Really. You have learned you are stronger and more capable than you had thought. This ritual should have finished the healing for what your mind went through. You will be even more powerful and capable than you had been just a few days ago. Use the power well."

"That I can promise," Neville swore.

"I know." Cadfael turned to Tom. "You have done brilliantly. I have never seen such a complex ritual done so well." Then he whispered. "Set up a dream circle in two nights."

"Yes, sir."

Cadfael looked at the group. "May the Powers Bless you all, and your endeavors." He disappeared.

"Alright," Tabitha called out. "We're all tired. Rest until Five. Dinner is at Seven, and we'll celebrate the end of the calendar year at midnight!"

For once, everyone except for Tudor went back to their own bedrooms, Henry for the first time since he had been there. Tudor disappeared, making his way to the Capitol. He would be returning to Britain in a few days. Only his pledge to Harry, made fifteen years before, had brought him away from his other duties. It was now time to get back to some of them.

The rest of the group drifted off into exhausted naps.

Wednesday, January 1, 1997

5:24 am

"Hello."

"Hi, Luna! Do you want to swing with me?"

Luna smiled and said, "I'm a little large for this swing, Hermione."

"Why are you so big?"

"Because we're dreaming, and right now you look about seven."

"Oh." Hermione continued to swing on her child's swing set.

"I've never seen anything like this," Luna said.

"Muggles have them, at school if not always at home. My uncle bought it for me when he visited from America. Three swings, a slide, and a see-saw, although he called it a teeter-totter." Hermione giggled. "Americans have silly names for things."

Luna smiled at the seven-year old and looked around, realizing the swing set was where the Granger's pool would be later on.

"Are you having fun?"

"Yes," Hermione said, a little doubtfully.

"You don't sound too sure."

"Everyone hoped the other children would come play with me." Little Hermione stopped swinging, and her jaw quavered. "They never would, just like they wouldn't come swim with me, later on." Hermione lifted a teary face to Luna. "You swam with me. Will you **please** swing with me?" she begged, nearly breaking Luna's heart with her emotional plea.

"Of course we will, my sweet," Harry said, coming up to them. Harry scrunched his face like Tonks trying to change herself, and suddenly he was about Hermione's age and size. "Nobody would play with me, either," he said, taking the middle swing. He glanced at Luna and waved his hand.

Luna was seven now as well. "I guess I can swing after all," she said, amazed at what Harry had done.

"Will you teeter-totter on my see-saw?" Hermione asked, her eyes wide. "Nobody has ever used it, and it probably feels lonely."

"Hermione," Harry asked, "do you take turns on the swings so they don't feel left out?"

"Of course!" said the wide-eyed little girl. "And I slide when I start and stop, so the slide feels useful, too, but the see-saw needs two." The little girl looked very sad at the see-saw's fate.

Luna smiled, and so the two girls played on the teeter-totter, while a smiling Harry swung. "I wish we could have played like this when we were small," he said.

"Can we play, too?"

Hermione stopped her see-saw motion and scowled for an instant at Ron and Sabrina, but then she said, "Of course you can."

"But we all have to see-saw with Hermione," Harry declared.

Thus it was that Tabitha, checking things out a short time later, found five children playing on a playset, all looking and acting like they were about seven -- Harry and Ron were each trying to go higher than the other on the swings while Luna swung sedately between them, and Sabrina and Hermione slowly rose and sank on the see-saw.

"Hi, Mommy!" Sabrina called out. "Pway with us!"

"I think I'm a bit too old for . . . oh, my!"

Tabitha was now an age she couldn't remember ever being. "You are an amazing wizard, Harry Potter."

"See-saw with me, Mommy!" Sabrina called. She looked at Hermione. "May we, He'mione?" Tabitha reminded herself that Sabrina had had problems with r's and l's when she was young.

"Okay!" Hermione got off carefully. "Let's all slide!" She turned to the two red-headed girls and said, "Join us when you want to!" She hugged Harry and Ron. "This has been the happiest birthday dream ever!"

Hermione stretched. She couldn't remember such a nice dream as the vivid one she had had just before she woke up. She wriggled, and realized Harry and Luna were gone already. That made her frown. She prided herself on waking up early. She sat up and gasped.

There was a children's swing set in her bedroom. There was a sign on it that said, "*NO, IT WASN'T JUST A DREAM*"

Hermione smiled. The ritual had worked.

Ginny wasn't happy about being left out of the previous evening's dream. Tom Lawrence managed to calm her down, when he announced that he would try to build a dream circle that evening, where they could all dreamwalk together.

Tabitha lectured to them on the ethics of dream-walking, (she ignored some smirks from Tom and Henry) as well as made suggestions on how to keep some of their dreams private. The other three experienced dreamwalkers spoke, and Henry and Ron spoke a little about their experiences.

After the morning discussion, the group broke up. Tabitha took Harry into the deserted tv room.

"Harry . . . how did you do that last night?"

"Do what?"

"Change us into seven year olds."

Harry frowned. "We were dreaming. Why couldn't I do that?"

"If we had all been playing if your head, it would have made sense. However, we were in Hermione's head. You should only have been able to manipulate yourself and Hermione."

"Well, I don't know how I did it, but I did."

"I think you also transformed us correctly," Tabitha said. "You couldn't have known Sabrina couldn't always pronounce her r's and l's until she was nine."

Harry shrugged. "Maybe Master J can help explain."

"I suppose," she said, shaking her head. "I'll write it up. Tudor can give it to J when he gets back to London."

Harry shrugged. This didn't seem any more amazing an ability than flying a broomstick perfectly his first try or producing a Patronus. He went off to join his friends. It was snowing again, and the teens were going to build a snowman.

Chapter VIII

Wednesday, January 1, 1997

"I'm glad you agreed not to set up that dream circle until tomorrow night," Tabitha remarked to her friends as the tired teens trooped back to their bedrooms for the night.

"Well, Tudor isn't here tonight anyway, so we might as well wait," Tom said. "What do you think they're going to do?"

"Harry will bring them together," Tabitha said with great confidence. "Sabrina and Luna both know to come get me if there are any problems."

"You really **must** stop dreaming about Harry," Luna gently teased Ginny. "It doesn't bother me, but it's not fair to Neville."

"Sorry," Ginny said, embarrassed. "It's getting better. Are you real?"

"Yes, I'm dreamwalking with you." The two girls were sleeping together, so that Luna would have the physical contact she might need to initiate Ginny's first dreamwalk.

"It's hard to control your dreams," Ginny said, defending herself.

"True," Luna admitted. "Still, if you're going to dream of Harry, you might as well make him anatomically correct." Luna paused. "Is that what Neville looks like?"

Ginny looked closely. "Yes. It looks a little bigger on Harry, since he's smaller."

"Not in that respect." Harry's equipment didn't thicken at all, but it did lengthen by 20%.

"Oh, my! And I thought Neville was large!"

The two girls looked at each other and both burst out laughing in ways neither would do outside their dreams.

"Another cauldron gone, Longbottom? What's the matter with you?" A fanged, ten foot tall Snape loomed over a cowering First year Neville.

Suddenly, Snape shrank down into a screaming baby. Harry walked over and stuck a pacifier in into the greasy-haired baby's mouth.

