

Ynulle

By

DrT

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Chapter I

Sunday July 27, 1997

Hermione Granger slowly stretched in her seat. The plane ride from Stockholm back to London was just under three hours long, and while it would be landing in less than ten minutes, airplane seats are not very comfortable. Not even for a shortish, average-built teen-aged girl.

She had spent just over two weeks with her parents, visiting Baltic beaches in Sweden, Norway, Finland, Russia, and back for their summer holiday. Her parents had kept her firmly in the Muggle world -- not that Hermione was overly interested in much of the magical world this summer. She had especially managed to avoid looking for any Crumple-horned Snorkacks.

The previous school year had seen the climax of all the many worries that had afflicted her since the second half of her first year at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Voldemort had reappeared just before the end of her fourth year, and she had helped the Order of the Phoenix the previous summer prepare to fight the threat. Hogwarts had survived a direct attack -- and then she had helped Harry Potter and two others kill Voldemort.

Sometimes, that thought haunted her at night.

Voldemort's forces were dividing even before the attack on Hogwarts. The majority would then try to rejoin the wizarding world, while a small terror wing attacked it. The 'political group' drove a hard bargain, making it slightly more difficult for the Muggle-born or raised, Half-bloods, and Mixed-bloods to get ahead in the future, and giving a slight advantage to 'Pure-bloods' like themselves. Many of the 'political group,' including the co-leader Lucius Malfoy, wound up falling anyways, betrayed along with the 'terror group' in early March by Regulus Black, so that he could control the Movement for Pure-Bloods.

Well before that, however, the Lestranges, leaders of the 'terror group,' had directed a dementor attack on the Hogwarts Express as it returned students back to school after the Yule holidays. Harry and his powerful cousin Edward Potter (the Runes professor) had led the two groups of students that had saved the students from the two-pronged dementor attack.

The three Lestranges had then attacked, killing five students before Harry and Edward had each killed one of the Lestrangle brothers.

Five students, including Ron Weasley.

One of her two best friends. The boy Hermione had loved for over a year.

Ron haunted her dreams far more than her participation in Voldemort's execution. Ron's death had blighted part of her soul, and after more than six months, she was still not completely recovered.

That night, Hermione would be going back to the Burrow, to spend some time with Ginny and the other Weasleys. She liked the Weasleys too much to refuse their invitation. Harry was already in Ottery St. Catchpole, staying with his girlfriend of nearly a year, Luna Lovegood.

Hermione wanted to see Ginny, Harry, Luna, and the Weasleys. She would also have to visit Ron, which she both wanted to do, and dreaded. They would all go to see Neville Longbottom (Ginny's boyfriend) for his birthday on Wednesday, then move on to Potter Place for Harry's birthday Thursday and Luna's on Friday. The party would breakup on Sunday evening.

'It will be nice to see Neville and Luna,' Hermione thought, but she was even more interested in seeing Ginny and Harry. She wondered how Harry was coping -- he had been as upset at Ron's death as Ginny or herself, but the death of Voldemort had relieved him of a heavy burden. Hermione, of course, had remembered little gifts for all of them, including ones designed for her two younger friends, now that their O.W.L.s were completed. (Luna had scored 11, Ginny 9.)

The plane landed and taxied to the gate. A quick trip through customs, and then a long walk took them to the car park. And less than two hours later, thanks to fairly light traffic, the Grangers were home.

Hermione partially repacked her bags while her parents started the laundry and sorted through the mail. She went down to help, and two hours later brought her clean laundry to her room to finish packing.

Edward and Carole Potter had promised they would take the teens to visit Diagon Alley on Saturday. Hermione therefore did not take many books with her -- just two N.E.W.T. study-guides. She also took plenty of ink and parchment, and all her quills. Hermione had started three organizations that had chapters in a number of the smaller magical schools around Europe (the Inter-House Student Committee For Cultural Input was working on the newly-required courses in Magical Culture the Pure-Bloods were requiring for the Muggle-born and Raised, and Mixed-bloods; E.L.F., the successor to her earlier S.P.E.W., promoted the liberation of house elves; and R.A.W.W. -- Rights for Afflicted Witches & Wizards, promoted greater acceptance for registered werewolves and vampires). All her magical correspondence would have been building up at the Burrow since the end of school.

Hermione surveyed her luggage -- two medium suitcases, a knapsack, and two large paperbags of presents. As usual, Edward Potter had provided a piece of rope to act as a portkey, this one long enough to tie off all her luggage. At 6:30, her parents came up to her room to kiss her goodbye. Promptly at 6:45, Hermione was whisked away.

Hermione found herself standing in Ginny's room a moment later. Hermione had just enough time to see that the room still hadn't really changed over the five years since she'd first stayed there when Ginny shot through the door and embraced her best friend.

Hermione hugged Ginny back. The two teens were of very similar height, slightly under 5 foot 2, and of slim build. Hermione did notice Ginny had continued to develop a bit, and was nearly as busty as she was. Hermione was rather glad that she had stopped developing in that department herself -- medium leaning towards large was quite large enough for her, although she sometimes remembered how Ron had hoped for much more.

Ginny and Hermione had both let their hair grow after Ron's murder. Ginny's thin copper-red, slightly wavy hair was now half-way down her back. Hermione's nearly-famous brown curly bush now fanned across her shoulders and was almost as long as Ginny's.

"You look tan," Ginny commented.

"A week on nude beaches will do that for you," Hermione answered.

Ginny's freckles nearly disappeared as she blushed. "Really?" She swallowed. Only a few of the more obscure groups in the wizarding world went nude for certain rituals. Most of the community, especially in Britain, were still rather Victorian.

"What?" Hermione teased, "you and Neville aren't ready to cavort naked?"

"Not in front of everyone else!" Ginny hugged her friend again, and released her saying, "Come on, Mum's holding dinner for us."

Molly Weasley greeted Hermione with her usual near-crushing hug. Once released, Hermione asked, "Who else is here?"

"Just the four of us," Arthur Weasley answered from the kitchen table. "Shocking, isn't it?" he asked with a grin.

"The twins have started living over their store," Ginny told her. "Percy still has his apartment. . . ."

"At least he's seeing Penelope again," Molly said with a sniff, referring to Percy's Hogwarts' girlfriend.

"Charlie's still in Romania, and Bill and Fleur still are never seen outside of work hours," Ginny said.

"Ginny!" Molly scolded.

"And Harry?" Hermione asked.

"He and Luna were here for lunch yesterday," Molly said in a disapproving voice Hermione did not understand. Molly loved Harry as a son, and seemed to like Luna, a childhood friend of Ginny's. Nothing more was said about it, and Hermione decided it was likely Molly was merely upset because Harry was staying at the Lovegood's rather than with her.

"It's supposed to be nice tomorrow morning," Ginny piped up into the silence that followed Molly's remark. "I hope you don't mind, but we decided to meet with Harry and Luna at . . . Ron's at Nine-thirty."

Hermione bit her lip, but nodded her agreement. The quartet sat down to eat.

Monday, July 28, 1997

Ginny woke up a little after 7:00 the next morning. Hermione's cot was empty and barely looked slept-in. Ginny got up and threw on her light robe. After a quick visit to the toilet, Ginny went up to Ron's room.

Hermione was sleeping curled-up on Ron's bed. The room was still filled with vibrant Chudley Cannon posters, but somehow, they had seemed to sense their owner was gone. Within two weeks of Ron's death, the figures on all the posters had slowed down and finally stopped. Molly just had not had the desire to take them down, let alone rearrange or redecorate the room.

So Hermione lay swaddled in Ron's beloved Chudley Cannon bedspread, under the stilled Chudley Cannon posters. Ginny had gone through the room and Ron's things from Hogwarts earlier that month, sorting out clothes that could be passed on to others and which ones would have to be sent to the rag pile. She had saved out three Cannon t-shirts and Ron's beloved hat (a Christmas gift from Harry a few years before). Ginny had taken one shirt for herself, given Harry the hat, and would give the other two shirts to Hermione. Ginny decided she would also ask her Mum if she could give Hermione the bedspread as well.

When Hermione woke up half an hour later, she found her bags moved to Ron's room. There were two shocking orange shirts on top of them, with a note. Hermione smiled as she read it. She pulled on fresh undies, her favorite jeans, and the orange t-shirt. Carrying her trainers, Hermione went barefoot down to breakfast.

Hermione and Ginny (who was also wearing the Cannon shirt that she was keeping) left the Burrow a little after 9:00. They walked the mile to the small Muggle village of Ottery St. Catchpole. There was a small combination florist/stationary shop, and Hermione had sent in a post-order before leaving for Sweden.

"Got flowers to match your shirts, I see," the florist said with a smile. She knew the Weasleys by sight, although she merely thought them one of the more eccentric families who lived near the village. It was a shame the youngest boy had died in some kind of accident the previous year, she thought. That made two boys in just a year and a half.

Hermione carefully carried the dozen orange roses in their plastic vase. Ginny had three smaller arrangements, one of marigolds and two of sunflowers. It only took a few minutes to walk through the village to the small ancient cemetery, just past the small Saxon church. Hermione could see that a small part seemed to have some glamours over-laying it.

"This is the wizarding portion," Ginny explained as they entered the area. "It keeps Muggles from looking too closely, and it protects the bodies from being used for dark magic."

Hermione shuddered. She was not paying attention to the world around them, which is why a thunderous roar startled her.

Turning, Hermione saw a huge motorcycle, an American-style 'chopper,' pull noisily up to the cemetery. Two leather-clad bikers climbed off the chopper, their heavy boots crunching in the gravel, which made Hermione frown. The driver pulled off his helmet, and Hermione saw it was

"Harry!"

"Noisy, isn't he?" Ginny said with a sniff. The pillion rider pulled off her helmet as well, and Luna's long dark blonde hair streamed down past her small rear.

Hermione waited until she could finish hugging Harry to remonstrate with him. "What are you doing riding that thing! It's not legal until you pass your exam, and you can't take it until you're seventeen!"

Harry smiled. "Somehow, my license says I was born on the Thirtieth of June, instead of the Thirty-first of July. I'll have it fixed . . . next month."

Speechless, Hermione kissed Harry lightly and let Harry go, moving to hug Luna while Harry hugged Ginny. Harry and Luna both gave their friends light kisses on the lips, and then they all walked back to the tombstones.

Hermione saw Ron's grave was still covered by fresh-looking flowers, although she was certain many of them had been enchanted to stay fresh-looking. As she laid her tribute, Harry (who had been given permission to use under-age magic the year before), pulled off his right glove and took out his wand, putting a freshening spell on Hermione's flowers. They would last for many weeks. He did the same for Ginny's marigold tribute.

While Hermione and Ginny stayed by Ron's grave, Harry and Luna took the sunflowers over to another grave, and then the second to one further away.

"Cedric," Ginny said softly as Harry laid the first bunch and enchanted it. "Luna's mum," she added a few moments later.

As Luna and Harry hugged by Mrs. Lovegood's tombstone, Hermione asked, "When did they go all leather?"

Ginny smiled slightly. "The motorbike is Doctor Potter's non-enchanted cycle. He also has an enchanted one, plus Sirius'. Somehow, he arranged for Harry to get his license early. It's a new look, isn't it?"

"It certainly is."

"Doctor Potter outfitted them," Ginny told her. "They're charmed, too, so if they're thrown from the bike, they shouldn't be seriously hurt."

Harry and Luna walked back, hand-in-hand. "Did you want to stay longer?" Harry asked Hermione.

"No," she replied, looking at the gravestone and sniffing. "But what, where, are we going?"

Harry gave a small smile and led the three girls back to the chopper. A wave of Harry's wand, and a sidecar for two appeared. There were helmets and denim jackets inside it. "Climb in," Harry said.

Ginny immediately started slipping a jacket on, but Hermione looked doubtful. "He's a good rider," Luna said. "And the sidecar makes it even more stable."

Hermione sighed, and pulled on the other jacket. If Hermione had learned one thing in the nearly six full years she and Harry had known each other, it was that when Harry was set on breaking the rules, even she would go along with it. Luna helped Hermione adjust the helmet over her heavy hair. Harry gave Ron and Cedric a sincere salute, and started the huge machine. With a roar, they took off down the lane.

A few minutes before noon, the chopper roared down the dirt lane that dead-ended just past the Burrow. Molly could not help but hear them approach, and so was out in the side yard, watching the gnomes and chickens scramble in case the loud noise got too close.

Hermione had noticed, however, that while the chopper was very loud and powerful, Harry actually drove them safely, in fact at times almost sedately. She did, however, now fully understand Molly's disapproving attitude of the previous evening.

Harry killed the engine, and helped the girls in-turn to steadier ground. Harry was the first to have his helmet and jacket off, and he approached Mrs. Weasley with an ease Hermione had never seen in her shy friend before.

Seeing Harry without the jacket for the first time, Hermione noticed he had added several pounds of muscle in the short month they had been apart, although not really any noticeable height. Harry had grown over the previous year to an almost-average 5 foot 8, and it looked like he might stop around that height. Despite the added muscle, Harry was still lanky, and the helmet had done nothing to tame the wild thick black hair Molly Weasley was running her hand through as she scolded him gently for scaring the chickens.

Hermione turned to make that observation to Ginny, but she saw it was unnecessary. Ginny had been watching Harry, while Luna had been observing them all. Luna smiled her well-known gentle smile, tossed her jacket and helmet into the sidecar, and faced Hermione. She also seemed a lot more confident. Hermione saw that she seemed to have grown, or maybe she just remembered her clearly only from before Ron's murder more than six months before. She was only an inch or so shorter than Harry, and was fashion-model thin and, except for her odd eyes, fashion-model beautiful. Hermione jumped a bit when Luna winked at her.

Molly led Harry towards the kitchen, while Ginny broke up the silent communication between the other two girls by linking her arms with Luna and Hermione, leading them away, to give Harry and her mother some quiet time.

"Harry looks good," Hermione said.

"Most of the stress is finally off him," Luna said simply. "He still dreams about Cedric, Sirius, and Ron dying, and sometimes you can actually see the joy wash off his face when he thinks how much Ron or Sirius would have enjoyed something he's doing or seeing, but without that terrible burden on him, he's . . . happy. And with no Dursleys and no Dark Lord, he sees a future that he can really live in."

"That's good," Hermione commented, trying to take it all in.

"More than that, he's grown into his remaining responsibilities," Luna went on. "They no longer crush him." She smiled. "He's also happy to be near the Burrow, especially now that you're here."

"There was a terrible argument earlier this month, though," Ginny told Hermione. "Doctor Potter showed up. He and Harry had bought up the mortgage and they gave it to Mum and Dad. They were shocked, and not very pleased."

"Harry merely told them they had looked after him out of love, and he was doing that out of love as well," Luna said simply. "Granted, he was embarrassed to actually say it, but he did. He said the Potter Trust had paid off the Dursley's mortgage out of obligation, but that if the Weasleys really did consider him their foster child, then they should be willing to take from him as well as give to him."

"Did you coach him, or did Doctor Potter?" Hermione asked.

Luna smiled. "Carole, actually. He still meant every word, you know."

"I know," Hermione agreed. "He just needed help knowing how to say it."

"Exactly."

"So, with the mortgage paid off and only me at home, Mum and Dad can really plan for their retirement and start bugging Bill about grandchildren," Ginny said with a smile, leading them towards the back porch.

"He and Fleur are that serious?" Hermione asked, surprised.

Ginny shrugged. "Mum hopes they are, anyway. Charlie's a wash-out, living in that dragon commune, and the others aren't in serious enough relationships yet."

They entered the kitchen, and went to wash their hands. Waiting for Luna and Ginny to finish, Hermione saw the family clock. Ron's hand was forever frozen at 'Mortal Danger,' and now had a black border. Hermione saw there were two other changes. Harry now had a hand, and 'Potter Place' had been added as a location.

"Hermione, dear," Molly asked, coming over, "we have a hand for you. May we add you to the clock as well?"

Tearing up slightly, Hermione nodded yes.

"So," Hermione asked after lunch, "what's the program, if any, for the next two days?"

"It's supposed to rain later today, through early tomorrow morning," Harry said. "There's a tea room in the village. I thought we could meet there for lunch, and then I'm driving Luna back to Potter Place. We'll meet you at Neville's Wednesday for lunch."

"Sounds reasonable," Ginny said.

"Are we still visiting Diagon Alley on Saturday?" Hermione asked.

"I promise we'll get there!" Harry said, "although Ted said we might go Friday afternoon, instead."

Hermione and Ginny both frowned. "Did he say why?" Ginny asked.

"He said Dumbledore might be coming for at least Friday night and Saturday, if not earlier, and he thought we'd like to see him," Harry answered. "Tonks is supposed to be visiting Remus this weekend, too, and I don't think we'll see either of them much if we're not at lunch Saturday."

"Those two are getting serious?" Ginny asked.

Harry shrugged. "I think so," Luna answered. "Either way, you'll have your shopping trip. Are there any N.E.W.T. guides you haven't gotten already?"

"No," Hermione admitted. "But I want to see if there's anything new out. I just thought we'd have a little more time together before going to Neville's."

"Does that mean you've already caught up on all the spew-letters," Harry teased, "or weren't there many?"

Hermione gave Harry a dirty look, but admitted, "I have about forty to get through. You're right, though; better to do them now, so I can enjoy the time at Neville's and your place."

It was starting to cloud up, so Harry went and vanished the sidecar. Hermione noticed that he rode the chopper a lot faster without the sidecar.

"If he can't fly one way, he'll fly another," Ginny said, and Hermione could only agree.

Chapter II

That night, Ginny went up to Ron's room just before going to bed. She and Hermione had stripped the now-unmoving posters carefully off the walls that afternoon. Mrs. Weasley had, with a few flips of her wand, cleaned the walls of other bits of debris and scoured them. Mr. Weasley had had some orange paint in his shed, and the pair of teens had spent a large part of the rainy afternoon painting the room a less-vibrant shade of orange (but all three women had silently agreed it had to be orange). Between coats of paint, Hermione read through her correspondence, and started thinking of her replies.

That evening, Hermione gave the Weasleys their presents: a pair of crystal goblets and a bottle of mead her parents had bought for her to give to them.

"We tend to forget that nearly all our everyday household items, and nearly all the luxury items for that matter, are Muggle-made," Mr. Weasley mused as he examined the fine crystal. "Even many of the enchanted items, like most cauldrons, are Muggle-made. We just add the enchantments. The same with nearly all our food. What wizarding farmers are left grow magical plants for potions and such, not food. There are quite a number of Mixed-bloods who make their living shifting Muggle-goods into our world."

"Doesn't any of that contravene the laws against enchanting Muggle objects?" Hermione asked.

"No, it's only illegal to enchant items without a license," Mr. Weasley told her. "I wish we would all remember how much we have always needed Muggle society to supply our basic needs -- I mean all the basic food has always come from Muggles. I honor our culture, but we sometimes are too arrogant about our superiority."

"We're trying to build that into the courses the Pure-bloods want," Hermione told him. "If Professor Dumbledore gets his way, at least at Hogwarts, the Full-and-Pure-Bloods will be taking a course their Second year, which will show how dependent we are on Muggle culture."

The idea cheered Arthur Weasley a great deal.

After dinner, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley had cleared the paint fumes from Ron's room (no matter how many times Hermione or anyone else might use the room in the future, it would always be Ron's room). Hermione worked on her correspondence until Ginny visited a little after 10:00.

"I'm going to miss you sleeping in the same room," Ginny said as she sat on the bed. "Although I'm sure you prefer Ron's bed to that little cot."

"I'll miss you, too, but at least you still have Pig," Hermione teased, referring to Ron's small owl, who had adopted Ginny as his new mistress.

"True," Ginny retorted, "but he doesn't answer back much."

"Well, in two nights you'll have Neville."

Ginny blushed, to her dismay. Still, she answered gamely. "No, I won't. Would you try anything in that house, with his grandmother keeping a close eye on everything?"

"No," Hermione had to admit, "I wouldn't. So make that three days. You know the pair of you will have adjoining bedrooms at Potter Place again."

If Ginny hadn't been blushing before, she would have now. Harry had arranged the rooms so that the three couples could sleep together if they wanted to without anyone knowing the previous Christmas. "Hermione, can I ask you something?"

"You may," Hermione answered, blotting a letter.

"Neville and I did sleep together last Christmas. Did you and Ron?"

Hermione rarely blushed, and so did not now. "Yes, but that's all we did." She then slightly flushed at a memory. "Well, we showered together there once, and then again once at my place, but that's all."

"Really?" Ginny asked drily.

"Okay, I got Ron off in the shower both times, alright?" Hermione almost snapped. She felt a little contrite at the sight of Ginny's sad face.

Hermione sighed. "Now, of course, I wish we had actually made love, but there was no way to know. . . ." she trailed off. She looked at Ginny. "Did you two do anything more than just sleep?"

"Well, we showered once, too," Ginny answered, before confessing, "and, well, yes, we did make love twice at Potter Place, and I helped Neville get off a few times at Hogwarts. We just couldn't find any place private enough to do more."

Hermione giggled slightly. "What?" Ginny asked.

"I do sometimes wonder where Harry and Luna go to make out," Hermione admitted. Seeing the startled look on Ginny's face, Hermione continued, "Come on! Harry has an invisibility cloak and the Marauder's Map. You know he must have found some secluded place by now, even if they still just snog!"

"That's true." Ginny gave Hermione a strange look. "The two nights after Ron died, you did sleep with Harry down in the common room. Did you do anything?"

Hermione ducked her head, and her hair hid her face. "The first morning after, Harry just came down and found me awake on the big sofa. I'd been awake all night. I put my head in his lap and fell asleep for an hour or so. That's all. The next night, well, I was all wound up." Ginny remembered that well. "Harry came down and made a copy of that new twin recliner he has in his study at Potter Place. We fell asleep next to each other."

Hermione finally faced Ginny, who had a slight leer on her face. "No, we didn't make out or anything! God! Ron had just. . . ." Ginny's face fell. Hermione continued, "But when we woke up the next morning, well, we were both in pajamas, of course."

"Go on," Ginny encouraged.

"Well," Hermione continued delicately, "when I woke up, I was sort of . . . sprawled on top of Harry with my hand down his pajamas."

Ginny giggled so hard she fell off the bed.

"It wasn't funny!" Hermione said, attempting to be prim.

"So," Ginny asked through more giggles, peeking over the edge of the bed, "did Harry measure up to Ron?"

"I never asked anything like that about Neville!" Hermione protested.

"I would think Neville is quite the statistical average, or a bit better," Ginny retorted. "He's a great fit! No complaints!"

"Ron was at the upper-end of the statistical average," Hermione said loftily, trying to ignore Ginny's last innuendo. She broke down and grinned. "Harry really raises the national average."

Ginny howled with mirth. "I wonder if we should say poor Luna or lucky Luna," she finally managed to say.

"Lucky," Hermione said somewhat wistfully, "very very lucky."

Wednesday, July 30, 1997

Shortly before lunch, Ginny and Hermione gripped the rope portkey Dr. Potter had provided them via Harry the day before. In an instant, they found themselves in the entrance foyer of Longbottom Hall.

Looking around, Hermione suppressed a sigh. She wondered if there were any middle-class wizarding households. She decided she would discuss it with Dr. Potter and Carole the next day if she could.

She was only at Longbottom Hall for a little less than 24 hours, but in that short time her empathy for Neville increased a great deal. It was a pretty house, in many ways, but it reminded Hermione of the stately National Trust homes she had toured with her parents when she was much younger. There was a museum quality to the house, even more so than at ancient Potter Place. At least Potter Place, in the private areas, looked like a comfortable, if wealthy home.

Longbottom Hall was just plain uncomfortable. Hermione remembered the 'deportment classes' her late grandmother had insisted she take the summer before she went to Hogwarts for the first time. This was the only time since where she felt it necessary to sit 'correctly,' legs bent under the chair and towards the side, with her ankles crossed 'properly.'

Hermione felt Ginny and Luna's occasional giggles were directed at her; they were certainly imitating her. Harry looked the most uncomfortable of all. They sat through the formal luncheon. Neville took them on a tour of the estate grounds, and they came back for a high tea, where Neville opened his presents. A tour of the Hall followed, then they retired to change for dinner.

Hermione had never realized that such dinners had survived so long past World War I. Harry and Luna's eyes glazed over half-way through dinner, although Harry managed to rouse himself for Neville's birthday cake. 'God,' Hermione thought, 'all they need is a whist or bridge party for the girls and billiards for the boys.'

As a house elf cleared the table, Mrs. Longbottom asked, "May I ask, do any of you children play bridge?"

Hermione, and to her surprise Luna, both admitted to playing. Harry and Ginny each picked books from the Library, and the rest of the group sat and played bridge for nearly two hours.

"Thank you for a most enjoyable evening, children," Mrs. Longbottom said a little after 10:00. Neville took Harry up to their rooms on the third floor, while Mrs. Longbottom conducted the girls to a pair of rooms on the second floor. Obviously there would be no hanky-panky allowed at Longbottom Hall.

As was befitting the beloved of the heir to the House, Ginny had been given the best guest bedroom. Hermione and Luna were sharing a huge bedroom, with attached bath. Deciding it was too late to have a bath, Hermione merely washed up, and came out in a few moments to brush her hair.

Luna came out of the bathroom some ten minutes later, nude.

Hermione looked up in the vanity mirror and saw Luna looking at her, a very different smile than usual on her face. "Eep!" Hermione said in a small voice.

"Interesting reaction," Luna said, now with her usual half-smile. "I thought Ginny said you'd spent a lot of time on nude beaches this summer."

"I guess you just surprised me," Hermione managed to say. "It's a bit. . . ."

"Incongruous in this old-fashioned setting?" Luna asked.

"Exactly," Hermione agreed.

"It is hot, though, and there's no cross-ventilation," Luna pointed out, as she went around the room, blowing out the candles. She knew Hermione was watching every graceful step and movement. "Join me?" Luna asked.

Hermione stood up and took one step towards the large bed. She stopped, shrugged, and took off her nightgown.

As they both got onto the bed, they made certain they stayed well-apart on the large bed.

They laid there for several minutes.

Finally, Hermione said, "Are you just teasing, did you want me to look, or did you have something you wanted to say?"

Instead of answering, Luna said, "Do you approve of Harry and me? As a couple, I mean?"

"Does my approval matter to either of you?"

"It does, especially to Harry," Luna answered. "Harry craves approval, but only from people that he both really respects and loves. Substitute parental figures in one sense, and true peers in another sense. The Headmaster really let him down at the end of my Fourth year; and of course Sirius died then, too. Edward partially fulfills that role, but they haven't known each other long and he tries to stay Harry's friend more than a substitute father. Professor Lupin does, too, but he's carrying too much of a burden of his own."

"True," Hermione admitted.

Luna rolled onto her right side and propped up on her elbow, her head on her hand. "Ronald was Harry's best mate, but Harry was really the senior member of the duo. Ginny and Neville are both too involved with themselves and too much in awe with Harry in general. That leaves you and me, Hermione."

Hermione rolled over and mimicked Luna's position. "What can I complain about? You've been very good for Harry, and you care about him very much. I had doubts, but you showed me I was wrong last year any number of times."

"I do care for him, probably as much as you do."

"What do you mean? I loved Ron," Hermione protested.

"I don't know if you ever realized it, but I was a lot like Ginny. She had a crush on Harry from the age of ten; I had a crush on Ronald. While Ginny was watching and studying Harry, I was watching Ronald, and you and Harry as well."

"Really?"

"Really. And, to me, it seemed that while you loved Ronald, you were always equally in love with Harry, and I still think so. Why did you decide to go with Ronald? Just because Ronald was more obviously in love with you? Or because you knew that Harry could share you with Ronald more than he could share you with Harry? Or were you really more physically attracted to Ronald?"

"I was slightly more physically attracted to Ron," Hermione admitted. "They're very different physical types, but there's just. . . ."

"Something about Harry?" Luna said with a really happy smile.

"Indeed," Hermione said. "I'm not going to try and take Harry away from you, if that's what you're worried about."

"That would be the only thing you could do that would hurt Harry and perhaps drive him away," Luna told her.

"Then what exactly are you suggesting?" Hermione asked, puzzled.

Luna leaned over and kissed Hermione gently on the lips.

"Oh, my!" Hermione said a moment later, aware her heart rate had nearly doubled.

"Harry was right," Luna said thoughtfully, "you have fantastic lips." She leaned forward again, kissing Hermione and lightly stroking her back. Luna was relieved when Hermione kissed her back with a gentle passion.

"Are you sure this won't bother Harry?" Hermione asked, breathless. At that moment, she only cared about what Harry thought, not anyone else. Hermione had spent the first part of her Fourth year wondering if she loved Ron or Harry more. Ever since Ron died, she had wondered if she could ever have a chance with Harry, especially since he was obviously so much in love with Luna.

She had been given an unexpected answer, which made her happier than she had ever been. General feelings that she had repressed during her Third year towards several older girls sprang forth, all concentrating on Luna. She looked at Luna, to see if things might actually work out.

"I promise Harry will love us both, and that I will love you both." The pair, both unwilling to go further, kissed gently, snuggled, and fell asleep.

Thursday, July 31, 1997

Hermione woke up feeling very loved and secure. When she tried to turn over, she realized that she was well-intertwined with Luna. Memories came flooding back of the previous night.

'Am I really ready for this kind of relationship,' she wondered, 'or should that be relationships?' Thinking about it, she realized that the vast hole that Ron's death had ripped into her soul seemed bridged. It was still there, but no longer felt ever-widening and bottomless. Luna was sweet and even, she made herself admit, attractive -- and apparently attracted to her. Harry was, well, Harry.

Hermione judged her options, and decided in the short-run her best option was to wake Luna up and get dressed before anyone came to wake them up for breakfast.

Hermione awoke Luna with a soft kiss.

Ginny knocked on her friends' door a little after 11:00. "Come on, you two," she said. "It's time to go."

Luna opened the door, favored Ginny with one of her secret smiles, and walked out of the room. "Try and convince Miss E.L.F. that leaving her bags will make the elves happier than dragging them down the stairs herself will," Luna said.

"Hermione!" Ginny protested, rushing into the room.

"Relax!" Hermione was sitting on the bed. "I just wanted to thank the elves!"

Ginny grabbed her hand and pulled her off the bed and towards the door. "And you should know perfectly well that they won't appear while you're in the room! You're holding them up! You would think someone as brilliant as you could remember that from breakfast!" Hermione had wanted to stay in the breakfast room to thank the elves that morning, and had to be coaxed out.

"But last night. . . ."

Ginny rolled her eyes. "Last night they were summonsed to take the cake away, to make certain Neville wouldn't eat too much of it."

'Sometimes,' Hermione thought, 'I don't believe I'll ever understand this world!'

Hermione and Ginny caught up with Luna at the top of the grand staircase. She saw that Harry and Neville were already in the entrance-way, and Neville was being lectured by his grandmother.

"Please demonstrate to us the proper way to descend a stair, milady," Luna teased gently, using a very posh accent. Ginny giggled.

Hermione frowned for a second, then decided they weren't making fun of her -- they were mostly making fun of the situation, and a little of Mrs. Longbottom. Hermione swept back her hair and descended the stairs at the proper speed and with just the proper bounce in her step.

The slight sound of her steps attracted Harry's attention, which in turn attracted that of Neville and his grandmother. Luna swept down after Hermione, and Ginny followed, although they both perhaps bounced a bit more than was strictly proper, especially Ginny.

Mrs. Longbottom allowed herself a slight smile. The Weasley girl was affectionate, bright, and vivacious, just what a somewhat-staid boy like Neville needed. She was also Pure-blooded, if from a very poor family on her father's side, and one only slightly better off on the mother's. In her parents' time, a match like that would have been almost unheard of. Now, this bright penny of a tomboy was a good catch for Neville.

Lovegood was a Bohemian, or whatever the correct term for the type was these days. Probably good for the angst-ridden Boy-Who-Lived. But Miss Granger, Muggle-born though she was, was a lady. She would take the two pairs in hand, and at the very least see them through Hogwarts and see them well-launched into life.

"Miss Granger," she said, her approval obvious in her voice, "it has been a pleasure to have you in our home. I understand you are working to bring the different cultural wings of our world together. I shall write Mistress Truheart and Mistress Trowbridge; they both reside near Hogsmeade. They might be of some help to you in regards some of the older aspects of our culture. If they are interested in helping, I shall write Miss McGonagall to see if you might visit them other than on Hogsmeade weekends."

Extending her hand, Hermione clasped Mrs. Longbottom's in the prescribed manner. "Thank you, I would appreciate that very much." She remembered the White Coven from the previous January. "I am very grateful for Neville, and you, having me to stay."

Mrs. Longbottom smiled more broadly than Neville had seen in a long while. "I am sure we both enjoyed your visit. I am also sure you will keep an eye on all four of these scamps at Potter Place, and beyond," she said, while thinking, 'That's right, girl! Put me in my place by reminding me all this is Neville's, and that I'll just run it on sufferance once he finishes school. If he and Ginny marry, I'll still have a diminishing hand in running the place, but if you married him, I'd truly be put in my place inside of six months!'

"I have been honored to meet you formally," Hermione concluded, dropping her hand. "Thank you for receiving me."

"Miss Granger," the old lady said, "believe me, I know who has been honored." She turned to Neville, "Well go on! You five have much to do!"

Harry, Luna, and Ginny all thanked the older woman, Neville said goodbye again, and then Harry activated the portkey, sweeping them away.

'Neville was honored, because one of the most powerful wizards alive is his friend,' she thought after they left. 'Neville was honored, because the most brilliant witch in the last two generations or so has helped him along, until he has been able to help himself. Muggle-born or not, the girl deserves our help.' She marched off to write to the other members of the White Coven, twelve Pure-blooded witches who sought to preserve the old ways without the most of the old prejudices. She was the youngest, at 87, Mistress Trowbridge the oldest, at 198.

When the next year started, Hermione would find herself with new resources.

Chapter III

Three elves were awaiting them in the reception hall of the gothic stone bridge. Harry greeted the elves and sent them ahead with the luggage. Ginny, and then Neville, both took the now-familiar blood oath with Harry. ("I, Harry Potter, swear Ginny Weasley is a friend to the House of Potter." "I, Ginny Weasley, am a friend to the House of Potter." "I, Harry Potter, swear Neville Longbottom is a friend to the House of Potter." "I, Neville Longbottom, am a friend to the House of Potter.")

At that point, Ginny led Neville across the covered stone bridge and down the lane leading to the castle. Hermione looked at the pair remaining. "What?" she asked. Then she realized. "You two have already . . . talked."

Luna smiled at Hermione, then nodded to Harry. "There are several levels of blood oaths," Luna started to explain.

"Like the one Carole took last year," Hermione, said, pointing out she got the idea. Carole was Edward's wife. "That one was 'I swear my heart to the House of Potter,'" Hermione added.

"That was, in a sense, still a mid-level oath," Harry said. "It may be used in place of the friendship oath, if it is meant. The higher oaths are usually only used in private. Once one of those is taken, then you can just swear the love oath without a Potter being present for the rest of your life, which is what Carole does."

"Really?" Hermione was always interested in such ceremonies. "What's the highest? Or can't you say?"

"One of the highest is for the women who love Potters," Luna said. "Carole couldn't do it, because she married Edward elsewhere, assuming she was a virgin at the time."

"What?" Hermione said. Then she thought about it. "Oh!"

"Another way is to use the blood of a male Potter child, along with the father and mother," Harry explained. "However, the love oath, by itself, means there is no need to have me, or Edward, with you to come and go for a month."

Luna held out her hand. Harry reopened the small cut on his hand, and said, "I swear Luna Lovegood holds the heart of the House of Potter."

He cut a tiny slice into the base of Luna's thumb as gently as possible. "I swear my heart to the House of Potter." They mixed their blood, dripped it on the oath stone, and Luna walked onto the bridge itself.

Harry then looked at Hermione, and Hermione felt her heart flutter. She knew what Harry was silently asking. She took the two steps she needed to come close.

Hermione took Harry hand and kissed the bleeding cut on his thumb, and then kissed him lightly on the lips. She stepped back a little. "I swear Hermione Granger holds the heart of the House of Potter," Harry said, as he cut Hermione.

"I swear my heart to the House of Potter," Hermione replied, and they performed the ritual as well.

Harry healed their cuts, and all three walked hand-in-hand towards the castle.

"Now that's unexpected," Edward Potter said in a very surprised voice, looking out of the main windows on the top floor of the front of Potter Place. Carole Potter, holding their four-month old infant, came to look.

"That Luna's a wild girl in some ways," Carole commented, watching Harry, Luna, and Hermione shared a group hug and kiss. "I mean, the three of them? Harry and Hermione are so . . . shy."

"Luna loves Harry totally; Hermione loves and adores Harry; Harry loves and adores Luna, and loves and needs Hermione." Edward shrugged. "Unconventional these days, but Luna must have decided this is what is best for Harry. Good thing she's not the jealous type!"

Carole gave a twisted smile. "Don't you get any ideas! I am the jealous type!"

"I know; I am, too," Edward admitted.

"Aren't you going to talk to him?"

Edward shook his head. "No. I promised him I would be his family, but that I wouldn't try to make myself his father."

"But people will talk! I mean, it's not exactly usual, is it?"

He frowned. "Actually, weren't many of the pre-Druidic cults polyamorous?"

"In pre-Celtic Europe, and some ancient parts of Polynesia, but not too many other places," Carole answered. Edward was a famous archeologist, but Carole was the better cultural anthropologist, especially when it came to the 'secret history' (ie unknown to Muggles) of the wizarding world. "Of course, many have been polygamous all over the world. But that won't stop the talk today!"

Edward grinned. "I don't think Luna, or especially Hermione, would put up with the term polygamy, even if that is how things work out in fact. They would both insist it is polyamorous, just to make it seem less gender-specific."

"True." Carole looked up at her husband. "Do you think it will hurt them very much when it gets out?"

"They're still in school," Edward reminded her. "It might not last too long."

"With ninety-nine per cent of students, you'd be right," she retorted, "but if those three have one quality in common, it's loyalty."

"Loyalty and bravery," Edward said.

"True." Carole looked at their child. "He's about ready to nap. I better let his god parents see him now."

"Neville, dear, your mouth is hanging open," Ginny commented.

"But . . . but . . ."

"I know," Ginny said with a sigh. "It will take some getting used to, won't it?"

"But . . . but . . ."

"Do you think any less of Harry?" Ginny asked.

"Well, no. . . ."

"Do you think any less of Hermione?"

"It's just . . . different!"

"True," Ginny acknowledged. She took Neville's jaw in her hand and made him face her. Ginny put her arms around his neck, and kissed him deeply. When she was finished, she laid her head against his chest. "Never think that I want that, Neville. I love you; I want to be with you But if this is what they want, good for them. But we don't mention it to anyone until they go public, if ever." She looked him in the eye. "Okay?"

"Okay," Neville agreed, a slight quiver in his voice. "If it doesn't bother you, it won't bother me!"

"You know, I feel a little tired," Ginny said to distract Neville. "Maybe after lunch, we can all take a nap."

Neville grinned.

After lunch, they did just that. Neville and Ginny had rooms on the next-to-top floor in the upper turret that Harry used for himself to themselves.

Harry had been rather protective of his privacy the previous Christmas. None of his friends had asked to come up to see what, if anything, he had done with the top floor, which was his domain. The previous Christmas, Luna had shared Harry's room, while the other couples had also stayed together on the floor below.