"Thanks, Harry," Neville said. "I hate this dream."

"Yeah, I hate my dreams, too. This is what my sub-conscious is dreaming at the moment." A wall turned into a movie screen, and Neville saw Peter Pettigrew cutting off his hand. Neville retched slightly, and turned away.

Harry waved the screen away. "There are worse. It's still early. Why don't you sleep more deeply. If we don't get some real sleep, we'll all be a bit out of it in the morning."

"Okay, Harry," Neville said drowsily.

Harry drew all the students together at little after 5:30. They were in the large field near the apple trees at the Burrow. "Why here, Harry?" Ron asked.

Harry shrugged. "This is the closest thing I have to a home, I guess. It is your and Ginny's home, and Percy's, too, for that matter. Hermione loves it here. Luna has visited, and I'm sure Neville and Rina will in the future."

"Oh . . . that makes sense." Ron paused. "What shall we do, fly?"

"That's a good idea," Harry said with a grin.

"You know I don't like to fly, Harry," Hermione said, coming up to them.

"You'll like this flying." He called out, "Everyone take off your shoes and socks!" Harry remembered a Muggle film he had watched at Mrs. Figg's once. Harry splayed his fingers at each student in turn, throwing a sparkling dust on them one at a time.

"What are you doing, Harry?" Hermione demanded. "Harry!" she squealed, as they all floated off the ground.

"I'll be Peter, you can be Wendy," Harry called, flying off, "and these are the children we found!"

"I don't want to be the responsible one all the time, Harry Pan!"

"Fine!" Harry swooped down and touched Hermione's shoulder. "We'll just play tag. You're it!"

"Harry!"

"If we can't play in our dreams, where can we play?"

Ron was floating and laughing at them just a few yards away from Hermione. She set her jaw and flew over and slapped Ron's foot, making him spin in the air. "Fine, you're it!"

The teens played tag in their dreams until it was time to wake up.

"Why do we even need a dream circle?" Ginny asked as Tom finished chalking the runes on the outlines of the circle down in the open area where they had done the rituals.

"It should help coordinate our sleep-cycles," Hermione said, since Tom was concentrating on the last runes.

The only person who looked nervous was Percy. He had no experience with dreamwalking, he had never had any Occlumency training. He was worried about keeping his private thoughts private.

Percy was yelling at himself. This had been an occasional and always ignored dream for the year after he had stormed out of his parents' house. In the half year since they had been proven more and more right, and he more and more wrong, the dreams had become harsher and more common. Tonight, three different versions of himself were yelling at him, while he sat behind the desk in his first office, his head in his hands.

"Guilt's the worst, isn't it?"

Percy looked up. The other three Percys were still yelling at him, but their voices were so muted he really couldn't understand them.

"Hello, Harry." Percy swallowed nervously. "Been here long?"

"No, not really." Harry looked at Percy. "Would you care to see some of the things I feel guilty about?"

"No," Percy said. "My own guilt is more than enough to bear." He looked puzzled. "Why did you ask for me, Harry?"

"Until my trial, I had thought you were my friend," Harry said sadly. "You always gave me advice without preaching at me, you seemed to like me. Why did you think I was leading you astray?"

"I never thought you were leading me astray, Harry."

Harry understood. "You were worried I'd lead Ron astray."

"I just don't understand you, Harry," Percy said. "I understand Hermione. She's not quite as much like myself as I had thought she was, but we're similar. I understand Ron, maybe not as much as I thought, still more than he thinks. I did like you, your first three years, but even then, you . . . bothered me."

"What? Why?"

"Harry, you can do things no wizard under thirty should even be able to attempt, and yet there you were, saving something that even the Professors couldn't protect, defeating monsters and winning a tournament that you shouldn't have had any chance at if twenty teachers had been helping you. And there you also were, a student I really cared about, that I even identified

with, yet who was also dragging my favorite brother along, making him alternate between hero-worship, having a closer friendship than I've ever had, and jealousy. Dragging him into danger throughout your First year and on into your Second and Third." Percy paused and then added, "And because he was what you cared for most. Not to mention Ginny, who had a crush on you at least through the Yule Ball. How could I not worry that either you were somehow manipulating everything, or if you weren't that they would still be hurt or killed if they were anywhere near you?"

"I didn't bespell them, Percy. And I tried to push them away."

"I know that now," Percy said. "Part of me still doesn't like it, but I know now that you're the pivot. I know you don't want to be, and that's why I can forgive you. You didn't want this, and you hate it. And I was wrong to blame you."

"But you still hate it that Ron and Ginny are involved."

"I do," Percy answered. "I just don't blame you, or them, for it like I used to. If you had any choice in the matter, maybe I could blame you, but you don't."

"I'm glad you don't," Harry answered. "Blaming myself is bad enough." He managed a small smile. "Are you ready to play?"

"Play?"

"Play," Harry said firmly.

Percy was suddenly ten. "Harry?" He looked, and saw Harry was the same. Harry gestured around them.

Percy looked and saw he was at the Burrow, although there was some sort of swing set set up near the orchard, where two girls were playing on the see-saw. Behind them, people were flying in the air without broomsticks, playing tag. All looked to be about ten.

"Hermione and Tabitha like to see-saw," Harry said. "The rest of us are playing tag, although Ron likes to, well, there he goes."

Percy saw Ron fly over to the swing set and throw himself down the slide.

"That's Ron, all right," Percy said with a shake of his head. "At least he can't tear his clothes permanently here."

When Harry looked at him, Percy explained. "Ron always got hand-me-downs. Even with magic, cloth can only be repaired so many times. Didn't you ever notice that he was always the most ragged of us? Even when he gets something new, somehow he always manages to wear things out even faster than the twins."

"You know, I have to say I never noticed," Harry said. "I do know he was still better dressed than I was until this past year."

"I assure you, Ron noticed, Harry," Percy said softly. "We all noticed how much worse off we were than the vast majority of our fellow students. It's human nature to see whatever it is you

don't have, even when what you don't have isn't all that important compared with what you do have."

"You might be right," Harry acknowledged. "Hermione had parents almost as affectionate as yours," (Percy winced) "and every material thing she could want. That swing set showed her that she had no friends, because no one would come and play with her."

"Thank you for asking for me, and for telling me that, Harry," Percy said. He went over and started to swing. Tom came and started to swing as well. Harry smiled and went off to play tag.

The entire time, Hermione played on her see-saw. When Ron tried to coax her away, Luna and Ginny gently led him away. Harry explained (again) why the swing set was important to Hermione, and each member of the circle took their turn on the see-saw. Then, one by one, each person drifted off into deeper sleep, until just Hermione and Harry were left.

"Thank you, Harry," Hermione said. "I don't know why this has been so important, but it was. And I don't just mean for me."

"It shows you and me, and Percy, Tom, Lloyd, and Neville, that we have friends -- we were all lonely in different ways and in different degrees. It reminds Tabitha that she had a childhood, even if she can't remember it, and brings her closer to Rina. It reminds Tudor and Henry that we're all equal to some degree -- they both love commanding. And it makes Ron and Ginny remember how much they love Percy, and how much they had that some of us didn't."

"How did you get so wise, Harry?"