Hermione was very interested in seeing Harry's domain, now that he had had some time to decorate it. The stairs led to a large, open circular room, much like the common area on the

floor below. The trio stood on the landing. A window looked out from the side of the castle. The stairs continued on up to the top of the battlemented turret. Harry pointed to the doors, starting to their left, "Spare bedroom, bathroom, and then our suite -- bath, bedroom, and what's supposed to be a dressing room, but what's currently set up as a den -- and then the study."

The furniture in the setting area was still much like downstairs as well -- old, well-built and well-conditioned Victorian sofas and captain's chairs. There were a number of old tapestries, non-magical and none listing any family trees. The one personal touch was a series of nine racing brooms, arranged in a vertical display. Even Quidditch-ignorant Hermione recognized Harry's Firebolt.

Hermione walked over to the display. She saw each had a little plaque. Two had belonged to James Potter. One each of the other brooms belonged to Harry's grandfather and great-grandfather, Sirius Black, Harold Potter (Edward's older brother), Edward's father -- and Ron Weasley. (Harry had bought Ginny a Nimbus 2001 the previous autumn, so she hadn't needed Ron's broom that spring.)

"Nice," Hermione said.

"Carole arranged it for me," Harry said simply. "Err, Hermione. . . ."

"Yes?" Hermione asked.

Luna linked her arm with Hermione's. "Come on, let me show you the suite."

Luna wisely took her into the den rather than directly to the bedroom. There was a desk, half-empty bookshelves, a long library table, comfy chairs, and plenty of space. The bedroom had several wardrobes, two chests of drawers and a vanity, Harry's trunk, almost empty bookshelves (just a few wizarding photos), three chairs, and a huge canopy bed. Hermione swallowed nervously.

Luna whispered in Hermione's ear, and she shook her head 'no.' "Harry," Luna said, "why don't you go into the bathroom for a few minutes."

Harry looked puzzled, then blushed as he moved quickly into the bathroom. He was out, wearing only his boxers and hoping he had not misunderstood, in less than three minutes.

He hadn't. Luna and Hermione stood in the soft sunlight, fully nude, embracing and kissing deeply.

Harry kicked off his boxers, which drew their attention to him. "You are both . . . so beautiful," he whispered in awe as they turned to face him.

Hermione blushed while Luna held out her free hand to him, smiling.

The five friends gathered at 5:30. Ginny and Luna kept up the conversation, as Harry, Hermione, and Neville all felt suddenly rather shy, since they all had a rough idea of what all the others had been doing.

No one was therefore paying much attention to whom was in the solarium until they were all well-inside. "Professor Dumbledore!"

Harry's surprise caught the other four's attention, and they quickly echoed it -- all five had thought his appearance today was less likely than on Saturday for some reason. Besides the Potters, the others present were Professors Lupin and Flitwick, as well as Remus' Auror girlfriend, Tonks.

"Happy Birthday, Harry," Dumbledore said, which the others echoed.

"Shall we open your presents now, Harry?" Edward asked.

"No," Harry answered politely, "I think Professor Dumbledore has something to ask or tell us first."

The adults all shifted uneasily. "It could wait, if you wish," Dumbledore finally said.

"No, sir," Harry replied seriously, "I'd rather get this out of the way." He moved to sit down, and everyone found seats.

Dumbledore nearly sighed. "Miss Granger, Miss Lovegood, are either of you familiar with the legend of the land of Ynunlle?"

"It's a type of dream world, isn't it?" Luna asked.

"Exactly," Hermione agreed, "a dream world believed in by some of those shadowy magical cultures that preceded the Druids. There are some parallels with aboriginal Australian beliefs."

"Very good, and as accurate as any student is likely to be," Dumbledore said. Hermione looked offended. Luna smiled gently.

"If you go on to study ancient cultures and beliefs at some place like Glastonbury," Carole said, referring to the various learning associations that took the place of universities in the wizarding world, "you'll find out a lot more about these things."

"The information is too dangerous to even have in the 'restricted' section of the Hogwarts library," Edward added.

"So this Ynunlle is real?" Ginny asked.

"Very real, in most senses of reality," Dumbledore said. "It is a parallel world. In some ways it is similar to ours, in other ways very different. The Cawg culture, the Sharuk culture of north Africa, and a few other Magical societies flourished at the dawn of agricultural culture. That would be some seven to five thousand years ago, even slightly earlier for the Sharuks, who were that culture Edward, Carole, and their friends were investigating in Chad before Edward's return."

"And the Cawgs were in Europe. Weren't they the ones that built the first versions of Stonehenge and the other earliest circles?" Hermione asked.

"Exactly," Dumbledore agreed. "These cultures had probably visited this dimension much like the Australian Dreamwalkers visit similar dimensions even today. Some Muggle Hindu and Buddhist mystics do as well."

"Now, between six thousand three hundred and five thousand seven hundred years ago, these cultures discovered a way to create physical portals to this other world, and they went around Africa, Europe, central Asia, and greater India looking for places to build them." Harry's attention perked up. "Thanks to the expedition to the Sharuk magical cities, we now know the reasons for building so many arches, and exactly where they were."

Edward took up the tale. "Entering Ynunlle via trance creates a parallel body, a parallel you, in fact. They learned quickly that you can enter Ynunlle safely three times in a trance. The fourth time, however, your body here fades away quickly and you are trapped there forever."

"Why would they want to go there, then?" Harry asked.

"It's a very beautiful, very magical world," Dumbledore said, "even more so than our own."

"And these people built these portals so they could come back here?" Harry said eagerly.

"Don't jump ahead, Harry," Edward warned. "They also learned that the portals didn't fully work both ways. You could enter them, but still couldn't exit them. They could move non-living things out, but they couldn't get people out."

"Oh," Harry said, disappointed.

"They built these, hoping to find a place where the magical boundaries were weak enough to allow exiting," Edward went on.

"They built how many, exactly?" Dumbledore asked.

"Seven-hundred and twenty-nine," Carole said. "They were a bit obsessive."

"The Sharuk listed the number and their locations," Dumbledore told the group. "Investigators believe they have tracked them all down."

"Of the Seven-hundred twenty-nine, a hundred and twelve are listed as destroyed," Edward told them. "Three hundred and twenty-seven are totally non-functional. A Hundred and thirty-eight now simply would kill you."

"Like the one in the Department of Mysteries?" Harry asked.

"Exactly like that one," Dumbledore said sadly. Remus and Edward both dropped their eyes when they saw Harry's disappointment. "Go on, Edward."

"Oh, and seventy-eight now would take you to very dull parallel dimensions where you still can't get back, and a dozen take you to dull places where you can get back. The other sixty-two seem to work."

"Where's the one that's listed as destroyed, but isn't?" Hermione asked.

"Very good, Miss Granger," Dumbledore said. "Now. . . ." He trailed off as Harry held up his hand to stop the Headmaster.

"Let me guess," Harry said, thinking hard for several moments. "Three guesses, anyway. One, it's here at Potter Place and you need two Potters to do whatever it is you need to do; two, it's a Godric's Hollow and you need me for some reason; or three, it's built into the Chamber of Secrets, and I'm the only Parseltongue you know." Harry looked at the Headmaster.

"Very good," Dumbledore told him. "It is partially reason three. It is built somewhere into the Chamber of Secrets, as best we can tell. Tom Riddle, when he felt he could no longer loose the basilisk, found the arch there. While he spent his last year and a half plotting to gain the prophecy, he did have other plans. One was to mount an expedition into the land of Ynulle. For that, he needed two things, one of which was access to Hogwarts, so that he could use the arch at the Chamber of Secrets to bring something out."

"And the other reasons?" Harry asked.

"We need five young people," Dumbledore answered.

"Why?" Neville blurted out.

"A skilled individual may enter the realm from any location on Earth, but only at an equinox. A group may enter mentally if near a portal. Two of the restrictions of any group mental expedition are that there be no more than nine individuals, and that at least half be under eighteen." Dumbledore shrugged. "There may be some reason for this, or perhaps it was created as a safeguard. The reason is lost. Voldemort was planning his own expedition; Draco Malfoy was supposed to be recruiting a group to help out on it."

"Go on," Harry said, suspiciously.

"Simply put, there is a jewel that exists in Ynulle. Common laws of science do not always apply there," Dumbledore added as an aside to Hermione, "and it grows in a cave. Facets of three carats or so slough off every so often. In Ynulle, they are merely pretty. Here, well, if a person held a good-sized piece of the crystal, say the size of an ostrich egg, and planted one of the smaller pieces on someone. . . ." He shrugged. "That person would control the other's mind totally, even more perfectly than under the Imperius curse."

"So, since Voldemort is gone, who is going after this jewel?" Harry asked.

"We've recently learned that Regulus Black is planning his own expedition," Dumbledore said. "Still, we do not have enough direct evidence to bring him down. We cannot allow him access to the crystal. We must destroy the cave, or at least the spout."

"How dangerous is this?" Harry asked.

"You can **feel** hurt, but you can't actually **be** hurt," Dumbledore said. "If any of the expedition are injured or become ill, they will be returned to our world. However," he warned, "you can be killed there. It would have to be a very sudden death; serious injury that leaves you alive for even a second or so would send you back here."

"So something like the Killing curse would work?" Harry asked.

"Exactly."

"It sounds like we'd be gone a long time," Hermione speculated.

"Yes and no," Dumbledore said. "The time intersections are not consistent, varying with the time of year, although they do tend to even out. If you go early Saturday morning, every day you spend in Ynulle would correspond to an hour here."

"Then what's the rush?" Harry demanded. "Why this Saturday instead of some weekend this term, when we'd have had time to study what we're getting into?"

"After the equinox, the time relations are reversed until the solstice," Carole explained.

"We have also just learned that Black is sending a scout in, to check out paths, et cetera, on the next equinox," Dumbledore added. "It would be best if the cave is destroyed soon."

"And Regulus has access to a portal?" Harry asked.

"He will by late December," Dumbledore replied. "He has not assembled the younger members of his expedition, however. He will probably do so by blackmail. Again, something we hope to prevent."

"How dangerous would it be, if we weren't automatically transported back?" Harry asked.

"Fairly dangerous," Dumbledore replied. "There are many more magical and dangerous beasts there than in our world today. The people, descended from those trapped there, live what we would consider a medieval life-style. They are magical, but while we retain our full powers, those trapped there slowly lose part of theirs. Most of their descendants are also fairly low-powered. Some are very intelligent, however, and have learned short-cuts we don't know here. So again, they can be dangerous. One small group is very powerful, although they are located far away."

"None of the natives like strangers," Flitwick put in, speaking for almost the first time.

"You've been there?" Ginny asked.

"Albus and I have both been there twice," the charms master said.

"Which is why we dare not go this time," Dumbledore told them.

"Who would the four adults be, if we go?" Harry asked.

"Myself, Remus, and Tonks," Edward said. "I'm not sure who the fourth would be."

The teens looked at Carole. She shook her head. "Harold," she said simply. Everyone nodded their understanding. "Like the Headmaster and Filius, however, I will be with you in the Chamber. There are ways to communicate, and we'll be able to give you advice. At least one of us will be there at all times."

"And we have the best route well-mapped out," Flitwick added.

"If we can solve a logistical problem, Hagrid will go," Dumbledore told them. "If not, I have several other candidates in mind. Professor McGonagall is handling the problem."

"To go back to your original important questions," Flitwick added, "daytime is somewhat dangerous. You shouldn't have to go near the known villages, and you are all more able than anyone you should find there. It's nighttime that is really dangerous."

"At least there aren't any werewolves," Remus said drily. The teens all looked at him.

"No moon as we know it," Carole explained. "There is a small ring, and several shepherding moons, like at Saturn, but they don't trigger the curse."

"Remus will actually function as an animagus there," Dumbledore added.

"A much less painful transition," Remus agreed. Seeing the looks that garnered, he admitted, "I've been once before, although to a very different area. Still, I know something of the customs, which should help."

"There seems to be something, some aspect, everyone is dancing around not saying," Luna stated.

"Ynulle is the native land of the Dementors," Flitwick told them. "One reason they are so difficult to kill is that they don't really live in our dimension, but in that one. They still feed on emotions there, but are fully material. There, they may be killed in any manner anyone can be killed in."

"The souls they steal are transported to Ynulle," Carole continued. "There, they fully manifest a physical presence until they are killed in either dimension. The Dementors try to enslave the people they Kiss in our world. They often succeed, especially with Muggles. They feed off the emotions, and also suck on their blood. They and the vampires sometimes war over the human population."

"So, if Barty Crouch Junior hadn't been turned into a zombie, and then destroyed last January, he would be alive in that dimension?" Harry asked.

"Exactly," Dumbledore agreed. "All those officially Kissed in the last twenty-five years or so were turned into zombies by Voldemort and Black last autumn, and they have all been destroyed. Anyone Kissed longer ago has already lost some twenty to fifty percent of their power."

"And anyone not officially Kissed?" Neville asked.

"We don't have a record of any these last twenty years," Dumbledore told them.

Harry stood. "I think we should discuss this." He looked at his friends. "Out in the courtyard?"

The other four stood, and then followed him out.

"He feels manipulated," Edward complained. "I can't blame him."

"I know," Dumbledore acknowledged. "I wish there was a better choice."

Chapter IV

"Well," Harry asked the group, "how do you all feel about this?"

"You start, my love," Luna said. Harry looked at her. "I know you don't want to influence us," she said, "but you obviously have reservations, so why don't you start?"

The five friends sat on three of the stone benches in the courtyard -- Harry and Neville levitating and moving them together. Harry sat by himself and looked at his friends. "I feel manipulated," he told them. "I mean, how many times have I had to save the bloody day? four or five times? Not to mention all the scrapes and problems along the way."

"You still want to be an auror, don't you?" Hermione asked.

"No," he replied heatedly, startling them all, "not really. I want the auror training. If I have to keep on saving the bloody world, I want some proper training! Once I get it, I don't think I could really work for the Ministry."

That they could all understand.

"This won't be as dangerous as some of the things you've had to do," Ginny reminded him. "And, more importantly, we'll be with you."

Harry gave her a strange look.

"I mean that, Harry," Ginny said. "Look, it appears that you're always going to be the one people turn to in these situations. Like it or not, you have the talent and you have a knack for survival. Yes, we can feel hurt if we try this. Yes, we can even be killed."

"But we still want to come with you," Neville broke in.

"If you do this, well, professionally, we obviously won't be with you," Ginny told him, "but if there have to be five of us to make a full party?" She shrugged, as if to say, 'So why not us?'

Harry turned to Luna and Hermione. Luna shrugged and looked at Hermione as well.

Hermione sighed and stood up. "Fine," she said, "let's go tell the Headmaster we'll play 'Dungeons and Dragons' for him."

"What's that?" Neville asked, before anyone else could.

"Come on," Hermione said wearily, "that way I'll only have to explain it once."

"Really?" Dumbledore said in surprise. "Muggle imagination never ceases to amaze me. Have you played?"

"Not really," Hermione admitted. "My parents played at university, and my father still plays every second Saturday of the month. Mum plays every once in a while, helping out the Dungeon Master."

"Is it in any way accurate?"

Hermione smiled at the Headmaster's question. "It's much more Lord of the Rings than real magic."

"Ah," the Headmaster said, "wonderful works. I was so glad Remus here introduced me to Tolkien."

Remus shrugged modestly.

"So far as I know, there are no Ents, Hobbits, elves, or Mount Doom," Dumbledore stated. "There are many trolls, and a much higher number of vampires than here, unfortunately, especially where you will be going."

"Really?" Neville asked, in a trembling voice.

"Vampires are harder to kill on Ynulle for some reason," Flitwick told them. "A stake through the heart merely aggravates them. Only prolonged exposure to sunlight truly destroys them, although fire and silver will harm them, and beheading will render them harmless for a time."

"Silver?" Harry asked. "Like a silver bullet?"

"Yes," Remus said. "We'll have pistols or shotguns, and silver-tipped bullets. Guns are another thing they don't have there. It's a fairly iron-poor planet, at least on the surface. They do have very abundant supplies of copper and tin to make bronze. They understand gunpowder very well, but can't make the guns, thank goodness."

"Well, there's something not allowed in D-n-D," Hermione said with a slight smile.

"So, you'll do it?" Dumbledore asked.

Harry sighed. "We'll do it."

Somehow, Harry just could not get into the mood for his birthday. All his presents were nice, but this 'mission' put a pall over the proceedings.

After the presents were opened and Harry thanked everyone with as much enthusiasm as he could muster, they sat down to ice cream. "Tell us more about Ynulle," Harry requested. "What's the universe like? How strange is it?"

"During the day, it's like being in a strange forest, at least the areas I have been in," Dumbledore said slowly, remembering. "The trees don't always match what we think should

be there. It would be more like the forest primeval from both here and North America, mixed together, as they were individually thousands of years ago."

"The weather when I was there was much more calm," Flitwick added. "It mostly rains just before dawn where you are going."

"Year 'round?" Neville asked.

"There really aren't any seasons," Dumbledore said. "The planet has no tilt, and its orbit is almost perfectly circular."

"I thought the sun was just a tad redder," Remus suggested.

"Perhaps," Flitwick said, with the air of the connoisseur. "The sky is beautiful, day and night, since there is so little air pollution, and no light pollution."

"And as the day nears dusk, the ring starts showing up. It is so beautiful. . . ." Remus mused.

"The stars are completely different," Dumbledore stated. "So different, that if it is in our universe, rather than a parallel dimension, it must be in a different galaxy. It must be just outside the edge of a spiral galaxy, and you can just discern the form of it in the night sky after midnight in the northern sky, and there are a number of visual spirals and globular clusters in the southern."

"And it is the most beautiful night sky I have ever seen," Flitwick said.

"It is," Dumbledore agreed.

"How many people are there?" Hermione asked.

"We don't know," Dumbledore answered. "The best guess is currently. . . ." He paused to think.

"Maybe as few as three hundred thousand, or as many as one and a half million, perhaps many more," Carole broke in. "A group managed to take in some Muggle technology three years ago -- a small recon drone. There are twelve major land masses and hundreds of large islands, spread over a crescent that extends more than two thirds around the planet. Altogether, my best guess is that there is probably as much land as Eur-Asia and Africa together, although the largest landmass is about the size of Greenland, the smallest three-quarters that size. We didn't get an accurate count on islands between the size of Hawaii and the islands of New Zealand, let alone the smaller islands. Going east to west, the land starts below the equator for about a fifth of the way, follows the equator, more or less for a third, then swings up for about a quarter before going back down towards the equator. There is no land mass near the poles -- there are open oceans at both."

"We only have access to three of the large land masses, and just one of the islands" Carole went on. "The smaller population is for them; if all are inhabited, then the higher number is more likely, if not even higher. The one you're going to in near the top of the northern part of the crescent."

"People tend to group together in small groups that then spread out," Edward said. "I'd be really shocked if they weren't inhabited, but we don't have to worry about that."

"You're going to the most explored land mass, at least from our point of view," Carole went on. "As far as we know, there are no larger towns or cities, just small villages and two small towns. Most have between a hundred and four hundred people, although a few are even smaller. The closest town, the largest we know of and with over a thousand people, is some forty or fifty miles in the wrong direction from where you'll be at any time."

"There aren't any villages directly on your path," Dumbledore added. "There is a small village some fifteen miles or so to the northwest of the starting point, and one about eighteen miles to the south."

Harry, Luna, and Hermione all looked at Dumbledore. "What?" Neville asked.

"We're going to go to a cave where a spout of liquid crystal sheds jewels," Hermione explained. "Someone must go and collect them. If people don't, who or what does?"

Dumbledore explained. "Mountain trolls live at some of the other approaches. Vampires and Dementors collect the jewels to lure victims, although at the moment the vampires seem to be in the ascendent in that area. So, there aren't any villages closer to your route than eleven miles or so; that's the one south of you. You will be going along a path that is mostly a well-built road, which will take you approximately forty-five miles if you have no detours."