"What do you mean? I learned from you, of course. I only tune you out when you nag, not when you offer your brilliant analysis," Harry teased.

Hermione gave Harry a dirty look. Harry smiled back, and turning back into his sixteen year old self, leaned over and kissed Hermione's forehead. "Go to sleep. We're likely to have an active day soon."

Over the next two days, Harry worked very hard on all his spells. Henry, Lloyd, Sabrina, and especially Percy were surprised at how quickly Harry adjusted to the new situation. By early Saturday morning, Harry could control the amount of power he was borrowing very minutely, even, to even Tom and Tabitha's surprise, into borrowing power from the individual points. It was still at a very low level, but that should slowly increase over time. It remained to be seen how well Harry would be able to control his powers when the people in the group were spread out over a fifth of the world. It also remained to be seen how well Harry could take a curse under the ritual.

At least the group wasn't returning blindly to the outside world. The Wizarding Network News satellite channel hadn't reported any problems which could remotely be connected with Voldemort. Of course, since the dementor attack on the Dursleys hadn't made it as more than

a brief announcement, that wasn't totally comforting. Still, Tudor had said the same, so that was some comfort.

The group broke up at 11:00 Saturday morning. Tudor had left the previous morning. Henry escorted Sabrina and Ron back to the Ysgol, and would return to London that evening.

The rest of the group portkeyed to Lloyd's cottage in Hogsmeade. "Your gear will be sent up to the castle later," Lloyd told them. "Why don't we got over to the Three Broomsticks for lunch, or an early dinner, as it would be now."

The teens shrugged. Tom and Lloyd escorted the five teens, while Tabitha and Percy made their way to the castle to report in. No one remarked that Hermione now had pierced ears.

"Well, Harry," Professor Dumbledore said as Harry settled into a chair, "I hope you had a productive holiday?"

"Yes, sir. At least I hope so, sir."

Snape, the only other person in the Headmaster's office, sneered slightly.

"Comment, Severus?"

"Obviously, I should not be a receiver of the more sensitive information, Headmaster. However, I will point out that Potter here will have to find some place more secure than his relatives' this summer. The Dark Lord has found one way to breach the defenses. He will find another. And unless Potter has achieved his goals in Occlumency, he probably should not know your plans, either."

"You haven't tried my defenses, Professor," Harry said quietly.

"Obviously, since you challenge me, you can stand up to an expected attack," Snape said, with a curl of his lip.

"Any time, Professor," Harry offered.

"Yes, good idea," Dumbledore agreed. He turned to Snape. "However, if you do take Harry up on this offer, Severus, you may not punish him for any actions he takes in response."

"Fair enough," Snape conceded.

"I know I left a message that I wanted to see you as soon as you returned to the castle," Dumbledore told Harry, "however, I need to discuss some important intelligence with Severus. Could we meet in the morning at Nine?"

"Yes, sir," Harry answered, standing.

"Severus?" Dumbledore prompted.

"Yes? Oh, here," Snape said to Harry, handing him five small vials. "Give one to each of your four friends. It will put you to sleep for seven hours in about three minutes."

"Yes, sir; thank you, sir." He turned to Dumbledore to ask a question.

"Whatever your plan, Harry, please go ahead."

"Yes, sir." Harry left.

"Can you tell me what they did?" Snape asked.

"How is your arithmancy, Severus?"

"Fair, sir. I'm sure you remember I earned an O N.E.W.T., but I confess I haven't kept up on it, other than as it applies to potions."

"See if you can understand this." The original arithmetical schematic of Harry's connections with Voldemort appeared. It took Snape nearly half an hour, but he understood it.

"I should not tell you what was done, or what training Harry will receive," Dumbledore stated. "However, we hope to block off the problems you see here, and give Harry the training he needs to control his powers. He also has access to a group's reserve power."

"Two questions for you to ponder, Headmaster," Snape said after a few minutes reflection, frowning. "For the short-term, can the boy actually kill the Dark Lord? I don't mean will he have the ability and power to do so. I mean, can he actually, deliberately, kill? It is not an easy thing to do, deliberately killing a man, for most people. Can he actually do it?"

"There are two beings I believe Harry can steel himself to kill: Bellatrix Lestrange and Voldemort."

"And if he can, will he be able to stop? Can we trust him with this much power?" Snape shrugged. "Can we trust **anyone** with this much power?"

"I believe so, Severus. Unless Harry has reserves which even I can't see, without this boost in power, he is slightly less powerful than I. The group can also monitor the power he draws from them."

"You believe you can trust him? Does that mean you **hope** so? Or do you believe you can really trust him?"

"It means what I say it means," Dumbledore said.

"And what happens if we can't? What happens if he turns?"

"This boy will **never** turn, Severus," Dumbledore said sternly.

"Very well, I'll accept that. However, will he show the restraint you have? Or will he try to control the wizarding world, not for his benefit, but for the benefit of others? Potter's friends, especially Granger, are so idealistic they could cause as many wars as Grindelwald. Even if

they do so from the best of motives, they could still cause as much suffering as Grindelwald did from more questionable motives."

Dumbledore suddenly sagged a bit. "Now you have identified a possible problem for the future," he agreed, to Snape's shock. "Wars do not always start from base or even questionable motives. Harry will never be even tempted into fighting for power. He may be tempted into fighting to right wrongs which should be fought politically instead of by force."

"Is that why you refused to take office, Headmaster?" Snape asked, curious.

"Of course it is," he answered wearily, "or at least one reason. The daily administration of the school is nothing compared to being minister, and I find the current amount of red tape and bureaucracy frustrating enough as it is. I would find being minister close to intolerable. Yet more importantly, I would find it galling to work through committees and bureaucracies and community meetings. It takes a special person to be able to work in such an environment."

"That's not what we were talking about, sir."

Dumbledore sighed. "No, of course it isn't. Not directly, anyway. No, I fear Harry may be tempted to use force to do good. That, alas, almost never works. Force may at times be needed to correct evil, and good may therefore result, but we can not force people to be good."

"If it were possible, you would have forced me years ago," Snape agreed. "What are we going to do about it?"

"At this point, there is little we can do. I have seen it fail too often to be seriously tempted, but the temptation is **always** there. Miss Lovegood would instinctively see the problem. So, to lesser degrees, would Miss Weasley, Mister Longbottom, and even Mister Ron Weasley."

"How about Granger?"

"Exactly. Miss Granger is tempted in that direction. It is the one personality characteristic of hers I think we would both agree is a flaw." Dumbledore sat up straighter in his chair and slightly shook his head, as if to clear away whatever visions he might have seen. "These are problems for the far future, Severus. Let us defeat evil, and then worry about where good might inadvertently lead us."

"Yes, Headmaster," Snape said smoothly, standing, an idea forming in his mind. "It is certainly nothing to worry about . . . for the moment." Snape left, smiling on the inside, knowing that while he would never be able to test Potter's defenses now, in the end, he might win.

Chapter IX

Albus Dumbledore had scuffed his way into his office early that morning. He had stayed up late the night before, going over all the many threads he held in his skilled hands. Things, he had thought, might finally be coming together.

"Good morning, Mister Dumbledore."