"And we have to come back to the arch unless we're injured," Harry asked.

"We can put you in at any arch and pull you out even without your being near an arch, but there is some psychic trauma. It does not do lasting damage, and causes no physical harm, but it is not pleasant," Dumbledore assured them. "We will only pull you out if the time limit comes close to expiring, in some two months, just as you should exit that way only if you are injured."

"How hard is the trip?" Ginny asked. "If it's easy, we could do it in what, two or three days?"

"Remember, there are only twelve hours of daylight," Remus reminded them. "Figure nine hours of usable walking time. If the usual weather patterns hold, we should make nine or ten miles a day without even trying hard, up to twenty or even thirty if we really push it. Worst case scenario? we'll use the first day to get acclimatized, then three to five days to get near the cave. The next day we blow the cave. Five days to get back and get out."

"Twelve days at most," Harry mused. He looked at the teachers. "Really?"

"If everything goes right and we take our time," Edward said. "With luck, we might do it in six or seven days."

"How likely is that?" Harry asked.

"Not very," Edward returned with a grin. "We'll get you set up tomorrow with some good gear. Dobby should have left some maps and guides up in the sitting area. Go on up and change for dinner."

"So," Hermione said, "how do we divide this up?"

"Divide it up?" Neville asked.

"There seems to be just two copies of everything, and we can't all learn all this in a day," Luna said, holding up the papers.

Harry held his hand out and then leafed through them, dividing them up. "Neville," he said holding out one part of the bunch, "you'll take the stuff on the plant-life, of course. Luna, here's the stuff on the runes used there. Ginny, take the Dark creatures info; we'll leave the animal info for Hagrid. I'll take the maps and the stuff on the people."

"What about me?" Hermione demanded.

"You get a copy of everything, of course," Harry said with a straight face. Ginny giggled, while Luna and Neville smiled. Hermione crossed her arms and tried to huff, like she had done when trying to pick a fight with Ron. Harry merely shook his head and kissed Hermione's nose, making her gasp in surprise, and then smile shyly. Harry wasn't going to fight with her.

"Spread out and start looking," Harry said. "We have an hour before we have to get ready for dinner."

Hermione just looked at the stack of material.

"Why don't you go into a spare bedroom?" Luna asked her. "It's private, and I'll bring your dress-robe down in fifty-five minutes."

Hermione scooped up the papers. "Great idea!" She scampered into what had been her and Ron's room the previous Christmas. Harry and Luna shook their heads, and went up to Harry's floor.

Some fifty minutes later, Ginny knocked lightly on the door.

"Aren't you early?" Hermione asked without looking up from her papers.

"It's me," Ginny said in a small voice.

"Oh, come in, Ginny."

Ginny came shyly into the bedroom. Hermione had the papers spread all over the large bed.

"What can I do for you?" Hermione asked, distractedly.

"So, did Harry live up to your expectations?" Ginny asked.

"What!"

"I mean, after your vivid description, I rather thought, well, you might be walking . . . you know."

"We did **NOT** do that!"

"Oh?"

Hermione flushed a little and mumbled something.

"What was that?"

"I said," Hermione said softly, now enunciating every syllable with clarity, "that while we are not having intercourse until after Luna leaves Hogwarts, I am certain my jaw is not the only one that is aching." Hermione stretched her neck. "We'll get used to it, though."

Ginny blushed very bright red. "Oh." She thought a moment, then two thoughts hit her. "**Oh!** Err, does that mean, well, do you mean, you **and** Luna. . . ?"

"We're going to share our lives," Hermione said with dignity, "not divide them."

Ginny shook her head. "Never thought that you . . . I mean I can believe Luna for some reason, but. . . ."

"I know," Hermione admitted, "I never would have thought of going through with it myself. I think it's partially to do with Harry."

Ginny gave a twisted smile. "I had a crush on him for years. I understand."

"But you never could have shared him, could you?" Hermione asked.

"No," Ginny admitted. "How can you?"

"Because I love him, and I know he loves me. The fact that he loves Luna doesn't matter; it doesn't mean he loves me any less. The fact that Luna seems to love me is . . . sweet. I can see why Harry loves her. I never thought I'd have the nerve to share affection with another girl, but it's . . . nice."

Luna tapped on the open door and walked. "Nice?" she teased gently.

Hermione stood and went over to Luna. She awkwardly kissed her on the cheek. "I'm still getting used to it, alright?"

"Alright," Luna said, kissing Hermione lightly but hugging her warmly.

"This had to be your idea," Ginny said. "I mean, I know Harry is a lot more confident, but really!"

Luna gave both her oldest friend and her new lover her secret smile. "You're right, of course. The Harry of even six or seven months ago couldn't be like this." She shrugged. "Edward claims its part of his father's personality peeping through, which does not please Harry!"

She thought a moment more. "Harry has had a most complex and stressful life. For ten years, he had no love. Perhaps he needs love now more than most people do. I know he can take love from both Hermione and myself, and return it."

She looked at Hermione. "I do not believe in categories, especially when it comes to people. I love Harry. I love you. It is very simple to me. I hope it becomes simple for you, too."

Hermione flushed and studied her toes for a moment. The taller girl hugged her. "We need to get dressed for dinner."

Hermione smiled happily and wrapped her arm around Luna's waist. The two slowly left, Hermione's head moving to rest on Luna's shoulder.

Ginny shook her head. "Weird," she muttered.

After a light dinner, the group sat down to ice cream. "Have you come up with any questions yet?" Dumbledore asked.

"I haven't found anything about the cave," Hermione said. "What exactly does this liquid crystal geyser look like?"

"There's a labyrinth," Dumbledore told her. "There are a number of small extrusions of the crystal, but these flake off in small amounts, and there are some shallow puddles, which can be broken up. Deep in the maze is a chamber, where there is a strange little rock spout, a little more than a yard high and roughly six inches across the inner pipe. That is what must be destroyed. Edward will have several small explosive devices, which will destroy the spout. The natives will still have access to the small jewels, but the temptation to our world to make a grab for a controlling jewel will be removed."

"I didn't see anything on language yet," Harry said. "How do we communicate?"

"If you were to become physically trapped via an arch access, you would have some difficulties," Flitwick piped up. "The native language is an interesting one. It is based on a number of ancient north African and Middle-eastern languages, with a heavy overlay of Celtic and Latin, and even some of the Native Australian languages. However, when you are sent in as you will be, it will sound like English."

"And there's no use asking how it works," Carole told them, "because all we have are theories."

"Interesting," Hermione admitted.

"It is," Carole told her. "I really envy you! I've never had the chance to go, and I've been studying it for years!"

"I wish you could go, too," Edward said. "I have to admit, I never wanted to make the trip."

"Why is that?"

"The three-time limit," Flitwick told them. "Any number of Dark wizards have booby-trapped treasures and the like over the centuries. They can't send you physically into Ynulle unless they happen to control an arch and can toss you through, but there are ways of send you psychically. It was really a very common trap in certain periods of history, and there are likely several thousand traps left. You will be taught how to escape those traps in your Seventh year, although Ynulle itself will not be explained."

"Bill Weasley has been sent there once already," Dumbledore told them. "At Gringotts, any cursebreaker sent twice is forced to retire."

"Which is why Albus and I could only join you in an emergency," Flitwick told them.

The teens all nodded; they would not like to be stuck in Ynulle either.

"What did you mean by possible 'psychic trauma' earlier today?" Hermione asked.

"When you are sent psychically into Ynulle, you will likely have visions," Dumbledore told them. "These may be visions of the dead, or visions of the past or of possible futures. They all tend to be positive on the way in."

"One reason some people want to make the trip," Carole put in.

"True," Dumbledore agreed. He went on, "If you come out at the same gateway you go in at, there are no further visions. If you are pulled out, or come out through a different gate, you will have some very bad visions."

"If you are seriously injured, you're usually able to ignore them," Remus added drily.

"We can send you to any gateway on Ynulle from any gateway here, but you should always exit from the one you are sent in from," Dumbledore continued. "We are sending you to a protected glade. There are nine such locations still functioning on Ynulle. So far as we know for sure, only those sent from our world can access the areas. The others tend to be guarded by passwords."

"But are the visions true?" Hermione asked before Dumbledore could go on about gateways they would not be using.

"Visions are not prophecies, just as prophecies are not fate" Luna said. "Visions are just possibilities; prophecies are probabilities. We can work to make visions true."

"Quite correct," Dumbledore told her. "You certainly earned your O.O.W.L. in Divination."

"So, tomorrow we get out-fitted in Diagon Alley," Harry mused. He looked at the adults. "Do we get any time to shop for ourselves?"

"Of course!" Edward said. "I promised." Harry nodded his head. It was nice to know he could rely on Edward.

Harry sat in a Victorian armchair in the circular sitting room on the guest floor, brooding. He had been sitting there since dinner had broken up, some two hours before. Just sitting, while the others discussed the material on Ynulle.

A little after 10:15, Ginny and Neville had retired, but Harry had ignored any suggestions that he follow their example. Finally, Hermione pulled Luna into her former bedroom. "What do you think is wrong with Harry?"

Luna sighed. "You saw how he was acting at Ottery St. Catchpole?"

"Yes, as if he hadn't a care in the world," Hermione replied. "You said that it was because all the pressures were off . . . Oh!"

"Exactly," Luna agreed. "The pressure is back on. I'm sure he's worried about losing someone, and remembering losing Sirius and Ron."

"Maybe we shouldn't have agreed to go, then," Hermione said thoughtfully.

"Can you really imagine Harry NOT going?" Luna demanded. "What we have to do is make certain this is successful. And, as hard as it will be, we will have to think of ourselves more than Harry."

"You mean, act to save ourselves first?" Hermione demanded in turn, horrified at the idea. Then, she thought about it for a moment. "You might be right. As hard as it would be to lose Harry, it would be harder for him to lose us."

"Exactly. If Harry gets through this, maybe his confidence will be back for good. Even though he grieved for Ron more than for Sirius, it's Sirius' death that haunts him most."

Hermione nodded, "Because he went to the Ministry, thinking to save Sirius, and Sirius only went to save Harry."

"So, we have to avoid that situation most of all. Harry mistrusts his judgement." Luna gave Hermione a twisted grin. "Too bad he knows us too well -- it would probably help if we could be damsels in distress that he could rescue."

Hermione clasped her hands together and screwed her face into a mimicry of helplessness. "Oh please, great hero, save me and love me," she cooed.

Luna giggled. "Exactly."

Hermione dropped the act. "No, he'd never believe it. Harry is far from perfect, but he's not a fool."

Luna smiled. "So, how to we get him to come to bed?"

"Direct action, don't you think?" Hermione stood and started undoing her dress robes. Luna followed suit. After hanging their clothes up, they moved out to the common area.

Harry glanced towards the slight noises, and did a double-take. Seeing that they were observed, Hermione and Luna stopped trying to creep up on him and put their arms around the other's waist. "We are going to bed," Hermione stated.

"Not to sleep, mind," Luna added, "just bed."

"Care to join us, love of our lives?" Hermione asked, licking her lips.

Harry smiled. Some offers were too good to pass up, no matter how maudlin a mood he was in.

Chapter V

Friday, August 1, 1997

Supervised by Edward and Carole Potter and Tonks, the five teens descended into Diagon Alley a little after 9:00 am. They were a bit more dispirited than usual. Hermione glanced through *Flourish & Blotts*, but since there were no new N.E.W.T. materials she did not already own, she was not interested in looking further. Harry walked past the Quidditch supply store without a second glance. Luna did not try to coax them into any of the smaller, off-beat stores and, since her father was investigating a story in Wales, did not drop by The Quibbler office. None of the five even evinced any interest in ice cream.

So, after Hermione had investigated the bookstore, the group went straight to Freebody's Outfitters, where clothing other than robes and associated garments were sold. The clothes were Muggle-style, but magically reinforced denims, and dragon-hide combat boots magically made to fit without having to be 'broken in' and similar gear.

"Caps?" Harry asked with distaste, looking at an array of them.

"Where you're going has a real temperature range," Carole told them. "It will be anywhere between Forty to Fifty most mornings. By early afternoon, it might be around Eighty, and back to the low Seventies by dusk. Most afternoons are pretty sunny, too."

The girls all went for practical wide-brimmed denim hats, but Harry and Neville went for more traditional bargemen's caps.

By noon, the group was outfitted. Since they showed no interest in having lunch in Diagon Alley, they returned to Potter Place.

After a very quiet luncheon, Dumbledore appeared. The group agreed that they might as well go to Hogwarts. While their 'adventure' hung over them, Potter Place had lost its appeal.

Harry and Luna had worried that they would be separated, since Luna would be sent to spend the night in her Ravenclaw dorm. Edward and Dumbledore had decided, however, that the group should instead spend the night in their Ynunlle accommodations. That would give them a chance to get used to it, and to discover if they were missing anything before leaving.

The group therefore trooped directly to Myrtle's bathroom, accompanied by Flitwick and Madam Pomfrey. Hagrid was not waiting for them, however. Instead, they saw a much different figure.

"Charlie!" Ginny cried, rushing to fling herself into his arms.

"Hey, Squirt!" Charlie said, hugging her back.

"I had hoped Hagrid could make the journey, but I'm sure Mister Weasley will more than suffice," Dumbledore told them, holding the door open so they could enter the girl's lavatory. A flushing sound signaled Myrtle's fleeing before the onslaught.

"Why can't Hagrid come?" Harry asked, worried.

"Just a minor problem with the accommodations," Dumbledore said. "You'll see once we reach the arch." Dumbledore took them to the sink. "If you would?"

"Open," Harry said in Parseltongue. The portal to the Chamber of Secrets' slide opened.

"Might I suggest the command of 'stairs'?" Dumbledore asked Harry.

"Stairs," Harry ordered.

A set of stairs spiraled down into the darkness. "Oh," Harry said, "that makes sense."

Flitwick led the way, followed by Dumbledore and Edward. The trio slowly made their way, cleaning up the tunnel, and setting up supports as well, especially at the site of the cave-in. Before Harry opened up the Chamber itself, they all enclosed themselves in the Bubble-head charm. Even though it had been just over four years, the huge body of the basilisk might have decayed fairly slowly. The teens had no compunction of standing outside the Chamber while the adults went in and cleaned up.

An hour later, the teens were allowed in. The basilisk's skeleton had had what little decayed flesh remained stripped off it and then it had been cleaned. The skeleton itself now laid over on the left side of the chamber, winding around the columns. It would become an exhibit the following year. Removing the bubbles, the students all found the air still a bit stale, but not unbearably so.

Dumbledore came out from behind the statue representing Salazar Slytherin. "As we suspected, the back of the base was built over the arch," he told the group. "It partially powers the defensive wards for the entire school! Still, We can set up anywhere."

"Set-up what?" Harry almost demanded.

Reaching into a pocket, Dumbledore pulled out twelve chains, each with a small black cube on it. Dumbledore handed one to each of the travelers, Carole and Madam Pomfrey, and had them wear them as necklaces, and yet hold the black cube in their off-wand hand while touching their wands together.

Dumbledore added his wand to the travelers, followed by Pomfrey and Carole, and then he said an incantation. An orange light spread up their arms, and it turned a light green when the glow hit the cubes.

"The habitat is now attuned to the twelve of us, which is the maximum," Dumbledore told them as he lowered his wand. "No one else may enter the habitat for the next two months, although of course you will be back long before then. It also allows those of us who are staying here to communicate with you. One of us will be awake and on duty at all times."

He turned to Edward and Remus. "If one of you would care to demonstrate?"

"These habitats have been developed over the centuries to explore Ynunlle," Edward explained as he took his necklace off and set it on the ground. He touched his wand to the cube and said, "Expand!"

The cube expanded into what looked like a little one person canvas tent. "Yes," Dumbledore said, "many of the principles are very similar to the type of tents I believe some of you used at the Quidditch world Cup a few years ago. This has a number of additional capabilities, including the security and communication features. Also, any number of your cubes may be activated at the same time. You may deactivate your entrance from inside; if you don't, you will exit from your entrance."

"That means if we get separated during the day, we can still get together at night, and easily leave together the next day" Edward put in.

"Precisely," Dumbledore agreed. "There is a month's worth of fresh food under preservation spells, and many other supplies. Why don't you all enter and familiarize your selves for now, and Madam Pomfrey, Mrs. Potter, and I will be in in an hour or so?"

Remus dropped to his knees and crawled into the tent. Harry shrugged and followed.

And he crawled into a carpeted room that would have done any wealthy hunting lodge proud. There were stones right at the crawlway entrance, but that soon gave way to a plush burgundy carpet. The room was some forty-five feet long and twenty feet wide, and perhaps twelve feet high. The wall to his left was had an immense stone fireplace in the center and had filled bookshelves on either side.

The entrance wall had a rather complete-looking bar on the fireplace side. The other side held clothes hooks and some low wooden shelves, with stools near by, obviously so they could shed their outside clothes if they desired. While the furniture on the fireplace side was deep sofas, captain's chairs, and rustic tables, the right side had a billiard table and a card table.

By now, the others were in the entrance room as well. "There are five bedrooms on either side of this room," Remus told them, "each with a WC and shower attached, and one large bath. Through that door," he told them, pointing at the center of the far wall, "we have the dining area and kitchen. Above the entrance," they all turned and noticed there were five mirrors, "we have our spy glasses."

Remus touched his wand to the center mirror, and the view in front of the tent appeared. The mirror below showed the view from the back, while the mirror above showed the ceiling of the Chamber. "The Headmaster recently upgraded these, based on some Muggle ideas, so that there's now a night-vision option, as well as record and fast play-back."

"And the Pure-Bloods like to think only they have ideas," Hermione said with a sniff.

"Now, now, Hermione," Remus chided gently, "none of that. These aren't decorative tiles under the mirrors, by the way; they activate our defenses, communications, and the entrances. The red shrinks the outside back to the size of the cube, although in the shape of a rock. Although it's the size and actual weight of a small stone, it has the inertial mass of the entire structure."

"So it won't crush whatever it's on, but it can't be moved?" Hermione asked.

"Exactly. The green tile restores the tent shape. Don't ask about the others; that's too complicated to go into now. There should be copies of the manuals in each of the bed rooms."

Remus turned full around. "Why don't you all choose your rooms? Take the right side -- five rooms and a bath. Your bags should be right inside the corridor."

The five teens did as they were told, and saw there were indeed five doors, presumably leading to the five bedrooms and bath. "Ginny, you take that first one on the left; Neville, you're in the last one. Harry will have this one, then Luna and myself at the other end."

"But. . . ." Ginny protested.

"No buts!"

"But. . . ." Harry started.

"If the bedrooms are the width suggested by the corridor, they're only twelve feet to fourteen feet wide at most," Hermione stated.

"Let's see," Luna said simply, and popped her head into Harry's room, and her own at the end. "Yep, ten feet, with a closet and WC between them. Looks like about thirty-five feet deep, though." Her head popped back into the corridor. "Nice big bed, too."

"See," Hermione said. "So, we each need a room to put stuff in, and get some down-time in." She grinned. "Beyond that, we can figure something out."

An hour later, the twelve people directly involved were sitting in the dining room. Professor Flitwick was monitoring from the communications mirror that was in that room. "First of all," Carole said, standing, "here are your watches. The time is irrelevant now, but won't be at the gateway on Ynunlle."

"As you can see, it's a twenty-four hour watch," Dumbledore pointed out. "As you can also see, they follow the old system, so both dawn and dusk are at approximately Twelve. Six would be noon or midnight. You might as well get used to the idea, on the off-chance you end up meeting any of the natives."