It was nearly impossible to shock or surprise or even startle Albus Dumbledore. Confronted by a druid sitting in his office, unannounced, unadmitted -- Dumbledore would have confessed to all that and more.

"I am Cadfael ap Tudur ap Mawrth ap Rhys. I believe you know of me?"

"You helped direct Harry's community ritual," Dumbledore managed to say.

"Quite so. I am here to tell you we are taking up an option on our lease."

Dumbledore frowned, wishing he'd had his usual cup of strong tea, or better yet a triple espresso followed by an extra large Turkish coffee. "Lease?"

"You are not aware that the area around us, the areas of Hogsmeade, Hogwarts, the lake in between, the fields, and the area you sometimes call the Forbidden Forest is ours? The Hidden, the Holders of the True Faith, that is? Well, it is. We leased it to the Four Founders of Hogwarts, in what you would call the year 948, although the actual building started the next year, and the first students were admitted in 960."

Dumbledore managed to sit in his chair. With a bit more effort, he managed to force his jaws closed.

"One reason why the wards are so strong at Hogwarts is the magic of this area. And the magic is powerful because we helped make it so over a period of some five thousand years. Shall I produce the magical contracts?"

Dumbledore shook his head, "No. At least not yet."

"Very good. Now, about six miles into the Forest is a small stone circle. We are reactivating it. A small group of us will be staying around it in a village."

"Why?"

"Because Harry Potter is a key, not just to destroying this Voldemort, but a key to magic. There has not been a key born in Europe since the year 1429. The key before that was Godric Gryffindor, and the one before him was Myrddin, or Merlin if you prefer."

"And who was the last one?"

"The Master who led the Hidden over the Sea, and convinced those who call themselves the Old or True Believers to come with us."

"Is Harry . . . is Harry a key for your return? For the Scouring?"

"No," Cadfael stated. "Harry is like most of the previous keys. He stands for justice within the wizarding world. However, his victory will enable the True Believers to return and start proselytizing to the magical in western and central Europe. We have always had communities of the Faithful and the Hidden in our most important sites, which have remained veiled from your view. It is time to come back. And we are sure Harry can use our help, should this Voldemort come back stronger than Tudor Myrddin expects."

"I see. How did you get in here without setting off any wards or alarms?"

"Like I said, the magic here is our magic. We are in control."

Dumbledore did not feel assured. "You and your friends around Harry are a very arrogant group of young people."

"We are," Cadfael agreed. "And you are a very arrogant old man. You have over a hundred years experience on us, but that doesn't mean you're right. You have been fighting so hard to preserve life, to preserve society, that you have forgotten the lessons a master taught you when you traveled to North America as young man."

"I won't ask how you know that," Dumbledore stated.

"If you had taken the time to marvel at the lives you were trying to save, you might have understood them better. You can't go from little town to town, trying to fix the injustices of the world as Doctor Lao did, but you can still take a leaf from the old man's teachings, as I have tried to. Marvel at life, Albus Dumbledore. Not your own, of course, but at those around you. Then, perhaps, you will understand them a bit better."

"I shall try."

"We shall also provide a very nice person to run discussions of the Faith here over the next two and a half years. I hope you will allow any who wish to listen to our teaching to attend."

"Of course."

"Until later." Dumbledore stared in amazement, as Cadfael slowly faded from his sight.

Sunday, January 5, 1997
Malfoy Manor

"Well, well, I was wondering when either you or your friend would show up." Draco sneered. "What does the half-blood want now?"

"You really have a death wish, Malfoy."

"Corner, you're hardly in a position to criticize."

"At least I still have my wand."

"And yet you're on the run for telling that whining cow something that no Ravenclaw should have been stupid enough to believe."

Corner shrugged. "We were leaving anyway. Interesting, that he turned to us, instead of you."

"What were you doing?" Draco asked, interested despite himself.

"I'm hardly about to tell you, am I?" Corner retorted. "Now, are you willing to give us a little help, or not?"

"Help to do what?"

"Help for the Master," Corner snapped.

"Temper, temper," Draco reproved. "Be specific."

"We need at least three longish hairs from Potter."

"Three hairs? Polyjuice?"

"No, a summoning spell. Maybe as soon as Potter hits seventeen, maybe at Halloween, or at any point in between, the Master will be able to bring Potter to him. Well, if he's within six hundred miles or so he can summons him, which he certainly should be, after September First if not before."

"Has Potter been out of the country?"

Corner shrugged. "We don't know for sure, but we think so. We do know Weasley wasn't at the Ysgol over the vacation, so either he was back here without visiting his family, or Potter and his friends were with him someplace else, which seems more likely. We think Spain was the most likely place."

"Sounds reasonable," Draco admitted. He scowled at Corner. "Why didn't your Master use this charm before?" Draco demanded.

"It summons a person to a duel, so. . . ."

". . .it can't be used on those underage," Draco cut in. "Yes, that does make sense. Nothing before that?"

"A few plans are in motion, which may or may not result in Dumbledore's dismissal. They will certainly cause damage and embarrassment to Dumbledore and the Council if they work. If they don't, well, they're more for testing the new recruits. We already passed ours."

"He doesn't want to strike in a major way while the Confederation people are running things, does he?"

"Why challenge an extra opponent?"

Draco smiled. "I still have a few low-level people in the Ministry. The Ministry doesn't get full sovereignty back unless Myrddin and Dorff are in charge of security until your Master is caught and destroyed. No one anywhere near the top seems inclined to oppose the idea."

"Shit."

"Look at the recent articles in The Prophet. Taxes will be raised before the International leaves, to insure that families like mine won't be able to influence the Ministry through donations."

Corner looked even more discouraged.

"Now, is there a time limit on when he needs the hair?"

"No. Any time before the end of term. We need at least three, but obviously the more the better."

"I can't promise it will be done, but I can promise it will be attempted."

"I shall let the Master know."

"You do that."

The Ysgol

"You behave yourself, Princess," Henry told his daughter.

"I will, Dad," Sabrina replied in the exasperated, sighing tones of a typical teen. "Don't let Mom off the hook again."

"I'll do my best," Henry replied. He smiled, stooped slightly, and kissed her cheek.

"Daddy!"

Henry straightened up and scowled at Ron. "You'd best behave yourself, too," he growled at Ron.

Ron straightened to attention and swallowed nervously. "Yes, sir." Dorff nodded, and reentered the floo network to go to Newton, where he could start the process of returning to London.

Ron heaved a huge sigh of relief. Sabrina smiled and took his hand. "Regrets?" she asked.

"No," Ron admitted. "The holidays got off to a rocky start, but after that . . . no, no regrets. You?"

"None," she said. "We're helping my parents and your friends. I got to meet your brother and sister, and your friends. And above all. . . ." She tugged at Ron's collar, and they kissed deeply.

"Yeah," Ron whispered a few seconds later, "that was a very good part."

"It's still early. Maybe one of the little study rooms are open," she whispered back.

"The one that locks, and has that window in the door that's been permanently obscured?"

"That's the one."

"And what shall we do there?"

"Nothing we haven't done before," Sabrina warned, then she smiled, "but we'll enjoy it."

"We will," Ron agreed.

Hogwarts, Gryffindor Common Room

"Something's happened with them," Lavender said to her friends. She leaned back into Seamus' arms. He squeezed her gently, making certain his forearms caressed the undersides of her breasts. Lavender giggled slightly and lightly slapped his arms.

"Cut that out, you two, if we're going to have a serious talk," Parvati hissed.

"Jealous?" Lavender teased.

"I know how to use my hands, and everything else," Dean murmured. He'd spent a lot of the break listening to Berry White, and found he now had the voice to imitate him, "I just know **when** to use them."

"That's right," Parvati agreed, following that up by sticking a tongue out at her best friend.

"Don't show it unless you mean to use it," Seamus said, which made the other three roll their eyes.

"Let's get back to the quintet," Dean said softly. "I assume you meant all five of them."

"They're closer," Lavender said. "They've only been back less than a day, and you can see it in their eyes. Those four act like they know where each one is at all times, and you can bet they're the same with Luna."

"Or at least Harry is," Seamus pointed out.

"No, look at them," Lavender said. "If Harry is that connected to Neville, then they're all connected to Luna."

The quartet near the window looked at the quartet near the fireplace. Even to anyone who didn't know them well, Harry and his friends formed little more than just a well-integrated unit. To the people who knew them well, like the quartet watching them, the change was amazing.

After almost forty-five more minutes of watching them while snuggling together, Parvati said softly, "In some ways, it's like . . . it's like watching me and Padma, or the Weasley twins."

"So they're not a quintet, they're quintuplets?" Seamus asked.

"That sounds about right," Dean agreed.

"Do you think Harry's doing anything with Ginny or Hermione?" Seamus asked softly.

"I doubt if he's doing much with either, especially Ginny," Lavender answered. "I also doubt Neville's doing anything with Hermione or Luna."

Lavender and Parvati exchanged a look that said that they would discuss other possibilities when the boys weren't around. Seamus and Dean both missed it. All of their attention was drawn to the four students standing up. Hermione hugged Neville, and hugged and kissed Harry lightly on the lips. Ginny also kissed Harry lightly, and Neville more deeply, and they all moved off together.

"I don't think we should try and hook Hermione up, even if it turns out she and Ron aren't together any more," Dean said.

"Look at the way Harry was moving -- raw power," Parvati said. "No one had better hit on her, either. If Hermione doesn't obliterate them, you can bet Harry will."

Unaware that the commentary on them had barely started, the quintet took their sleep potion, and quickly fell asleep.

With one exception, for Harry and his classmates the start of the spring term would be much as the autumn. The exception was apparation lessons. 'Apparation' covered several related concepts. The easiest was learning to apparate within one's line-of-sight. Students also learned the theory behind apparating to a familiar place, and also the hardest type of apparation, apparating to a set position by coordinates.

Nearly every witch and wizard could learn line-of-sight apparation, since all it took was a simple spell and not taking your eyes off your objective. The other two types of apparation took much more theoretical work and practice. Only those who could pass a very strict set of written and practical exams would receive licenses.

It was the practice that caused the problems. The majority of students understood that one could not apparate in and out of Hogwarts or the grounds. Some, however, failed to understand that this included apparating **within** the bounds of Hogwarts. About every three years, some student got splinched, which was nearly as painful as it looked, although not as deadly.

The problem was, it was so **tempting** to try out line-of-sight apparation out on the grounds, even on cold winter days. This year, the students resisted the temptation. The second Friday afternoon of the term, from 2:30 until 4:00, the chilled Sixth year students, and a few Seventh years, made their way out towards the gate leading to the Hogwarts grounds.

Normally, Madam Hooch taught apparation without aid. This year, Remus Lupin, Tobias Jones, and Tonks and two other aurors accompanied Madam Hooch and the students.

"Right," Madam Hooch said, turning on the students. "First of all, remember everything I told you back when you were learning how to fly back in your first year. Think of how much more serious and dangerous apparation is compared to simply flying a broomstick."

She let that sink in. The message was clear and obvious.

"You all should know that if you try to apparate on the other side of the gate, you **will** end up in pieces. Think about that for a moment or two!"

After a pause, she continued, "Now that **that** prospect has sunk in at least a little, now remember this. If you try to apparate **in** or **off** the grounds, those pieces will be larger in number, smaller in size, and all that much more difficult to join back together."

She glared at the students and brandished her wand. "Does anyone wish me to slice off a hand and foot, so that you **feel** what it will belike if you do something foolish this time?"

Needless to say, no one volunteered.

"Now, last week, we went over what you will be learning this term. No doubt, most of you read ahead to learn, or at least read, the spells. Therefore, many of you are just itching to try the basic line-of-sight spell at the least. Well, this is your chance."

There was a lot of happy murmuring at that.

"Quiet down! The good news is, unless you pick someplace stupid to try and apparate to, you won't splinch yourself. Remember, for this basic spell, you **must** pick a spot that is clear, where there are no obstacles directly in your path."

Hooch pulled out a small red square, and with a tap of her wand, it enlarged into a large red rubber mat. "This is what you will aim for. We'll go sixty feet down the road, and you'll try and apparate here. Then, I'll go another forty feet down the road and place another mat and you'll apparate back to me. Then, we'll go another fifty feet down the road and you'll apparate back."

Hooch's look swept along the line of chilled students. "Brown! What do you need to do besides see the spot you're aiming for and see the spell?"

"Concentrate on the movement, Madam."

"Thomas, what could happen if you don't concentrate, but there's a clear path?"

"You might apparate, but leave your clothes behind."

"Correct. Ignoring the embarrassment, you will certainly catch a chill today! Now, stand on the mat one at a time, and look up at the gate. That's what you should end up looking at. Stand just for a few seconds, and come along! Hurry!"

The entire class managed to make the line-of-sight apparitions. When the last student had made the 150 foot jump, they were all happy to hurry into the castle and return to the classroom, where they had been promised hot chocolate.

Most of the students were chattering happily away on their way and more so once they grabbed a large mug of hot chocolate. Some were bragging, pretending that mastering the basic level of this simply spell implied they would have as easy a time with the harder levels.

The students milled about, talking. Harry was surprised that Pansy and Millicent came over to talk with him. "Well, Potter, you seem to have a clue," Millicent boomed, "what was all that security about?"

"We're outside most of the wards, which is why we can apparate," Harry replied, basically quoting how Hermione had explained the idea to a Third year.

"I know that! What I meant was, do you think it likely we'll be attacked?"

Harry gave that some consideration. "To be honest, probably not. But I guess the thinking is, better safe than sorry, right?"

"I suppose. Good luck, Potter." Millicent gave him a hearty slap on the back, which moved him about five feet forward and dumped his Gryffindor scarf towards the floor. Pansy caught it, and handed it to Harry.

No one noticed her pocketing one of Harry's hairs.

Harry's main concern in January was not apparation, however. Neither was it thinking about classes, or even worrying about Voldemort. He was searching for a keeper. No one practiced Quidditch in January, and Harry wasn't cruel enough to try.

What he had done the first Friday night of the term was call a House meeting. Harry had made a ten minute speech on House unity and gotten all the students riled up. Then Harry announced that every afternoon that it wasn't storming and was when he didn't have class, he would be out on the pitch from 4:00 until 5:00. Between the next day and February 16 (a Sunday), he expected to see **every** Gryffindor, Second year and above, on a broomstick at least twice. When the First years complained, he told them he would allow any that Madam Hooch brought to him to try out as well.