"So, we'll be waking up at around the Eleventh hour of night, an hour before dawn. Shower or whatever, breakfast, fix and pack lunch, et cetera," Edward told the group. "Around dawn and dusk, we can communicate back here clearly for about thirty to forty minutes, at other times there can be some interference. Remus will generally be in charge of that, and Charlie will be checking out the outside or setting the defenses. There's another manual on the bar if your room didn't have a copy. Hopefully, we come out at around Twelve-thirty and hike until about noon. We take forty-five minutes at most for lunch, and to rest. Then we hike until at least Ten. That's when we'll start thinking about camp. Depending on what hills we might have to go over, we'll rest as needed."

"There traditionally aren't many Dementors in the areas we'll be hiking through," Remus reminded them, taking up the story. "There could be many vampires, however, especially around the cavern."

"Natural enemies, from the info we were given," Harry pointed out.

"Exactly," Remus agreed. "And we'll be totally safe in here from either at night. There are also mountain trolls and a number of other dangerous animals, magical and otherwise."

Edward pulled out the guns. "Double-barreled shot guns and old fashioned six-shot Forty-fours or Thirty-eights." He looked at them. "I know Harry can handle the Forty-four; can the rest of you?"

The students and Tonks all nodded. "Good. Remus, don't touch any of this until we get there!" Remus nodded, looking at the ammunition warily. "The shotgun shells are filled with a mixture of silver shot and some steel. The slugs for both the revolvers and the shotguns are hollow-points with an alloy that has some silver in it. Vampires and Dementors get the right barrel for preference; that's where we load the pellets. Animals, trolls, and people get the slugs if we can't hit them with spells. Got it?"

They all nodded. "People?" Luna asked.

"Some are controlled by the vampires and Dementors," Carole told them. "Hopefully, you won't run into any of the regular natives."

"If we run into those controlled by vampires or Dementors?" Harry asked.

"We treat them as the enemy as well -- they'll attack first unless they've been ordered to watch us, so we fight back," Edward told them. "The regular natives are more likely to try and avoid us."

"And of course you won't chase them down," Dumbledore told them. "You are on a mission, not gathering data."

"Questions so far?" Edward asked.

"There are trolls, Dementors, and people," Hermione mused, "are there elves, goblins, centaurs, giants, or merpeople?"

"There are certainly doxies, pixies, and fairies," Carole said thoughtfully. She looked at Dumbledore.

"So far as we know, there are no elves, goblins, centaurs, or merpeople," Dumbledore replied. "We believe there were once giants in the areas we know about, but they are no longer there. However, there are all those other islands and mini-continents which we have never properly explored. If they are on Ynulle, we have no knowledge of them and they should not be apparent to you."

"I'm glad to see Charlie, but exactly why couldn't Hagrid come?" Harry asked next.

"Ah, well," Dumbledore said with a touch of embarrassment, "we just could not get the entrance to enlarge without causing problems with the habitat."

"When was the last time we had reliable information on this area," Hermione asked, seeing the subject needed to be changed.

"This gate has been restricted for some hundred years," Dumbledore told them. "The last official use was more than sixty years ago. We believe the last unofficial use was over fifty years ago."

"There was primitive magical recording equipment at one of the sites in Chad," Carole put in. "We're still deciphering the records."

"However, the main gate used is in that town we mentioned. The Italian Ministry, and the groups that have preceded it, have sent a deputation nearly every year, often twice a year, for some two thousand years," Dumbledore said, picking the thread back up. "While fifty miles is a fair distance to the people of Ynunlle, since they can not Apparate, brooms work quite well in areas where there are few dragons. So while we have little recent news, we think we have a fair knowledge of local conditions."

"If it's so easy, why didn't Voldemort do it?" Harry asked. "And, for that matter, why wasn't this cave blown before?"

"He never had a group of well-trained students like you five," Dumbledore said simply. "I have no doubt, had he proceeded unchecked, Draco Malfoy and four others would have been involved with a safari to the cave."

"And it might not be going to be easy, although we hope there are no great difficulties," Edward said.

"As for your second question," Carole went on, "no one from this side has been to the cave recently. . . ."

"Except perhaps for Tom Riddle, when he made an illegal journey or two," Dumbledore put in.

"Exactly. And he was reportedly driven back by vampires before arriving at the cave. Anyway," Carole finished, "the cave resisted magical attempts to collapse it a hundred years ago. We believe the Muggle explosives will work."

"You said the people of Ynunlle can't Apparate," Hermione said, "does that mean you four can't either?"

"Line of sight only," Tonks answered first.

"Would it be easier for you four to go without us?" Luna asked.

"Faster, but not easier," Remus answered. "There is safety in numbers."

"You five are all very able," Dumbledore told them. "You will all be more than helpful to the party. And as Miss Tonks said, Apparation is line of sight only. Remember, you will be traveling in the mountains. Line of sight Apparation would be at best at most twice as fast as hiking for large parts of the journey."

"Now, put on your belts," Edward instructed.

"Not you, Remus," Tonks warned. Remus nodded.

The group adjusted their belts. There were places for two wands on the left side of the belt and a gun holster on the right. There were places for twelve extra pistol cartridges, and six cartridges each for shotgun shells and pellets. In the back of the belt, there was a Bowie knife, again made out of an alloy with some silver in it.

Next, they slipped on their canteens and then their denim jackets. They were each supplied with a large and a small clasp-knife, a set of water-proof maps for the first 12 miles, a compass (magnetic north was almost true north on Ynunlle), and a small set of pocket omnioculars. They then put on their small knapsacks. That would give them easy-access to a second canteen, water-proof holders for lunch and snacks, and extra cartridges. There was also a place to tie the jackets onto the knapsacks. Add their hats and a walking staff, and the outfits were complete.

"Not terribly heavy or awkward," Ginny said, with the air of a connoisseur.

"Quite so," Charlie agreed. "It's nice having these necklaces. Not having to lug a tent of any size should make it easy to make those nine or ten miles a day if the road is somehow gone or if there are problems, and to be honest, we can probably do twenty a day on a decent road if we really want to without come close to killing, err, exhausting ourselves."

"Why don't you each take a peg and shelf out by the entrance?" Dumbledore suggested. "Then we shall do a quick tour of the amenities."

Behind the large dining room was a well-equipped and well-stocked kitchen. It turned out there was a second level under the first one. It was a mostly-open area. There were cans and sacks of food under preserving spells, more than enough to last the nine for a month. There were also huge storage containers for water and waste, which answered some of the unasked questions the teens had. There was also an old-fashioned armory, extra camping and hiking equipment, piles of astronomical gear, a small potions lab, and a modern Muggle-laundry (washer and dryer).

"I guess we'll need a rota for washing and cooking," Hermione said.

"I can't cook worth beans," Tonks said. "I do know how to operate these contraptions. I'll be laundry officer, unless someone else wants it."

No one volunteered.

"Harry and I can both cook," Luna said.

"As can I," Hermione added.

"I guess that leaves Neville and me for dining room clean-up and general wash-up, and you three leaders can set-up the dining room and police the sitting room when you're not ordering us about," Ginny stated.

"Just like Mum," Charlie grumbled softly.

"I heard that! You can do the canteens, make certain we all pick up the packed lunches, and take care of the garbage from lunch."

The group made a practice run with dinner, that seemed to be successful as far as all were concerned. Charlie retired first, unaware of the sleeping arrangements in the other corridor. No one wanted to enlighten him.

Ginny retired to Neville's room, while Hermione and Harry retired to Luna's.

They would have to be awake early to make the journey.

Chapter VI

Day One

The nine travelers sat in silence, each wondering, a little in anticipation, a little in fear, for what visions they might see as they made the journey.

At first, all they could see was a bright white mist that hurt the eyes.

Two baritone voices started softly singing; singing a song that was calm and ethereal in the tune, although the lyrics didn't make a lot of sense at first:

*"Through early morning fog I see
Visions of the things to be
The pains that are withheld from me
I realise and I can see
That suicide is painless
It brings on many changes
I can take or leave it if I please
The game of life is hard to play
I'm gonna lose it anyway
The losing card I'll some day lay
So this is all I have to say
That suicide is painless. . . ."*

Edward and Remus both looked at each other. Remus said "Padfoot! Prongs!" and together they yelled, "Knock it off!"

"Twits," Edward added in a mutter.

Harry's eyes, partially closed against the light, flew open, and indeed, all nine were still together, surrounded by the mist. Standing in the middle of their circle were his father and Sirius.

"Now, we can't stay long," James said.

"Bending all sorts of rules, you know," Sirius agreed.

"So, nice meeting you, Weasleys, Mister Longbottom; you have your own visions." Charlie, Ginny, and Neville faded away.

"And Nymph!" Sirius addressed her in a familiar and leering voice. "Finally bagged Moony, huh? Way to go!" He gave her a thumbs up, and Tonks faded away, squeaking in protest.

"Moony, Teddy, thanks for looking after Harry," James said, now with great seriousness. "I'm sorry for leaving you both so soon; I shouldn't have been taken by surprise."

"I understand, James," Remus said.

"Thanks, Jamie," Edward said. "I really miss you."

"I understand, Ted. You've both done a great job."

"Thanks for looking after my cycle, too!" Sirius put in. "In fact, Moony, thanks for everything those last two years!"

"You know it was my pleasure, Padfoot," Remus said softly.

"You've both done more than Lils and I could ever have asked," James added, as Edward and Remus faded away.

"My goodness," Sirius leered, "I must say I didn't think you had it in you, Harry! Ow!" James had cuffed Sirius on the back of the head.

"Quiet, Padfoot!" James turned to Harry. "I'm sorry you learned I could be such a prat at times, Harry. I'm also sorry your mother couldn't come, too." He looked at Luna and Hermione, flanking Harry. "I don't know if this arrangement will work, but I wish you two luck. Either one, or both of you, are very good for him, and for what it's worth, Lily and I approve." He turned back to Harry. "Treat them good, Harry. And listen to Edward and Remus. If I had, most of the major problems in your life never would have happened."

"Yeah," Sirius agreed sadly, "you should have listened to Moony, not me, Harry."

"Sometime, Fate can't be avoided," Luna told them both.

James gave her a twisted smile that was almost a leer. "Wisdom on one side, brilliance on the other, and beauty on both. Well done, my boy! Ow!" Sirius had cuffed him back.

"Just never become staid, Harry, and you'll know I always approve," Sirius told him. "And I'm sorry I screwed up at the Ministry. **That** wasn't anybody's fault but mine."

"Thanks, Dad; thanks Sirius," Harry said, finally able to get a word in. "I love you both."

They all faded away.

"Neville! Charlie! Harry!" Ginny called.

"I'm over here, Gin," a quiet voice said.

"Charlie?"

"No," Charlie said, "I'm here." Ginny saw Charlie, and grabbed on to him.

"Then who. . . ?" Ginny started to say.

"I always **thought** he was your favorite brother."

"Ron!"

The three siblings hugged.

After a few moments, Ron said, "I wish I could stay -- I wish I could have stayed with you for that matter! -- but I have to go. Give my love to everyone, even Percy."

"We will," Charlie said.

"I love you, Ronnie," Ginny managed to say, before they all faded out.

Remus and Tonks watched together in shock as their daughter took her first steps.

"Ron!" Hermione threw herself into Ron's arms.

As Ron embraced the crying Hermione, he looked over to an embarrassed Harry. "I know time is relative here, but there still isn't much of it. I hope you realize, if I had done it right, we both would have been saved. Don't feel guilty." He looked down at Hermione and smiled. "And don't either of you feel guilty."

Harry tried to hug Ron as well, but the vision faded.

Charlie Weasley was smiling. He saw dragons. Every kind of dragon he could imagine.

Neville's smile faded as the vision of six red-headed children froze in time, and one stern-looking Ron Weasley appeared.

"Neville!" Ron barked, "what the bloody hell have you been doing to my little sister!" He looked at the frozen scene. "And what the hell are you planning on doing to her?!"

Neville managed to give Ron a grin. "Fertile pair, aren't we?"

Hermione and Luna stood with their arms around Harry's waist. They were watching a vision of what was known as 'the little house' on the main island of Potter Place, a few hundred meters south of the castle. From the look of it, they were some twenty years older in the vision than they currently were. Six children, looking between fourteen and four, were running around the yard playing tag, while Hermione nursed an infant and a heavily-pregnant Luna sat on Harry's lap. The three boys had Harry's hair, and one of the girls had hair that showed that she was both Harry and Hermione's daughter. The remaining daughters had Luna's hair and Harry's eyes.

Three crups were trying to play tag with the children as well. Hermione pointed, and Harry and Luna saw Dobby and a female elf happily polishing silver on the veranda while a little elfling played at their feet.

Then Luna pointed, and they saw a crowd of people coming towards them. There was a horde of Weasleys, and Edward and Carole with four children, and Remus and Tonks with two.

Luna pointed again, and they saw the 'real' versions of Edward, Ginny, Neville, Remus, and Tonks looking on from nearby.

The sun light intensified, and all nine found themselves lying down in the grass, with the sun in their face.

As the members of the party opened their eyes, they found themselves in a small glade, an ancient stone arch standing near a rocky hill.

They had arrived at Ynunlle.

Hermione recovered first. She sat up, sniffing.

Edward was on his feet quickly, surveying the scene. Tonks followed, checking for problems. In less than ten seconds, Remus, Charlie, and Harry joined them.

It was an hour past dawn or so. There was a small rounded mountain to their north, with a semi-circle of sheer rock some thirty feet high and then a gentle slope going the rest of the way to the summit, some hundred feet higher. Water was gushing from three springs, forming a small stream that flowed south-southeast. The clearing was only some fifteen yards across and maybe extending twenty from the rock face. The stream bisected the clearing, leaving some five yards on the east side, where the arch was, and some ten on the west side, where they were.

"How far is the so-called safe zone?" Harry asked quietly.

"We're on a small rocky rise that extends maybe fifty yards before sloping down to the main valley floor," Remus replied, almost as softly. "The safe zone encompasses just this glade, although the rest of the rise is free from accidental penetration. We're at the north end of the valley. You can't see it for the trees, but these are old mountains, maybe a hundred to five hundred feet of vertical height from valley floors to summits in the older river valleys like this one. Remember, this one is some four to six miles across east to west, with two small rivers flowing south."

"They meet at a point approximately six miles south, right?" Hermione asked.

"Exactly," Remus agreed. "It will be rough going at first, because no one is supposed to live in this valley. There could be some traffic on the rivers, as they meet the sea some forty-five miles below their confluence."

"Which is where the one real town is," Neville stated, to show he had paid attention.

"Exactly. More to the point, there are a series of rapids below where the rivers join. The rivers nearly meet a mile or so above the actual confluence. People coming down the east river carry their boats over the narrows. There's a small bridge, marking the start of the paved road, that

goes over the west river, and they typically go the next sixteen miles on foot. That's where the rapids end and there's a small village on the down side of a mountain the river cuts through. People going the west river do the same. The west bank is troll country from the bridge to the north side of the mountain before the village, so they usually go in groups on that trail. The male trolls here keep small harems deep in the woods, and act individually as hunters. Faced with more than six wizards, they always give way."

"Why don't we want to join a group?" Ginny asked Remus. "I presume we don't want to, anyway, right?"

"Right," Edward answered. "First of all, they won't trust us. Second, when we strike west, it will mean we're going to the Crystal Cave, which they won't like. Third, below the village is currently vampire territory for the next twenty miles or so. If members of any party are caught by vampires, they will of course tell them our mission. Trolls will be bad enough without having to worry about vampires and their minions."

"So, we stay here all day?" Harry asked.

"That's what Dumbledore implied, anyway," Tonks injected.

"We're going about four miles south," Edward told them. "There must have been an ice age here right before people started coming to Ynunlle, because the terrain is pretty rough for those four miles, above where the river ever flooded. Lots of dips, no real flat forest floor. We'll try to go at least as far as the end of the dips."

"We don't want to get too near the carrying path, and the dips end about a mile before that," Remus said. "Any party on the path south will leave at first light. Hopefully those going up-river will do the same."

"Why isn't there any kind of path from the arch to the bridge?" Hermione asked.

"The people that built the arches did so about two thousand years before the cave was discovered, and about fifteen hundred before these river valleys were started to be settled," Edward explained. "They built the arches in any location that could, originally corresponding to locations back on Earth. This one corresponds with a malfunctioning one in Morocco. They later figured out how to link the Ynunlle arches together for psychic travel from any arch on Earth."

"And people traveling to the cave wouldn't want a set path from this arch to the native paths, because then that way would be more easily guarded," Remus added. "Of course, we'll be following one of the four native roads to the cave, so an extra few miles of trail wouldn't hurt as far as I can see. Still, that's the set-up."

"So," Edward commanded, holstering his wand and unshouldering his shotgun, "Harry, Neville, wands away, shotguns out. This is the area we're most likely to run into bears. Charlie, take point. Remus?"

Remus nodded and turned into the wolf. Charlie and Remus moved out cautiously, followed by Ginny, Hermione and Luna, then Neville and Tonks, and finally Harry and Edward. Charlie turned to the group. "I know we all want to process the visions, but we need to stay alert."

Everyone merely nodded.

It was not easy for most of them.

They followed the little stream as it meandered, even if it took them a little off to the southeast. There were no trees right next to it, and the banks were fairly level and stony. After a mile or so, however, it ran into a larger stream, with steeper banks. It took an hour to walk the next mile, as the group learned what 'the dips' meant. It was as if a very choppy sea had been frozen and planted with trees. The dips ranged between three feet wide and a foot deep, to some as large as ten feet across and five feet deep. The trees were mostly hard woods, especially various types of hickory and maples, and although fairly widely spaced, they were mostly old enough to make any real line-of-sight to be less than thirty feet. They were all glad they had the walking staffs; they were needed for walking this broken ground, although they would likely leave them in the habitat until they returned. Edward wasn't happy that they had to shoulder the shotguns and holster their wands, but they needed the staffs more.

The next mile took an hour and a half. The third mile took even longer. It was just as they completed the third mile that they came to a small clearing. Charlie walked the parameter while Edward walked it in the other direction. Remus sniffed the air, and popped back into human form.

"I guess it's time to take a break," Ginny said, flopping on the ground. "And it's getting warm!"

"Remus, Hermione, Charlie, go ahead and join Ginny; the rest of us will keep watch," Edward said in a hard voice.

Ginny flushed. "Sorry," she said.

"We all need to remember we'll be lucky if this is just a long, boring stroll," Edward said. "Today is likely to be the safest and easiest day we have, but we have to learn not to take chances."

"Lemonade?" Charlie asked his sister.

Forty minutes later, the four women went off into the woods. Neville and Charlie looked a bit concerned for a moment, then realized that it was probably a call of nature. This was confirmed twenty minutes later when the three teens came back wearing their jeans transfigured into denim skirts -- a much more practical article of clothing. Charlie was about to make some remark, but was hushed by Harry, Remus, and Edward. All three knew Hermione would give them a long lecture on why robes and skirts had been the most common way Europeans dressed, except for those few who had to ride horses, until the 1400s. None of them wanted to hear it.

The men then went off on a similar mission. Finally, they went back to hiking. While they were heading for a point roughly four miles from the arch, their three mile trek so far had not followed a straight path. They therefore had about a mile and a third to go before they would

even consider stopping for the day. Lunch had refreshed them a little, and there were slightly fewer large dips.

In addition, there must have been a serious forest fire within the last few years. After the first twenty yards, they ran into the evidence, and soon most of the trees were dead, and some had fallen. While it was not always easy to climb over the fallen trees, many of them allowed quick crossing of the dips. It also made the day brighter, and gave them their first real glimpses of the low mountains that formed the valley.

In an hour and twenty minutes, they were in an area mostly cleared by the fire. The group could clearly see the three long low mountains to their west. "The bridge is about two thirds the way down the southern-most mountain," Edward said, pointing out the one that was now the closest. They could see the incline that would take them to leveler ground ahead of them, although the dips continued off to their right in a more gentle slope.

Remus looked at his watch. "Eight forty," he said. "I know we don't want to get too close to the bridge, but it should be almost exactly a mile from here."

Edward thought a moment. "Charlie, did the files say anything about biting insects?"

Charlie shook his head. "Not that I saw. Has anyone collected any kind of bites?"

Everyone considered their bodies, and they all shook their heads.

"How is everyone feeling?" Edward asked. "Any problems at all?"

"Well," Hermione said, "my feet hurt."

"So do mine," Neville admitted.

"I have a slight headache," Harry added.

"My calves could use a massage," Ginny said, giving Neville a nudge that Charlie missed.

"That's not too bad. Now, after tonight, we will not want to be out after dusk," Edward said. "There is still a slight risk tonight, but I think we can risk it. If there are no biting insects, we certainly don't need a fire; that would just give us away. The area partially cleared by the fire seems to extend another quarter mile or so. I think we should back up a few dozen yards to be on the safe side -- someone from the bridge might come this way hunting or looking for firewood, and we don't want to be seen. Sound reasonable to everyone?"

They all nodded in turn. They walked back twenty yards, and took twenty minutes for each member to retest their cube to set up the habitat in turn. Each one worked, and they left Remus' to use for that night. Then, each went down to take a shower. The three teen girls went back to jeans after their shower, and Harry started dinner, a fairly slow-cooked meal, since for once they had plenty of time.

Forty minutes before the twelfth hour, Harry turned down the stew, Remus stopped setting the table, and everyone gathered outside. After about twenty minutes, Remus pointed out a fast-moving shepharding moon. Over the time remaining before complete darkness, the thin ring slowly appeared in the night sky. Half an hour after sunset, there was a night such as none of

the students had ever seen. Even Hogwarts suffered a little from the industrial air pollution of the modern world, and the tiniest amount of smoke and light pollution from Hogsmeade.

A thin wisp of smoke that appeared just before sunset showed there was indeed a group camping out near the bridge, but there was no other light visible, except in the sky.

"The stars in this part of space during this time of year are a little closer than around Earth," Remus said softly. "There are several visible small stars within three light years, and about three times as many sun-sized stars within twelve light years." He then pointed out the very visible spiral galaxy, and they used their pocket omnioculars to locate several more.

While it would normally be Remus' job, Edward went in early to report to Dumbledore. Finally, a little after the first hour of darkness, the others retired into habitat as well. Charlie pressed the correct tile, and to outward appearance, the tent turned into a small rock.

The hungry group happily ate Harry's stew and other dishes. While Neville and Ginny cleaned up, Luna pre-prepared breakfast and Hermione did the same for lunch (including refilling the canteens). Remus showed them how to do the preserving spells.

After the chores were finished, everyone gathered in front of the fireplace. Each told, and recorded, their visions. Seeing Ron, James, and Sirius gave everyone some comfort, and they all enjoyed their visions of the future (although Charlie now realized how close Neville and Ginny were).

All-in-all, everyone felt that it had been a successful, if easy, first day.

Chapter VII

Day Two

The wake-up alarms went off just over an hour before dawn. There was time for everyone to have a slow, leisurely awakening and breakfast, since they did not want to get to the bridge too early. Remus and Edward had a brief chat with Carol and Flitwick. The cooking detail prepared some of the food for dinner (peeling potatoes and the like) and set it all under preserving spells.

An hour and a half after local sun-rise (the teens still could not think of it as 1:25), the group exited the habitat, Remus going out first in wolf-form. Compared to the day before, the walking was easier, and this time they left the walking staffs behind from the start. They had walked a mile in less than forty minutes, which was still slower than they would be going once they hit the road.

Charlie and Remus left the group and scouted the area around the bridge. They scouted carefully, and only came back twenty minutes later, Remus changing and giving the all-clear. "They've been gone for over an hour," Remus told them. "We might as well make time."

"No rush," Edward stated. "Stretch the muscles today; we can pick up the pace tomorrow."

"How far until we turn west?" Harry asked, standing up from cover and helping Hermione and Luna to do the same.

"A shade over four miles from the bridge," Edward answered as the group moved out. "The Old Ones laid down roads, which they enchanted, so they should be in fairly good shape. The road to the cave is the first paved west turn."

"You all remember what you were taught about mountain trolls, I hope!" Remus stated.

"They hate water, and will cross no stream wider than a yard or so unless under dire peril," Ginny answered promptly.

"There's a pre-Druidic incantation, 'Rastarip triam Holath,' that can be put on narrow access points, which will discourage trolls from entering," Luna added quickly.

"Right," Remus told them, proud that the two had remembered their lessons from him quicker than the other three remembered Lockhart's, "that's why most bridges in this area will have some sort of portal at one or both ends."

"Once we all pass through the portal, we say the incantation as a group," Edward said. "Then we walk quietly and moderately -- we don't want to catch up to any other group."

The group nodded their understanding. They saw a number of dugouts and a few skiffs that had been pulled up on both of the grassy banks. The two rivers did nearly meet, they were only thirty yards apart. No doubt, some day they would erode away the banks and meet.

The bridge was a very solid, unmortared stone-and-timber bridge. The portal at the end was simply two tall oak poles with a cross-beam. They turned and said the incantation together.

The road was not overly-wide, perhaps the same as a two-lane auto highway. It was paved with slightly-rounded rocks; not terribly comfortable walking, but still better than walking on smaller cobbles. Cattle and oxen were the only beasts of burden known to the peoples of Ynunlle, and ox-carts and similar vehicles were only used near villages. With only occasion foot-traffic, the charms and enchantments kept the road in good repair.

In four hours, they had strolled nearly the entire four miles without breaking a sweat. Edward and Charlie had agreed to go slowly, to make certain everyone was up to the walk. There was a bridged stream, and the group sat in the covered bridge for lunch after saying the incantation on the entrance.

"I know it's too early to say," Neville started, but he was hushed by most of the others.

"Oh, come on," Hermione said. "His saying we've had an easy trip so far is not going to bring bad luck!"

"Even granted its at best only a fifth of the way. . . ." Neville tried to continue.

"Neville, why say it?" Charlie nearly snapped.

"The turn is about thirty yards down the road," Edward said, overriding the growing grumbling. "Trolls, black and brown bears, coyotes, wolves, pixies, boggarts. . . ."

"I get the idea," Neville said.

"Vampires and their servants, dragons, highway men, angry peasants. . . ." Edward continued.

"Twisted ankles, doxy bites, sunburn. . . ." Remus went on.

"Stop!" Ginny demanded.

"I won't answer for these two," Edward said, "but I was reminding all of us, including myself. We may easily get all the way to the cave and back with no problems beyond some sore muscles, or we may not. If we don't get sloppy, we shouldn't have any major problems. Now, are we ready?"

The group packed up, moved out of the covered bridge and cast the incantation, and then walked to the west turn. The road went nearly straight for almost a mile and a half. The verge was made up of tightly, inter-grown bushes, so that nothing large could really leap out at them.

After about half a mile, Harry quietly asked Edward why Charlie was still so nervous, and scanning the sky, sometimes with his omniscissors.

"Dragons and wyverns," Edward answered. "Nothing can leap out at us, but that also means we can't run for cover, either. That's why I told you that you could have left your brooms; it's unlikely you'll need it. After this straight away, we'll be winding through and over low hills, dales, glens, whatever you want to call these little valleys. The danger there will be the ground animals."

"Wyverns?" Harry asked.

"Miniature dragons, about six to eight feet long from snout to the start of the tail. They hunt in small packs, and have been extinct back home for over a thousand years. As far as we know, the only two types of dragons here are the Welsh green and the Welsh red -- which is also extinct at home."

Harry nodded. As the group approach the end of the straight-away, the road curved west north-west around a high hill. The hedge on the left verge had a very old, wide break and a trail leading up the hill. Remus had gone forward while Charlie kept an eye on the trail.

"Troll trail?" Hermione asked.

Charlie just nodded. The whole group knew that this meant it was most likely a family group, and the male troll would not act against a group this size unless the group tried to approach the females and children. Any danger would come from a pod of young male trolls, who often ran amuck to exert dominance and to attract females.

The hedge on the right ended as the road came close to a small stream. The one on the left slowly started showing small gaps, and petered away within fifty more yards.

"I think we should take a short break," Charlie said. There was still a section of hedge to protect them from the left, and the stream was starting to turn away from the road on the right. That left a shady glade to rest in.

"Are these blueberries?" Luna asked, looking at some of the bushes.

Neville took a look. "A variety, anyway." He glanced at Edward. "Can we risk it?"

Edward shook his head. "It's almost certainly safe, but we still shouldn't risk it. Take a close look at it; if you get lost without your cube, this would be a decent bet for a little food."

"No dragons?" Harry asked Charlie.

"No, although I thought I saw a wyvern flying south just after we came off the bridge for lunch. It was going away from us, thank goodness."

Tonks looked at her watch. "Nine twenty. So, we should walk for another hour or so?"

Remus stood and stretched. "I guess. I think I'll walk as myself for a while," he said, flexing his hands. He of course did not spend a lot of time as a werewolf, and the pads on the wolf's forefeet were a little sore.

An hour later, they found themselves at the entrance to the next small valley. "Shall we walk down to that little brook and camp there?" Tonks asked.

Charlie shook his head first. "No. If we were really camping instead of living in the habitat we would, but since we have our own water we should stay away from it."

"Water attracts just about everything," Edward reminded them as they moved off the road to a small clearing.

"Of course, if we were really camping," Hermione added thoughtfully, "a campfire on the top of a hill would be like a beacon."

"Exactly," Charlie agreed. "A different set of rules apply."

"How far do you think we've gone," Ginny asked as Tonks made her cube change into the faux-tent entrance.

"About four miles the first day, and just ten miles today," Charlie said cheerfully.

"Thirty-one miles to go," Tonks stated, "more-or-less."

"How deep is the cave?" Luna asked. "We really didn't get a whole lot of information."

"If it were straight in, maybe fifty yards," Remus told her. "With the twists and changes of level, maybe two hundred yards."

"So," Harry asked Remus, "what did that keen nose detect in the area?" Remus had gone back into wolf form to sniff around and had just changed back in time to answer Luna's question.

"A few old troll trails, both types of bear -- although I'm not certain which is which, I think it was a male black bear, a female black bear with two cubs, and a grizzly. The most recent troll must have been dragging a slaughtered moose." Remus looked around and sighed. "Despite the beauty of the scenery, it is only an hour and a half until sunset. Let's get in. We can't afford to look at the stars here."

"Twelve hours of sunlight really aren't a lot, are they?" Luna asked as she entered the tent an hour later.

Remus went to take a long bath, while Harry went to take a quick shower. Tonks drifted out of the sitting room after a few minutes, muttering something about washing Remus' back when Edward teased her.

Charlie and Ginny were having a heated, although quiet, discussion. It was evident what the major topic was, and so everyone in the room decided it was the best part of valor to retire and wait for the water pressure to build and allow them to shower as well. Harry and Neville fled first, but everyone else was gone in less than a minute.

Seeing everyone gone, Ginny rounded on Charlie, "And I suppose you were totally innocent at sixteen?"

"You're not sixteen for a while yet, Gin," Charlie argued.

"Who was nearly expelled for sneaking into the prefect's bathroom with TWO girls during their FOURTH year? I'm entering my Sixth, might I remind you."

"And I'm not saying anything bad about Neville," Charlie went on, "just that you are both too young. . . ."

"To date?"

Charlie looked at her fiercely. "No, not too young to date, too young to shag. Deny you're sleeping with him? Deny you're shagging him?"

"And sucking him and bending over so he can take me up the. . . ."

"GINNY!"

"I'd never done that before last night," Ginny mused. "I wouldn't risk my real body, but it was fun. I rather think Luna lost her virginity last night, from the way she was walking and the way Hermione and Harry were watching her today. . . ."

"I DON'T CARE ABOUT LUNA!" Charlie shouted. "I don't really care what Hermione does, for that matter. It's YOU I'm responsible for. . . ."

"Nonsense," Ginny snapped. "You are no more responsible to me than I am for you."

"Maybe, when you're well into your twenties, I will accept that," Charlie told her, "but that's at least seven years away."

"I love Neville," Ginny said simply. "If this doesn't change, I rather think I shall marry Neville in three or four years." She gave Charlie an evil look. "You know, marriage; what Mum bugs you about, since she doesn't know you prefer being buggered, like I was last night."

Charlie sat down, surprised.

"Yes, I know you're gay," Ginny said.

"I'm not," Charlie said softly, from the shock.

"Alright, bi, with a decided preference by well-hung men."

Charlie shook his head. "That was just a phase." He gazed up at Ginny. "There are six of us, four guys and two girls."

"A double-inverse of Harry's group, huh?"

Charlie took a moment to think about that, and nodded.

"Now," Ginny asked, "which would shock Mum the most? My precocious relationship with the boy I hope to marry in a realm where nothing affects my real body, or your group orgies?"

"It's not like that, Gin!" Charlie protested.

"It will seem that way," Ginny insisted. "Now, I can accept what you're doing, as odd as it seems to be, because I love you. Try and do the same for me, despite my age."

"But it's not the same," Charlie said, now getting really angry. His voice was now getting threatening as he added, "You don't know what you're doing!"

"Aren't they similar?" a new voice added from across the room.

"No offense, Harry, but this is none of your damn business," Charlie snapped.

"No offense, but arguing in a public area that I have to cross at least calls it to my attention," Harry said. "And yes, to some degree it is my concern, even if you don't agree."

He turned to face Ginny from part away across the room, ignoring Charlie, who was getting ever more angry. "I really hope you and Neville aren't having regular sex in the real world," Harry told her. "I'm not with Luna or Hermione, and won't until Luna is done with her N.E.W.T.s. I wish you and Neville would do the same, whether you have done it before or not. Neville needs those N.E.W.T.s for his agricultural work, and I'd feel a lot better if you both finished up your Defense work. I love Luna and Hermione, just like you love Neville, but Charlie's right, we're all so young we might be wrong."

"See, even Harry knows it's wrong!" Charlie said firmly. "You're all too young!"

Harry walked over towards them, and such was the power and anger radiating from Harry that Charlie had to take two steps back. Ginny and Charlie's eyes both went wide. It was as if Harry had unveiled his true self, and the power was dazzling. "You might say that your commitments to Ginny are more important, because you're her real brother, and I'm at best her foster-brother. That if there is any kind of wizard's debt, she owes it to me," Harry said quietly, but the power of his magic was such that it was raising the hair on the back of Charlie's head. "But I don't think that way, Charlie."

Harry took another step, and Charlie found himself pressed against the wall and breathing very fast. "Ron, Sirius, Ginny, Hermione, Luna, and little Harold. As far as I'm concerned, I am, or was, pledged to them in ways I can't explain. So, I'll just say that I have, and will, kill to protect them. That I will die to protect them. Yes, Sirius and Ron are dead, but so are their killers. I love Ginny like a sister, and I will protect her. If Neville hurts her, I will deal with it. If YOU hurt her, I will deal with it."

Harry turned to Ginny. "And I don't mean you're my 'little' sister."

"Trying to add her to your harem, Potter?" Charlie managed to snarl.

Harry snapped back to face Charlie, and Charlie realized right then he would be better off facing an angry mother dragon without a wand than an angry Harry Potter while having one. "Charlie, you're one of the few people alive who could say something like that to me. Now, I am NOT looking to create a harem; neither Luna nor Hermione, nor Ginny for that matter,

would tolerate it even if I had ever thought of it. I love both Luna and Hermione, and they love me and each other, and so far I have been fortunate not to have to choose, if that's any of your business."

Harry took a deep breath, and the power radiating from him seemed to diminish a bit. "I'm not trying to interfere with your relationship with Ginny, Charlie. Argue with her all you want, even scold if you want to, but please, no fighting."

Harry suddenly winked at Ginny so that Charlie could not see it. "Unless, of course, you'd care to join us after dinner, Gin? Then Neville could demonstrate to Charlie if he knows the proper way to. . . ."

"Go to hell, Harry!" Charlie snapped, and stormed out of the room.

"That must have been a very quick shower, Potter," Ginny said, trying to growl.

"The girls offered to give me a bath later, so I did a quick wash-up," Harry said. Harry hesitated, then took Ginny's chin in his hand. "I do worry about you and Neville, Gin."

Ginny smiled. "Don't, Harry. We decided not to shag out in the real world anymore, at least for a while, but why waste the chance now?"

"Okay. I certainly understand that." Harry dropped his hand and sighed. "I guess I'd best get dinner going."

"I'll help chop the potatoes," Ginny offered.

"Onions."

"Whatever."

Dinner was very quiet that evening. Obviously everyone had heard the end of the 'discussion' between Harry and Charlie. Both Charlie and Neville slipped out early (going in opposite directions). Hermione and Luna stayed to help Ginny clean up, and Edward steered Harry to a far corner of the sitting room.

"Going to chastise me, Ted?" Harry asked.

"No, not really," Edward answered. "Should I?"

"No, I don't think so." Harry suddenly lowered his eyes. "Why did I do that?"

"There are somewhere between five and six million of us in our world, Harry. Probably less than a hundred of us have anything like the power you displayed today, maybe less than thirty. You have to remember that in your interactions. Never use it deliberately for anything that isn't worthy." Edward shrugged. "That's all I can tell you."

Harry gave a deep sigh. "I know; 'with power comes responsibility,' right?"

"For people like us? Yes."

Harry straightened a little. "That's how Potters should act, right?"

"Right," Edward said. Then he gave a small twisted smile. "Granted, it took your father until well into his Sixth year to even start to really learn it. You're ahead of that curve. But like I said before, you really do have that arrogant streak that was one of his dominant traits, and one of mine at times for that matter."

Harry flushed in embarrassment and nodded. He went to see how the girls were doing. Within fifteen minutes, the quartet had finished the preliminary preparation for the next day's food. Ginny went to look in Neville, while Hermione and Luna dragged Harry to the bath.

"Interesting evening," Remus said to Edward a few moments after the teens had left for their corridor.

"Very," Edward agreed.

Remus picked up a billiard cue. Edward nodded, and went to get one was well.

"Eight ball?" Remus asked.

"Sure; haven't played since New Orleans. . . ."

"You have always been a hustler," Remus complained. "What you mean is, you haven't played eight ball since New Orleans; you've been shooting billiards with Carole."

"How'd you know?" Edward asked.

"That poker party," Remus growled.

The Muggle Studies professor had suggested a Saturday poker party the previous May, and had somehow enticed all of the younger staff to play. All had pledged to use no magic. Edward had cleaned them all out, even though Edward had sworn he would not use his slight-of-hand abilities as well.

When asked the last time he had played poker, Edward had replied, "I haven't played stud poker since New Orleans, although we played a little draw on the expedition." He hadn't mentioned playing in, and winning, 'Texas No-Hold-'em' tournaments, and playing in a world championship in between.

"Potters are always honest, but sneaky," Remus now complained as Edward ran the table. "I'd hoped Harry would avoid the second part of that statement."

"Some people are arrogant without reason," Edward said as he re-racked the balls. He broke, and then started running the table again. "Some of us have reason."

Remus glared at him.

Chapter VIII

Day Three

Harry and Neville took the lead with Remus the next morning, while Charlie dropped back to the rear with Edward. They left a half hour after sunrise. This was the day they hoped to make better time, although they still weren't going to push it very hard.

"I guess I should thank you," Neville muttered after nearly an hour of walking.

"For what?" Harry asked.

"For last night."

Harry shook his head. "I meant it last night, Neville. You're a good friend, and I do feel protective of you, Remus, Edward, Carole, and all the Weasleys. Even Hagrid. But I do feel especially responsible for, well. . . ."

"I know." Neville walked a little faster, so that they could speak more privately. "Harry, you do know Ginny still loves you?"