When Hermione, Parvati, Lavender and a few other girls protested being included, Harry appealed to their Gryffindor spirit. All quickly backed down, except for Hermione. Harry then privately pointed out all the reasons Hermione should participate, starting with her position as a prefect, setting a good example for the students, and ending with pointing out that merely being a good prefect and a brilliant student was not enough to claim the position of Head Girl. Participating in the preliminary try-outs for keeper would show she was willing to put the needs of the House and school above her preferences.

Hermione made certain that no one under a Fifth year was in the line of sight, and made a very rude gesture in Harry's face. "You'd better give me a better reason than that, Potter," she added, trying to sound tough. "And don't say 'because everyone else is, either.'"

"Alright," Harry said, "I can only think of one more reason."

"And that is?"

"Because I'm asking you to, because it's important to me."

Hermione's jaw dropped at the sincerity in Harry's tone. "Alright," Hermione said, "but if anyone laughs, I'm hexing them into next week."

"If **anyone** laughs, I'll help you hex them," Harry stated.

This was how Hermione, Lavender, and four other of the girls who admitted to being 'nervous flyers' found themselves just inside the entrance to the Quidditch pitch the second Saturday of the term. (None of the boys would admit to being nervous flyers, including the Second year who had thrown up every time his broom went higher than four feet off the ground the year before.)

The only other person with them was Natalie Macdonald, the young chaser. Katie Bell and Ginny Weasley were guarding the entrance to the pitch.

"I still don't see why we have to do this," Hermione complained.

"The House team needs a player. Even though there's no chance we'll make it, we should still show the others that **everyone** has a chance," Lavender said. "Really, Hermione, you of all people should know how motivation and morale works. If we have to look a little foolish so some of the shy students will have the guts to try out, I'm willing to look a little foolish."

"And you have to admit, Harry's arranged it so we don't look foolish in front of too many people," Margene Banks, a Fourth year, remarked.

"True," Hermione acknowledged.

"Now what's he doing?" Lavender wondered as Harry stood in front of them, right at the entrance of the stadium, and raised his wand like a conductor. Harry summonsed all the snow from the stands to the pitch, and then levitated the snow on the pitch and let it fall back to the ground, and then repeated the action twice, breaking up the harder snow. The girls knew if they fell, they'd have a relatively soft landing.

It was also a display of power like none of them had ever seen before, especially not from Harry. The girls all looked at Hermione, who shook her head in amazement.

Hermione hadn't felt Harry draw any extra power. She wasn't certain if this meant she was already so used to the effect that she didn't feel it, if Harry had always had this much power and just hadn't had the confidence to use it, or if his power had hit a growth spurt.

Hermione spent several hours later on determining that Harry hadn't, in fact, drawn any power, which left her a bit in awe and a bit less worried about the future.

"Who wants to go first?" Harry asked.

The girls looked at each other, and finally Margene volunteered. As Harry was explaining to the girl what he wanted, and the girls got over realizing that Harry had somehow secured a Nimbus 2001 for them to fly on, Lavender leaned over to Hermione, "I've never heard of anyone manipulating that much mass at once, even with a simple spell, let alone lifting it what? between six and ten feet? Sweeping up all that snow was one thing, I mean Flitwick or McGonagall probably could have done that. . . ."

"But not in less than three minutes, like Harry did," Hermione pointed out. "And lifting the snow was even more amazing, not just because of the mass, but because it wasn't one solid object. Harry didn't manage to levitate every last ice and snow crystal, but he came close, and I didn't see any falling back before he dropped it."

"I didn't either," Lavender agreed. "Harry might never have the depth of knowledge Dumbledore has, but I bet he'll have access to as much power, if he doesn't already."

'And that's not all the power he has access to,' Hermione told herself. While a little less worried about Harry's chances against Voldemort, she was starting to wonder how others would feel when they learned how powerful Harry really was.

In less than an hour, the girls had been put through their paces. All of them decided that flying really wasn't nearly as bad as they remembered.

Once they were back in the castle, Hermione saw Katie Bell give Natalie Macdonald a little shove in Hermione's direction. Hermione let the Third year steer her away from the group.

"Hermione," the girl said, her voice quavering, "you did really well today."

"I really didn't," Hermione answered, smiling. "Somehow, Harry made it seem safe."

"I guess."

"What can I do for you?"

"You're not dating Ron any more, are you?"

"No, no I'm not. Why?"

"Could you take me to the Valentine's Dance?" The first dance of the term would be Valentine's Day.

Hermione flushed.

"I know," Natalie said. "I found out there are going to be a few other same-gender couples going. I know you're not gay, but I can't go unless an older student asks me and I really don't like any of the boys. And we don't have to dance, but I really admire you. If you aren't planning on going with someone else, would you at least consider it?"

Hermione had both wanted to go and also had to attend (since she was a prefect), but didn't know how to do it without leading any boy on. This would certainly distract attention away from her current interests. Hermione smiled at the girl, "As long you tell everyone we're just going as friends, I'd be proud to escort you to the dance."

Chapter X

Thursday, January 23, 1997

"What did you want to talk about?" Harry asked Hermione. She had invited Harry and Luna into the small room the group of friends shared, but had asked if Harry knew any place more private.

He had thought about that and then retrieved the Map. He took the girls to what he had identified as one of Sirius' 'love nests.' He hadn't taken Luna there; they either used his parents' or Remus'.

"How did you do that last Saturday?" Hermione blurted out. Luna nodded. Having heard what had happened, she had decided she and Hermione should try to help Harry figure out what happened, since she sensed Harry was still working things out.

"What? Get you back on a broom?" Harry teased. "You were pretty good, even though you only flew four feet over the snow and flew at about two miles an hour."

"I'm sure it was at least five miles an hour, which is a good speed for walking," Hermione said on her dignity, "not to mention that you should know perfectly well what I'm talking about."

"Moving the snow?"

"Moving the snow from the stands was amazing enough. I mean, I could have swept the snow from the stands to the field, but it would have taken me well over half an hour, maybe forty-five minutes, to get it that clean. It took you about three minutes. And while a few people like Dumbledore probably have the power to lift all that snow, it really looked like you didn't lose a crystal."

Harry's shoulders sagged. "I know." He looked pensive for almost a minute, and then he asked, "Hermione, what does it feel like when you do magic?"

Hermione frowned. "What do you mean? Sometimes my hand tingles a bit, but that's usually when I'm not doing something quite right." She turned to Luna.

"I would agree," Luna said simply, "although sometimes it feels as if I am scooping some power out of a stream."

"Or even redirecting a little of it," Hermione agreed. "It's so subjective, though, I hadn't thought of the analogy."

Harry sat on the old sofa that was in the small room. "I've always had this other feeling. I don't really know how to describe it."

"Don't worry about a flawed analogy, Harry. Just come close," Hermione encouraged.

"Okay, imagine a wide valley with a dam across it. The water, the magic, builds up behind it. But in my case, it doesn't threaten to overflow, it just builds up further and farther behind the dam."