"Neville, she got over that crush a long time ago. . . ."

"I know," Neville said simply. "And I even know she loves me more than she loves you. But she does love you."

Harry blushed.

"Now, I'm not too worried about being hurt here," Neville went on, "but something could happen later. It's nice knowing you'll always look out for Ginny, especially if something ever does happen to me." He glanced at Harry. "I care for you more than I can ever say, Harry. You've been like a brother to me. You, Hermione, and Ron helped me become the wizard I am, but Ginny is the center of my life."

"I know, Neville."

"Keep alert, you two!" Tonks told them. Harry and Neville split apart.

As Harry and Neville stopped their conversation, Edward stepped closer to Charlie. "What do you think they were talking about?"

"I don't think I want to know," Charlie almost snarled.

"Still angry with Harry?"

Charlie shrugged and sighed. "Not really. More angry with Ginny. I mean, look at her! She's a beautiful teen; most heterosexual males would drool at a glance at her! So I can't blame Neville, but I do blame her. Ron looked for glory; Ginny looks for affection from peers."

"I understand," Edward told him. "I worry about Harry and his relationships, but there's nothing I can do about them. And he'll always be news. The publicity will hurt them all when it comes out."

"If they see him like I did last night, they won't let out a peep!" Charlie said fervently.

"I love Charlie, but I really wish Hagrid had come," Ginny grumbled to Tonks as the group took a break that afternoon. They were just on the sunny side of the crest of a small mountain that rose high both to their north and south. The rest of the group was back about thirty yards, on the shady side. The pair was acting as lookouts, looking down the next narrow valley they were going to enter.

Tonks shrugged. "They both have useful skills. Just be grateful we haven't needed any so far!"

"You know what I mean, Tonks! Everyone must, the way you have all been walking on eggshells."

Tonks smiled, and her hair went from blonde to Weasley red.

"Very funny!"

Tonks shrugged again. "I never had the opportunities any of you have had, and none of the family life you've had. I was treated badly when I wasn't being ignored by everyone except my Mum and Dad and Sirius until his conviction. It took me a long time to partially get over Sirius' conviction, and a while to be accepted into auror training."

Tonks looked at Ginny. "My aunt killed my father and tried to kill my mother. Try growing up knowing that! I never really had any happiness from the time my father was killed until I got together with Remus. So, be glad Charlie cares, Ginny. Be glad Neville loves you. Be glad you have friends like Hermione and Luna. And, of course. . . ."

"Be glad the most dangerous teen in the wizarding world is on my side?"

Tonks smiled. "Exact. . . ."

"What?"

Tonks pointed. About a mile or so away, the road crested a smaller hill, and there were two trolls facing each other down. Ginny scrambled over the hill to get the others.

Staying low, the nine watched the two trolls out-staring each other.

"This could go on for days," Remus muttered.

"Too dumb to blink?" Ginny asked.

"Something like that," Edward acknowledged. "Remus, Charlie, come on. We'll have to stun them. Tonks, Harry, you stay here. The rest of you can come about twenty yards down to that switch-back. If you see blue sparks, Tonks, hurry everyone along. If you see red sparks, Harry gathers the group and you all go into the habitat immediately, Tonks bringing up the rear just in case the trolls back-track us. Understood?"

The six nodded.

They had to wait nearly thirty minutes, but finally they saw the two trolls collapse. Blue sparks went up almost immediately.

It took just a few minutes to reach the site on the jog. The stench was only bad as they came within twenty feet of the fallen beings. The group had been hurrying along, but they now went from a slow jog to nearly a run to get past the trolls as fast as possible.

Edward pointed to the start of the next small mountain, some two hundred yards ahead. "Let's jog to where the road goes around the mountain." He, Remus, and Charlie broke into a jog. "We've been going slightly more up than down since we left the river. Around the foot of the mountain we should be going down a hundred and fifty feet over a two mile walk. That should get us far enough away from those two."

Everyone saved their breath and merely nodded. Once around the bend, they walked slowly down the hill. Another mile brought the road to the edge of a marshy area.

"This should be a safe place to camp," Edward said as they approached the top of a slight hill. It was only 75 minutes before sunset. "The road skirts the marsh for about three and a half miles. If we stay on the road, and the road is intact, there shouldn't be many problems."

"And what problems might we encounter, Mister Potter?" Remus asked in his 'professorial' voice.

"Huh?"

"Think, Mister Potter. Not all Dark Arts are concerned with Dark Wizards."

"Oh, hinkypunks, and perhaps grindylows or kappas if the water is deep enough," Harry answered.

"Very good," Remus said, but then he frowned. "And there might be boggarts, which means no one must go off on their own from here to the far side of the swamp. If there have been vampires near the cave, we should really keep an eye out there as well."

Tonks had opened the habitat. Ginny, Neville, Hermione, Luna, Harry, Tonks, Charlie, Edward, and Remus went in in order.

"How far did we go today?" Harry asked.

"About eighteen miles," Edward. "Not bad, although I'd hoped we would make it to the far side of the marsh. The trolls slowed us down."

"So we should make the cave tomorrow afternoon?" Neville asked.

"Maybe," Edward said firmly. "It's thirteen miles. The cave is on the far side of a valley, across a small river. We'll climb a small mount on the near side of the valley and survey the situation. There almost certainly will be at least one vampire, possibly with servants. Obviously, a quick in-and-out would be best, but we have lots of time if we need it."

A little before dawn, a cringing, stunted man approached his master. "Your Darkness summonsed me?"

"Yes," the Vampire hissed. "I smelt healthy flesh as I checked the area just past the swamp. However, I found no one. Do you know what that means, meat?"

"Old Ones? Or perhaps Outsiders?"

"Most likely Outsiders. They will likely be on the mount by this afternoon. Take five servants. Hide yourselves well just before noon, wherever you can see parts of the road. I want to know how many there are."

"Yes, Master." The servant hesitated.

"What?" the cold voice demanded.

"And the others that come, Master?"

"It shall be . . . interesting."

Day 4

Emerging the next morning half an hour after dawn, the group was confronted by a light fog around the campsite, but it was obviously thicker down around the marsh itself.

Remus transformed, while Edward addressed the travelers. "We'll go single file today, except for Harry and myself at the end. Until the fog lifts, stick close; three to five yards!"

"As long as we stick to the north-side of the road, the only dangers from the marsh should be boggarts," Charlie reminded everyone. "Remus will alert us of trouble ahead, and trolls shouldn't approach once they catch sight or smell of us, unless there's another stand-off like yesterday. We need to move through this quickly, if possible."

The group had not really exerted themselves until late the previous afternoon. They didn't overly push themselves this morning, but went faster than they had the previous two days. The fact that the road was much more level helped. They made the near-side of the cavern's valley well-before noon. The mount they were heading for rose steeply more than a hundred and fifty above them.

"How do we do this?" Hermione asked.

Remus popped back into human form. "There's a path a little further around the curve of the mount that should lead to the top," Remus said softly. "However, there are at least three people watching us from the far hill. And one of them has had contact with a vampire recently."

Edward stopped twirling his wand in his left hand. "Shit," he said softly. "I was afraid things were going to easily."

"Do we still go up this mount?" Harry asked. "If we know the path, then they probably expect us to go up that path."

"True," Edward admitted. "But that's the only close look-out on the bridge."

Neville gestured towards the stream that was running near the road. "A bridge across this? If so, it should easily enough to ford."

"No," Charlie told him, "this runs into a small river in about a mile. It's narrow but too deep to ford."

"We have plenty of time to get to the cavern," Ginny pointed out.

"But not a lot of time to get away," Edward reminded her.

"It might be best to be on the other side of that river by nightfall, since they know we're here," Harry said strongly. "And, if worse comes to worst, we blow it today and hide in the habitat. We'll have bad visions, but nothing I see can be as bad as what I've lived."

Edward and Remus exchanged a glance. "Why not?" Remus finally said.

Charlie and Edward both grinned. "No voice of reason?" Edward asked.

"Why is everyone looking at me?" Hermione demanded, stamping her boot.

"Because you're the only sensible person here besides me." Luna's soft, dreamy voice came from a distance. The group turned towards her.

Luna's eyes were closed, and there was a soft glow around her. "What?" Harry asked of no one in particular. He took a step towards her, but Remus stopped him.

"She's Seeing, Harry," Remus said. "We don't normally observe the aura, but she's drawing impressions of the magic around us. She's not predicting, of course, but she can see the currents of magic and probability."

"The Dead are in crypts on the north hill and in the cavern," Luna said. "Some servants are watching us and some are to the south. Most are to the west. Others are coming; two other groups are coming to the cavern. I can't See who they are, but the nearest will be as close as we are by nightfall."

The aura faded, and Harry and Hermione went to hug their lover, who was very unsteady on her feet. "Are you alright, Luna?" Edward asked gently.

"It's never been anywhere this powerful at home," she said, amazed. "Seeing has always been much more . . . subliminal and impressionistic." She frowned. "I didn't like this. It's too strong." Harry and Hermione kissed either side of her pout. Luna smiled.

"Let's go," Edward said.

"Excelsior!" Hermione said, turning to head around the curve.

"O Hermione!" Luna exclaimed, "I love that poem! Do you know it by heart, too?"

Hermione nodded, and Edward and Remus laughed. Harry then added, "I had to recite the damn thing by memory my last year before coming to Hogwarts."

"Stanzas One, Four, and Five?" Luna suggested.

Harry and Hermione thought about it, and nodded. "Of course," Hermione agreed. "The servants know we're here, so let's make a lot of noise. Why be afraid?"

"You three go ahead," Edward said with a smile. "We'll keep watch." He knew the vampire servants were always the weakest of the natives, and a show of bravado might impress their masters a little. And, if not, it probably wouldn't hurt at this point. Luna linked her right arm with Harry's left, while Hermione did the same on his right side. They set off quickly down the road, while the others followed, bemused.

Luna started off:

*"The shades of night were falling fast,
As through an Alpine village passed
A youth, who bore, 'mid snow and ice,
A banner with the strange device,"*
And Harry shouted, "Excelsior!"

Hermione took up the fourth verse:

*"Try not the Pass!" the old man said;
'Dark lowers the tempest overhead,
The roaring torrent is deep and wide!'*
And loud that clarion voice replied,
"EXCELSIOR!" Harry repeated.

Hermione and Luna then chanted together:

"Oh stay," the maidens said, 'and rest

Thy weary head upon this breast!"

Harry then added, *"A tear stood in his bright blue, err, green eye,*

But still he answered, with a sigh,

"Excelsior!"

The trio laughed. "Laughing while strolling into danger," Charlie said to Edward, slightly disapproving and slightly in admiration.

"The danger will come if any vampire can stay alert deep in the cavern, or from whomever is coming. If the vampires can't stay alert, which should be the way it works, then the dangers will come after we leave this valley. The vampires are keeping all the other dangers far away from this place. Our trio's power is the power of love, Charlie. It's the most powerful source of magic there is. No evil can stand up to it." Edward looked at the trio in admiration. "Harry loves, Charlie. He loves with more power than I have ever seen. I was almost surprised it failed to bring Ron back. As long as Harry loves, and is loved, we will prevail, in this world and our own."

"Is that why you're not putting any breaks on him?"

"Dumbledore took care of that," Edward growled. "Harry can't be controlled by anything other than himself. Right now, the only two beings he trusts enough to really listen to, who can make him stop and think, are Hermione and Luna. The Dursleys ruined Harry's ability to easily trust. Dumbledore ruined Harry's capacity to trust in superiors. Be glad Luna and Hermione were there for Harry, along with Ron and Ginny, and Neville. Without them, Harry might have become a more terrible presence than Voldemort ever thought of becoming."

"I can't see Harry as a Dark wizard," Charlie said.

"Harry wouldn't have been Dark; Harry would have been more terrible, because he would have ruled through a perverted love for the world, and he would have been just as oppressive and ruthless, if not as vile."

Less than an hour later, the group was standing in front of the cavern opening. Sweeping the meadowy valley behind them with his omnioculars, Edward commented, "Three of the servants are still trying to crawl after us."

"One doesn't disappoint a vampire master," Remus reminded his friend.

"True," Edward admitted, "they were no doubt told to keep an eye on us, and of course don't have binoculars, let alone omnioculars."

"Plan One?" Remus asked.

"What's Plan One?" Harry asked, suspiciously.

"Charlie, Remus, and myself go in, Remus with his shotgun taking the lead. I'll have my wand out as well, and I have the charge ready. Charlie follows, wand out. You come to near the first tunnel split. Neville goes in half way to the split. The rest of you makes certain no one more dangerous than those servants threaten the outside, unless Neville calls you in. Neville, you don't call them in unless Harry is in trouble or he relays our call. Everyone got it?"

They all nodded.

In less than thirty minutes, the trio was back. "That didn't take long," Harry remarked as they approached.

"No active vampires, no servants, and no small gems," Charlie, who was in the lead, told him. They had planned on collecting the small flake gems that fell near the spout at the very least. "They'd all been collected, and the pool sheets had smashed and collected, too." The liquid gem material also welled up in a few places other than the spout, although not in any large way.

Harry turned and hurried behind the trio. Neville turned as they approached, and in a few seconds, they were all outside.

"So you didn't get any?" Harry asked.

Edward smiled and pulled an iron mallet from the back of his belt. "Oh, yeah; knocked about a third of the spout mass, but we didn't get greedy."

Remus was looking at his watch. "Ten seconds."

A loud 'THRUMP' was heard, followed by other noises -- small rocks falling from the ceiling and other similar sounds.

"Do we check?" Neville asked.

"No," Edward said firmly. "We know it went off on schedule, and it would take someone fairly powerful, and with a knowledge of the charms and the Muggle technology, to have had any chance of interfering with the charges. It doesn't matter if the natives can restart the flow or not; it should take a number of years for them to arrange any way to get the flow going in such a way to create a mass that can be used to control people in our world."

"Shall we get going, or have lunch?" Hermione asked.

"We have sandwiches," Edward said. "We can take turns to eat as we go. We want to get ahead of whatever other groups are coming here."

"The same route back, or the north route?" Charlie asked. As they had come to the bridge crossing the small river, they had also crossed a north-south road. "Or doesn't that lead where we have to go?"

"In a sense it does," Remus told them. "It's a forty-mile hike to a small village that's up-river from our arch, but the road then goes north. To get to the arch, we'd either have to hike through virgin forest or boat some fifteen or eighteen miles to get to the arch."

"The vampires can always catch up," Charlie reminded them. "And they can go due east to the vampire nest below the rapids." The road to that village met their route at the start of the swamp.

"It's quickest to go back the way we came," Edward said. "We have a good three and a half hours to walk."

"I think we should walk back east," Tonks said. She looked at Luna and Harry.

"What do you think?" Luna asked Harry.

"Quicker is better," Harry said. He looked at his girlfriends. "What do you two think?"

"I'd like to keep the visions unsullied," Luna said, "but you were right before. If we have to, we can hide out."

"I agree," Hermione said. Neville nodded his agreement.

"Then let's go!" Ginny said. They made eight miles before going into their habitat.

A few hours after dark, a torchlight procession stopped in front of the mouth of the cave. A figure stepped out from the group. "Come forth, Dark One!" the voice commanded.

A vampire appeared. "You are brave, mortal."

"Silence! Kneel before the Lord of the Day!"

The vampire sneered. "Old Ones! Well, Old Ones, you're too late."

"Too late for what?" a less bombastic voice asked. The wizards standing between this voice and the vampire moved out of the way, and the speaker's pure white garments seemed dazzling even in torchlight. The vampire lord shivered in fear. This was indeed the Lord of the Day, the leader of the Old Ones, the small group of wizards who were as powerful as the Outsiders, although none knew how they preserved the magic of the Other World or had mastered the powers of this one. The Old Ones rarely traveled from their distant large island, and the Lords of the Day had not left it for hundreds of years.

"A group of Outsiders came today. They destroyed the Sacred Spout!"

Most of the group shouted in anger and horror.

"Silence!" the Lord's voice commanded. "How?"

"Our servants can not tell us. Another group arrived before dusk. They were led by another Outsider, but they were People of the West."

"The Unclean," the bombastic wizard spat.

"They tortured our servants, killing the one who might have told us anything! The leader of the second group killed the High Master when he would not bow in obedience! He claims to be the Lord of Night."

"Blasphemy!" many voices screamed in protest.

"How many Outsiders are in the first group?" the Lord asked.

"A full group of nine, Lord. Three adult males, one a wolf, and an adult female. Five near-adults, two males."

"And the Unclean?"

"The one Outsider, and twenty warriors."

"Is the Chamber destroyed?"

"No, Lord, but the Spout is. The pipe that flowed to it also seems somewhat . . . clogged. However, the rate of flow is so slow, it will be at least a year before we can know for certain."

"How far ahead of us are the Unclean and the Outsiders?"

"The Outsiders are some eight miles to the east, although we cannot see their camp. The Westerners just stopped, nearly three miles to the east."

"Scribe!" the Lord commanded.

"Lord?"

"Give me parchment." The Lord wrote a short note. He then turned to the vampire. "You will take this to the campsite of the Outsiders. You can smell where their scent disappears. Walk slowly around the area, even slower than human speed. Then place this, unopened, under a rock a few feet away from the place where the scent disappeared. Take the rock with you. Do this, and we will have no complaint against you."

The vampire nodded, turned into a bat, and took the note away.

Chapter IX

Day 5

"We have a problem, Edward." It was about 20 minutes before dawn the next morning. Edward, Remus, and Ginny walked over to the observing mirrors.

"What's the problem?" Edward asked.

"We had a visitor last night," Charlie told them. "A vampire. He left us a note.

"Luna! Tonks!" Edward called out.

Luna poked her head out from the kitchen, where the others were putting the finishing touches on lunch and finishing the prep for dinner. "Yes, Ted?"

"Come on out! In fact, everyone come out! It's important."

"A vampire left us a message. Ginny, stand in front. Luna, Hermione, you stand here. When I give you the word, press the tile to expand the tent. Charlie, you look forward, Remus back. Luna left, Hermione right. I look forward up, Tonks back. Keep looking until I tell you to stop! Harry, Neville, stand back and try to see any mirror we call your attention to. Ready?"

They were. "Hit the tile."

"Nothing?" Edward asked over a minute later.

"Nothing," the others said.

"Then I'll go out and retrieve it. Be right back."

"Keep a good eye out, everyone!" Remus called.

Edward was back in less than a minute. He and Remus huddled together to translate it.

"Rough translation, 'Outsiders, we are not pleased but understand your actions. Twenty Unclean and young Dark Outsider,'" he looked at Remus. "I read that as Outsider, singular, right?"

"Right."

". . . young Unclean Outsider five or six miles behind you. If you can be hidden and desire, let them go past you. We will join unto you and. . ."

"Smite them?" Remus asked.

"Seems like. Signed, the Lord of the Day, of the Old Ones." Edward thought. "No, let's get to the arch. Let me write this person a note."

"Won't these 'Unclean' just read it?" Harry asked.

"And how could there be a young Outsider trapped here? Wouldn't someone have a record of it?" Hermione asked next.

"Let me write this," Edward almost growled. "I want as many miles as we can get today. Neville, carry a shotgun. Tonks, Ginny, Harry, shoulder shotguns. You can switch off with me and Charlie. Let's go!"

Outside, Edward laid the parchment on the ground, and said a series of incantations. A monument formed over the parchment, which looked like a mix between an Egyptian ankh and a Celtic cross. "The Old Ones are supposed to be descendants of the people who built the arches and later on, the roads," Edward explained as they moved out. "If this person really is their leader -- that's who the Lord of the Day is supposed to be -- then he should be able to remove the monument."

"I never saw magic like that," Remus stated.

"It's part of the hidden magic I was gifted with in Chad." Edward growled, "I learned a lot more than how to sever someone's head, you know!"

"Do you know what I do but the rest of you don't?" Harry asked.