"Go on," Hermione encouraged.

"So it's always felt like there's this huge reserve of magic that I just can't access. It's as if there's usually just this one pipe that I can use to access the magic. Every once in a while, there's another small pipe bursts out for a moment, like when I blew up Aunt Marge."

"Is it always small?" Luna asked.

"Pretty much," Harry answered, thoughtfully. "About the only time I felt I was accessing more power was when I scattered all those dementors at the end of our Third year. No. . . ." he then added, "wait."

Harry paused in thought, and the two women waited for him to work out his thoughts. "I think that was the problem when Snape was trying to teach me Occlumency. It felt like he was blocking the pipeline. When Voldemort possessed me at the Ministry, I drove him out, and it was like the pipeline opened wider."

"Last Saturday, I suddenly felt like I could access all the power I wanted, and I did. It felt like there was only thing holding me back from letting all the power flow through all the pipes."

"That if you let all the power flow at once, the force might weaken the structure of the dam, meaning your very self," Luna stated.

"Exactly," Harry agreed. "And then I realized something."

"That if you got into trouble, you could draw power from the community to control what you were doing," Hermione concluded.

"Exactly." Harry smiled a little. "I almost needed to draw on that power, too. And I did talk with Dumbledore about this Tuesday."

"What did he have to say about it?"

"He reminded me that while it didn't involve as much mass, I had actually witnessed a display of at least equal power." Harry smiled a bit more. "You both saw it, too."

"When?" Hermione demanded.

"Second year!" Luna piped up.

"Exactly."

"When in our Third year did . . . oh! When Dumbledore conjured those sleeping bags!"

"Exactly. They weren't a temporary creation. I think mine's still stuck at the very bottom of one of my trunk's compartments."

"Mine's at the cottage," Luna added.

"It takes a lot of power to permanently create something like those sleeping bags, let alone a few hundred of them," Hermione agreed. "I still think you might have used more."

"Maybe, but I used everything I had," Harry retorted.

"Perhaps," Luna responded, "or perhaps you used as much as you thought you had. It was more than enough to complete the job, wasn't it?"

"It was," Harry admitted.

"Can you access that kind of power consistently?" Hermione asked.

"No," Harry admitted. "Still, that's likely just a matter of time. It's scary to think I might have constant access to that much power, or possibly even more!"

"Why?" Hermione asked curiously.

"Because if in the future I'm more powerful than Dumbledore. . . ."

"Which still isn't proven," Hermione interjected.

"Which still isn't proven," Harry agreed, "Can I, can anyone, be trusted with that kind of power? Especially when it can be augmented by the group?"

"You can be trusted," Luna said. "You are a few years from channeling that kind of power consistently, and you are a very moral person, Harry."

"I have to agree," Hermione added. "I can't see anyone other than Voldemort and his group worrying about you."

"Well," Harry said, lightening up and looking to tease his friend, "if you don't have to worry about me, do we have to worry about you?"

Hermione frowned. "Me? About what?"

"Your date with Nate," Harry said with a straight face, changing the subject. "Pulling a Viktor, dating someone that much younger than you are?"

"Prefects are required to attend, and I didn't want to go with some random guy, like I did in December," Hermione said simply. "I know taking Natalie will cause some rumors to fly, but hopefully once we're there everyone will see there's nothing really going on."

Harry and Luna both rolled their eyes at that naive statement, but decided to let it pass. Luna wasn't argumentative by nature, and Harry knew arguing would likely result in a long lecture on tolerance.

Over the next three weeks, more and more of the students' attention was drawn to the Valentine's Dance. The rumors about a number of same-sex couples went into high gear when it was discovered that Hermione was part of one of them. When Natalie's identity came out, the young girl underwent a modest amount of harassment by the boys in her year and older, although not the Gryffindors. Those few tempted knew better than to say anything, as they

realized most of the Fifth and Sixth years were backing Hermione and protecting Natalie. Few students from any House would dare make a comment directly to Hermione, in any event. A few public comments were made by the Ravenclaw Clique and assorted Slytherins (led by Pansy Parkinson), but never within earshot of Hermione, Harry, or Ginny Weasley.

As the dance came closer, numerous individuals and groups tried to come up with ways of celebrating Valentine's Day. The Fifth years, unsurprisingly, were the most interested in finding a way to blow off steam.

This was not unusual. What **was** unusual was that this year, the Fifth year girls actually came up with an idea.

What only a few people ever knew was that the idea had originated in the bored mind of Draco Malfoy.

Sunday, February 9, 1997

"You are going to do **WHAT!**"

"There's no need to shout, Harry," Ginny scolded.

"Let me understand this," Hermione said, in full prefect mode, "the Fifth year girls are having a kissing contest?"

"Exactly. The girls, Fifth years only, get one point for kissing someone in the their House, and two points for those in other Houses. The kissing starts Thursday morning at Seven and ends Friday at Five. No repeats allowed. There has to be two witnesses to each kiss. The kiss must be on the lips. No tongues," Ginny warned. "No kissing in the common rooms or class rooms allowed. No kissing coming into the great hall or at the tables. Kissing between classes **is** allowed, but not for the five minutes before class. Only Fifth years get to play. The highest scorer in each House gets lunch for two at either the Three Broomsticks or Madam Puddifoots, while the overall winner gets double."

"And?" Harry demanded. He knew Ginny well enough to know she was hiding something.

Ginny mumbled something.

"What?" Harry demanded, hoping he had misunderstood.

Ginny sighed. "Everyone gets two extra points for kissing you."

"Oh, God," Harry moaned.

"Every boy's dream," Neville teased.

"Yes, well, quite a few will be after you, too," Ginny snapped. "You hadn't better enjoy it!"

"Good thing it's a Thursday and Friday," Harry said. "No classes for me except Apparation. I can hide out here."

"Is de big bwave Gwiffindor afwaid?" Carol Sloan, one of Ginny's year mates teased. Harry, who hated baby talk after his run-in with Bellatrix Lestrange, glared at Carol. "Meep!" The Fifth year hid behind her boyfriend.

"Anything else?" Hermione asked.

"Oh! No lipstick, lip gloss, or lip balm or anything like that allowed."

"Great, I guess I won't get poisoned," Harry grouched. "Why couldn't someone else have a bounty on their heads?"

Ginny looked apologetic. "Actually, anyone who gets Hermione gets one extra point."

"Oh, God," Hermione complained.

Thursday, February 13, 1997

"Are you ready?" Harry asked.

"No," Hermione retorted.

"Me neither," Harry acknowledged. They shrugged and went out of the common room.

Ginny and the other four Gryffindor Fifth years were waiting near the portrait of the Fat Lady, as was Luna and Geneva, the Fifth year Hufflepuff security prefect.

"Thank you for doing this," Geneva said.

"You're welcome, but first things first," Harry said. "I thought you all had a temporary counting spell put on you last night?" After the staff had stopped arguing against the Fifth year plan (now dubbed 'Operation Snog'), Professor Flitwick had agreed to put a charm on the Fifth year girls which automatically added the points.

"That's right," Ginny said.

"Then how come nobody has any points yet?" Hermione demanded.

"How would we get points already?" Carol asked.

Luna and Hermione sighed. "What?" Ginny demanded. Luna leaned over and kissed her startled friend on the lips. The number '2' now flashed over Luna's right shoulder.

"Why doesn't Ginny have two points?" another Gryffindor asked.

"She doesn't have two points," Luna said. "I kissed her, she didn't kiss me."

"Oh . . . OH!"

When the girls who were willing to kiss other girls had earned their points, Ginny, Carol, Geneva, and Luna collected their points from Hermione. Harry then allowed each girl kiss him, although he lingered over a long, deep kiss with Luna. The other girls left as it went on, except for Hermione and Ginny.

"How many points do you plan on earning?" Harry teased Luna at the end of their kiss.

"I have all the points I plan on earning," Luna replied. "What do you and Hermione plan on doing now?" She knew Harry had discounted using his invisibility cloak.

"Something nice and inconspicuous," Harry answered. With that, he disillusioned Hermione, and added a distraction spell as well. "Hermione has Runes and Arithmancy this morning, and University Prep tomorrow, and we both have Apparation tomorrow. My private coaching sessions are on hold. I think they decided dealing with this counts as a test."

"Good luck," Luna said. "Try not to be caught **too** often."

"With luck, their only decent chances will be when I'm escaping meals." Harry disillusioned himself and then added the distraction spell as well.

"Try not to run into too many people!" Ginny called out.

The game had started.

As Hermione set her hair in preparation for the dance, she realized that she hadn't been terribly bothered by the contest. Half the girls had no interest in collecting points from any girl, and stuck with kissing boys they had always wanted an excuse to kiss. Most of the other girls only kissed selected girls. However, the Fifth year Clique member, Margot Smythe, and all the Slythern girls kissed her, and most had kissed her quite passionately at that. 'I guess they're playing to win,' Hermione thought.

She had endured a modest amount of teasing when the identity of her 'date' had officially come out the day before. More of it had to do with the age difference than with the gender of her escort. That made Hermione wonder about how much teasing Viktor had endured. Hermione and Natalie were each about a year younger than Viktor and she had been at the time of the Yule Ball, so the age differences were about the same.

Hermione adjusted the color of her robe to a slightly lighter shade of medium-dark red. She was glad now she hadn't gone for a plunging neckline on her robes. The tattoos would have shown. Ginny was going to have to have her second robe adjusted before the second dance in May.

Hermione had remembered to order Natalie a wrist corsage. She picked it up and left the mirrors to the other girls.

Harry had had a much tougher time with the contest, getting mobbed every time he tried to leave the great hall. A number of the girls had been rather passionate with Harry, and he was complaining of bruised lips. He was just glad the game was over, and hoped it wouldn't be repeated the next year. He headed out of his room a little early, and waved to Hermione on the stairs. He hurried over towards Ravenclaw.

As Hermione and Harry were heading down the stairs, Pansy Parkinson was heading out of the Slytherin common room. She walked briskly to the owlery.

Sure enough, the eagle owl was waiting for her, as she had expected. Longbottom's hair was cut too short to allow anyone to collect it easily, and Weasley and Lovegood were too young for this spell to have any application, so those were mere bonuses. Potter should be dead long before they came of age. On the other hand, she had a dozen long hairs from Mudblood Granger, and fifteen somewhat shorter ones from Potty Potter.

Hopefully, that was enough.

Pansy smiled. She had almost given up on Draco the previous November. Now she was glad she hadn't. There was still a chance he might end up on top, and if he did, she would be at his side.

At first, Harry wondered why so many people were looking at his table at the dance. The quintet, plus Natalie, sat at the twelve person table. Dean, Parvati, Seamus, Lavender, Padma, and Morag McDougal sat with them. Harry suspected it was because all of the other same gender couples either sat together at one tables, or were sitting in such a way as to disguise they were a same gender couple. Colin and his Seventh year Ravenclaw boyfriend, for example, had escorted a pair of Hufflepuff Fifth year girls who were dating.

Of the people at Harry's table, only Seamus and Lavender danced nearly every dance, although Dean and Parvati weren't too far behind. As at the previous dance, Harry and Luna only danced the slow dances. Ginny and Neville danced more than Harry and Luna, but less than the other heterosexual couples.

Padma and Morag spent the first quarter of the dance eyeing each other nervously while Hermione kept up a strong conversation. Finally, Hermione had had enough, and as a medium-slow song started she stood and held her hand out to Natalie. The younger girl smiled nervously, but stood up and took Hermione's hand.

Hermione looked at the other two young women and gave them a challenging look. They also smiled nervously, and stood up while holding hands. The two same-sex couples moved onto the dance floor, and before the song was over the other same-gender couples were on the floor as well.

"Thank you, Hermione," Natalie said, watching the other couples sweep by.

"Don't thank me yet," Hermione said. "This is just a tiny early step. This will just make some people angry, and make some people hide deeper in the closet."

"But it's another step," Natalie answered. "I don't know if I'm gay or not, but I want to have the choices."

"That's what I want to hear from the smartest, bravest witch in her year," Hermione agreed. "In my third year, most of the Slytherins said I hung around Harry and Ron because I was so ugly I couldn't be normal. The Ravenclaw girls who formed this Clique back then said I acted and thought I was a boy." Hermione laughed softly. "I rather think Ron thought I was a boy in drag until the middle of the Fourth year."

Natalie laughed as well. "Were you any of those things?"

"I wasn't terribly attractive. You probably don't remember what I looked like at the beginning of your First year."

"No, no I guess I don't, why?"

"It wasn't . . . a real disfigurement, but my two front teeth were a few sizes too large. I'm sure you can imagine all the rodent references that were made."

"You're perfect now." Natalie blushed after saying that.

"Thank you." Hermione frowned. "Ron obviously didn't agree."

"Ron Weasley was only mature compared to his twin brothers."

"It sometimes seemed that way," Hermione agreed.

The song ended. "Thank you for dancing with me," Natalie said.

Hermione kept one hand in Natalie's as they went back to the table. "I'm enjoying it."

"Is there any chance. . . ?"

"No, not really," Hermione answered. "I really prefer men to women."

"Then why did you agree?"

"Why did you ask?"

"Because I couldn't imagine anyone better to go with than you. I really do like you."

"And I appreciate that. I prefer men, but I appreciate some women, too. And I didn't want to come with just any guy. There's no student here I'm interested in, and I didn't want to lead any one on."

"No," Natalie agreed, "you didn't lead me on."

"Good." Hermione smiled. "Let me know after Easter if you need a partner for the May Dance."

"I will."

Natalie snuggled down into her bed that night, letting the light teasing of her room mates wash past her. She was happy. Hermione had kissed her good night. She might never date another girl, but tonight was perfect.

Not too far away, Harry tossed and turned, unable to get comfortable.

Far away, across the Atlantic Ocean, Ron Weasley startled his two suite mates by staggering into their bedroom, waking them up.

*"The bait has been taken for the trap;
The Boy-Who-Lived shall be Summoned.
Only by Building the Powers the Other cannot Access
Can the Boy become a Man, and Defeat the Evil One."*

Ron passed out and fell onto Leroy's bed.

The two boys looked at each other and sighed. It was a good thing they had been warned this might happen.