"What?" Edward asked, puzzled by the question.

"I know who this Outsider is that's leading the Unclean." Harry wrinkled his nose. "Unclean?"

"Ruffians from the western coast and parts of the interior," Remus explained. "How do you know who it is?"

Harry stopped, forcing the others to as well. "Dammit, Harry," Edward complained, "we have to make time! Just spit it out!"

Harry pulled his bangs back. His scar, which had faded to a thin white scar over the previous seven months, was now again red. "It's Tom Riddle Junior. He didn't die in the Chamber of Secrets after all. He must have projected himself through the arch just before his artificial body dissolved."

Ginny fainted into Neville's arms. "Neville! Take her inside the tent. We don't have time to waste! You can both come out on our first break. Let's go!"

They went. Along the way, Hermione managed to ask the question the was in the back of everyone's mind. "Could it be Voldemort instead of Riddle's echo?"

"No," Edward said firmly. "He died, I felt it; he didn't escape."

The group hadn't exactly dawdled when actually moving on their way to the cave. They had taken fairly frequent rests, however, although not very long ones, except for lunch, after they had crossed that first bridge. Now on the way back, they went much faster.

Ginny and Neville came out ninety minutes later, during the first break. Edward sent Luna and Hermione in. They were the most tired, and were starting to slow the group down. After they rejoined the group, just after the fourth hour of daylight, the whole group moved at a steadier pace. There was greater safety in numbers.

They didn't stop for camp until slightly after nightfall, which is when Harry reported Riddle's group had stopped. As best Harry could tell, they had stayed ahead of the group all day, perhaps even gaining a little at first, as Riddle had tried to solve the mystery of Edward's monument. Still, they had lost some ground in the end. If they had been six miles ahead at dawn, they were now under five miles ahead as they entered the tent.

"How far did we go?" Tonks asked, dropping heavily on the large sofa.

"About twenty-six miles," Charlie said. "We're almost back to the blueberries we saw on the second day."

"That's right. That's the same stream outside, isn't it?" Luna asked as Ginny and Neville set the table for dinner.

"Right," Charlie told her.

"Dinner in thirty minutes," Hermione announced. "Everyone take a shower. We can take turns soaking later. After dinner," she finished, looking at Edward, "we can get those explanations that we were in too big a hurry to get today."

Dinner turned out to be pizza and salad. Hermione had been planning it for a surprise, since Dobby had had to get her the pizza sauce and cheeses before they had left Hogwarts. This time, they were all in conference with Dumbledore and Carole.

"I'd hoped our last dinner would be more jolly," Hermione stated after Dumbledore had heard their basic report and he had inquired how they felt.

"It's actually worse than everyone thinks," Harry said, embarrassed.

"In what way?" Edward asked, puzzled.

"Well," Harry said reluctantly, "remember our first night, in the clearing?"

Hermione made the connection immediately. "Your headache!"

Harry nodded. "That's all I thought it was, but I guess I've already forgotten what it was like to be at the verge of a headache my entire life."

"The burned area," Remus said, looking at Edward.

Edward nodded. "Riddle must have burned it, and then set wards on it as an alarm at some point, using the death of the trees as an anchor for the Dark alarm. He must have discovered which valley was near the arch used to go to the cavern."

"That might also explain why he hasn't tried harder to catch up to us," Harry said. "They'll start before dawn, catching up at least one to three miles, and you can bet there's at least one group of his people ahead of us. They can trap us in the hedge area, at one of the bridges, or even the burned-out area."

"There's a storm coming," Remus offered. "It will probably blow over before dawn, but that might delay their start."

"Good," Ginny said in a hard voice. "We meet them all and shoot anyone between us and Riddle. Better yet, let Riddle get ahead of us in the morning, then we shoot him."

Everyone stared at her for a long few seconds. Luna finally turned to Ginny, and said, "Do you really think we should introduce Muggle weapons to this world in such a large, dramatic, traumatic, way?"

"Yes," Ginny stated firmly, crossing her arms. "If none of you will shoot the bastard, I will."

"I think we might have to do just that, near the arch, if it comes down to a confrontation," Harry said.

"A possible solution, but not likely," Dumbledore said.

"Charlie, don't most dragons hunt at night?" Harry asked.

"Yeah."

"Especially early at night?"

"Most prefer to do short hunts early in the morning or just after noon, then the main hunt just after sunset, why?"

"But not just before dawn?"

Charlie shook his head, "Not really."

"How about wyverns?"

"They generally scout in the late afternoon, and hunt in the evenings, too."

"What's your idea, Harry?" Dumbledore asked.

"I think Charlie and I should leave about an hour before dawn, leaving the rest of you in here. Except maybe for Ted, we're the best flyers, and you didn't bring a broom," he added, looking at his cousin. "We're at least eleven walking miles away from the arch, probably closer to twelve, but probably eight by air."

"You can't fly directly to the arch," Carole pointed out. "The protection wards won't allow it."

"But we can fly to any point we want to," Harry retorted. "We should be at the top of that valley before dawn. Now, the only people who should be able to access the warded area are ourselves and Riddle, not his local ruffians, right?"

"Possibly right," Carole told them. "The Unclean are scavengers and worse. They often attack by sea; their villages are mostly on the western shore. Granted, our information is limited, since they shouldn't be so far inland."

"Riddle," Harry answered. "He probably made contact with them before. If he couldn't mind-travel here, his followers could in all his incarnations."

"True," Edward admitted. "So then what do we do if there are a lot of these so-called Unclean guarding the arch?"

"We should come down on the north-east side of the mountain near the arch," Charlie started.

"The one of the north-end of the valley?" Dumbledore checked.

"Exactly. If Riddle's people came from the west, and they're expecting us to come out do the west, they should be concentrated in that area. We can wait for these Light people and see if they can help out, or we can just out-wait everyone."

"How can we out-wait. . . . Oh!" Neville understood.

"We have over three weeks of fresh food, and a couple of months of tinned goods," Harry said. "Riddle probably doesn't have that much food available. There's a good-sized brook that the little stream that comes out of the spring near the arch flows into. If we land near there, we can even get fresh water."

"Better yet, there are some springs on that side of the mountain, too," Dumbledore informed them. "If Riddle's forces are not set up at the last spring at the eastern side of the mountain, it would be an ideal place to set-up camp."

"Are the visions really that bad?" Hermione asked. "Can't we just go now?"

"They are a mixture of bad visions and your worst nightmares," Dumbledore told her. "I don't know if even Harry has seen such . . . malevolence."

"Well, then there's no reason to rush once we get there," Hermione said.

"But we should try to do something if we can," Harry stated firmly, forestalling Ginny.

"What do you mean?" Tonks asked, plainly a little puzzled.

"Remember, Riddle is an evil from our world. If we can get rid of him, we should."

"What will you do? Kill him?" Remus asked mildly.

"He looks human, but he's just a bad memory," Harry told Remus.

"A very terrified memory, if he knows Voldemort is dead," Hermione mused.

"In what way?" Dumbledore asked, curious.

"Riddle made himself into Voldemort in part because he was so terrified of death. I mean, we all are. We don't know for absolute certain if there is anything . . . long after. And if there is, if it is truly eternal or if at some time we still simply . . . cease to exist."

"But we saw Ron," Ginny complained. "There must be . . . something."

"Something," Hermione agreed, "hopefully more than just an echo. Hopefully leading to something . . . permanent. But there are no guarantees. That's what Riddle wanted, a guarantee. And this version of Riddle doesn't even have the possibilities he had in real life. When he's gone, he's gone."

"He probably counted on rejoining his real self," Harry added.

"Perhaps he still does," Dumbledore said. "Regulus was going to at least attempt to make a try for the crystal before the equinox, and next year for certain. If he knows about Riddle, then he might not have revealed that the real Riddle is dead."

"And he certainly wouldn't want to reveal the details," Edward added drily.

Ginny curled up next to Neville. Seeing this, Charlie changed the subject. "So, who are these other folks opposing these . . . well, they can't call themselves the Unclean!"

"The closest in English might be the Buccaneers or Pirates," Carole answered. "The self-proclaimed Old Ones are descended from some of the earliest permanent travelers to Ynulle. Again, there is a great deal of magic here, but ours seems to work less well, giving the impression that we lose power over time. Still, there are apparently ways to manipulate the magic here which is different than ours. Most people here have our forms of magic, but only the Old Ones seem to know how to fully use the magic native here."

"But they aren't supposed to be here," Dumbledore said with great concern. "They rarely leave their island, which is over two thousand miles away!"

"Riddle again," Harry stated. "If he's organizing the pirates of this world, and he's part of Voldemort's and Regulus' plans, then he's probably causing enough trouble to draw them here."

"And we should help get rid of Riddle," Ginny muttered. Neville hugged her, gaining him a dirty look from Charlie.

"I agree with Harry," Tonks said. "Getting rid of Riddle isn't our top priority, but it should be up towards the top, or at least a consideration."

"What do you think?" Luna asked Hermione.

"I think Harry and Tonks are right, as long as we come up with a good plan before the confrontation. If I understand correctly, Riddle hasn't been here long enough to start losing his effectiveness." She looked up at Carole and Dumbledore as she said it.

Both nodded. Carole added, "And if the Riddle of that period could use the killing curse, it would still work." That gave everyone pause.

"So," Remus said, "are we in agreement that we let Harry and Charlie fly the habitat, with us in it? From there, we play it by ear, hoping for an advantageous situation to confront Riddle?"

Tonks and Neville raised their hands. Harry, Luna, and Hermione looked at each other, and raised their hands. Ginny did the same, followed by Remus.

"Well, I guess that's what we're doing, then," Charlie grumbled.

"No," Hermione stated. She stood and stared Charlie in the eye. "We should be unanimous. What are your objections? If they're anything more than worrying about Ginny, I know I will listen."

Charlie looked back, gulped, and raised his hands in surrender. "And you?" Hermione demanded of Edward.

"Good plan!" he said hurriedly.

Harry now stood. "Now that we know what we're going to do, I guess we should let the elders here decide what sort of message to leave this Day Lord or whatever. My only suggestion is that you tell them about Riddle's echo and Voldemort's death, and add an explanation of why we blew the cave, just in case they're angrier than they seem."

"Good plan," Hermione agreed, taking Harry's left hand.

Luna stood and took his right. "If you and Charlie are leaving an hour early, I guess we should turn in early."

"We can have breakfast after you and Charlie land, though," Hermione decided.

"Ginny, Neville, shall we all retire?" Luna asked. Charlie started making strangling noises.

Ginny gave Neville a private wink and stood, pulling Neville along. She linked hands with Luna, and the quintet managed to snake their way out of the room.

"I swear, if they don't kill me, I'll kill them," Charlie growled.

"Since Luna, Hermione, Ginny, and Neville could all out-duel you, and Harry could probably out-duel ninety-nine per cent of all the Aurors and hit-wizards there are, I have to ask, what kind of flowers do you want at your funeral?" Tonks asked.

Charlie gave everyone a dirty look, and said, "I'm going to go polish my broomstick."

"Lonely?" Remus couldn't help but ask. Charlie blushed and fled the room.

"Shall we compose our letter?" Dumbledore asked.

As the younger quintet entered their corridor, Ginny blocked the trio's way to their bedrooms. "Thanks, for everything today," Ginny said quietly. She kissed each of the trio on the cheek, and then walked with Neville to their bedroom.

"I believe there shall be some harsh discussions at the Burrow at some point," Luna commented after the bedroom door shut.

"True," Hermione said. "Still, first things first." The trio played 'Odd & Even' until they had determined Hermione would be the center of attention that evening.

Day 6

The normal wake-up alarms went off just before 10:45 at night by the Ynulle clock. This morning, Harry managed to get up at 9:45 without waking up Luna or Hermione. He left them tangled together, and left quietly. He got dressed in his own room.

Remus came into the kitchen a few minutes after 10:00, and found Harry making a large pot of coffee. "Good idea," he managed to say.

"Where Charlie and Ted very angry after we left?" Harry asked.

Remus shrugged. "Ted still isn't used to listening to anyone, except maybe Carole, so he really wasn't angry. Charlie is more angry that Ginny and Neville are sleeping together, and worried that she might be sleeping with the three of you, than he was about anything else. And, of course, he's worried about Ginny possibly meeting up with Riddle again."

"It might be a good thing," Harry replied. "Maybe she can finally put the worst of the nightmares behind her if she actually sees him destroyed."

"Maybe," Remus agreed. "Tell me honestly, do you really think you can have both Luna and Hermione as lovers? Long term, I mean?"

"If that's how it was, probably not," Harry replied frankly. "But right now, Luna and Hermione love each other almost as much as they love me. I think seeing that vision of us living as a family appealed to both of them as much as it did to me. Luna lost her mother, and she really needs to take care of people. Hermione was also an only child. Her parents love her, but while they don't hate our world like the Dursleys always did, they don't understand it. Together, the three of us are stronger than any combination. I know, when it comes out there will be big stink. I have the money to ignore a lot of it -- we don't have to depend on anyone's liking us or our lifestyle to survive. They can hate us for defeating the Dark Lord, or being Muggle-born, or being a Seer, or for our lifestyle. Screw'em."

"Do you still plan on being an Auror?" Remus asked.

"I plan on doing the training," Harry retorted. "I don't trust the Ministry enough to work for them. I'll work as a warlock."

Remus nodded. Harry as an independent agent made more sense than a government employee of any kind. "The others should be checking the replay from last night."

"I'll bring the coffee in a few minutes."

Remus left him to it.

Chapter X

Day 6

At 10:20 night time, Charlie, Harry, Remus, and Edward went outside.

"Wow," Harry said softly, looking up. The sky just before dawn was, if anything, more beautiful than the evening sky.

The other three ignored him, as Edward set up another monument. As Edward finished, Remus came over to Harry. He pointed at Harry's scar. "Anything?"

"He's awake, and on the move. I'm not certain how close. Not very, I think. They probably just got started." Harry frowned. "The connection was never like this; not with Riddle in the Chamber, not even when Voldemort was sending those visions. He's not invading my thoughts; do you think he can sense me?"

"Almost certainly not," Remus said. "Your link with Voldemort leaves you with a type of connection over this version. Voldemort would have controlled Riddle completely had they met once Voldemort was restored. When Voldemort was disembodied, they would have merged, with Voldemort as the dominant personality."

"As long as he can't sense me, I'm happy with sensing him," Harry said.

"Good. Happy flying."

Harry smiled, and looked at his cousin. "All in, ground crew." Remus went back in the tent, followed by Edward, who first clapped Harry on the back. A few seconds later, the tent disappeared, leaving Tonks' cube. Harry picked it up and offered it to Charlie.

Charlie refused. "Where to, Boss?"

"You're in charge," Harry told him, putting Tonks' chain around his neck next to his own. "You've done a lot more of this type of flying than I ever have."

"Then we go straight up, and then over this high knoll. That should take us to the road near the river, and take about three miles off the distance by road. We'll fly across the river and fly near the eastern mountains, about fifty feet above the trees. You fly the inside, and keep an eye out for our turn back across the river to the stream. I'll keep an eye out for dragons and wyverns. Okay?"

"Sounds great."

Charlie kicked off, and Harry followed.

It took a little bit of concentration, but it was very easy flying. They probably flew ten miles in the air, but it took them much less than an hour. The first rays of dawn still had yet to do more than just brighten the eastern horizon when Charlie and Harry landed at their objective.

There was a thin trickle of spring water bubbling out of the side of the low mountain, and splashing down a narrow cobbled bed to the creek. While the south side of the spring was thick with ripening blueberry bushes, the northern side was very grassy.

It took Charlie less than two minutes to create a flattened area of the grasses to look fairly natural. Harry put his own cube down, and the tent appeared. Remus came out in his wolf form. Charlie transformed the chain of Remus' cube into a collar, and fastened it around Remus' neck.

Harry patted Remus' head and said, "Be careful, Moony." Remus licked Harry's hand, and went off to reconnoiter the area around the arch. Harry and Charlie went into the tent for breakfast. The tent changed into its cube form, then seemed to shrink into itself and disappeared.

If Remus could easily get inside the safe area, he would, setting up the habitat entrance there. If not, he would return to the spring.

As Harry and Charlie sat down to breakfast, Edward asked, "Did you see anything?"

Harry let Charlie answer. "There were three small fires. One down by the bridge, two up by the arch area, but not actually inside the area."

"I agree," Harry piped up. "One was close, but I think a little to the west. The other seemed to be near where the stream and creek run together."

Edward nodded his understanding, and then said, "Are you all sure you want to stay and confront Riddle?"

"I have to," Ginny said simply.

"It's our duty," Harry added.

"And where Ginny and Harry are, we are," Luna said in that dreamy voice that everyone now knew that no one could argue with.

"So if you want to go, go ahead," Neville stated, giving Charlie a dirty look.

Charlie gave the look back. Edward stood up, and placed a calming hand on Charlie's shoulder. "I'll inform Dumbledore. Charlie, Tonks, break out the ammunition belts, the ones that hold shells and pistol clips."

"Right," Charlie said, while Tonks merely nodded.

"You folks, cook up three days worth of food. Hermione can do the preservation spells. We might sit tight and be bored, or we might be on twenty-four hour alert. Any questions?"

"Two," Harry said. "One, Remus isn't going to try to look into all the camps, is he? And second, how are we going to signal from inside the arch area, if we get there?"

"Remus doesn't know about the camps; he will be snooping around the protected area, at least partially from the inside, I hope. Second, if we get inside soon, we'll have to leave the habitat for a minute, allowing the Hogwarts folk access instead. They're supposed to be adding a few creates of specialty fireworks, curtesy of the Weasley twins."

"And some ice cream," Hermione said. "Mint chocolate chip," the women all chorused.

"I'll see what I can do. Let's get going!"

Remus returned nearly two hours after he had started off. The visuals revealed that the tent was back at the spring, not near the arch.

"Rough?" Edward asked.

"Tense," Remus replied, flopping on a sofa and accepting a cup of tea from Ginny. "There's one thug guarding the nearest path to get to the arch glade from here, with two guard dogs. It's a good thing the wind was from a favorable direction. It took me a while to work my way around, but that put the wind against me. I couldn't get close enough to tell who might be guarding the glade from the other approaches. I came back, and looked for some way up the mountain, but that doesn't look good, either."

"Do we force our way into the area, or stay here?" Harry asked. "If we're going to force our way in, we should go right now."

"Why?" Charlie demanded.

"Because Riddle could be here in two hours or less," Harry retorted. "We don't want to confront four groups of these people. One guard will be bad enough."

"Four groups?" Remus asked.

"Charlie and Harry saw three camp fires, plus those Riddle may have with him." Edward shrugged. "These could be as few as twenty-five in total, or as many of sixty or so. If the Old Ones don't show up, and we're out here, we're stuck trying to out wait Riddle or face some traumatic times. If we're inside the area, it doesn't really matter -- we can always out wait both sides or leave."

"So we use force?" Charlie asked. "I'm not complaining, mind, just being clear."

"Any objections? Anyone want to stay inside?" Edward asked. No one said anything. Harry was obviously straining to get going. "What's your plan, Harry?"

Harry stopped fidgeting. "Not thought of one?" Charlie asked.

"Yes, just not used to being asked," Harry retorted. "If the path is wide enough, Moony leads. Charlie takes a shotgun, for the dogs. Edward either uses his pistol or wand for the guard. Tonks takes the outside, to make certain no one takes us from the side. Luna, Ginny, and Hermione take the center. Neville and I take the rear."

"Is the path wide enough?" Edward asked Remus. He nodded. "Anything else we should do?" he asked Harry.

"Oh, we disillusion ourselves."

"Sounds good, then! Any objections?" No one said anything. "Let's go."

Keedu lazed in a sunny patch, leaning against an old hickory. Two nameless hunting dogs dozed at his feet. He looked up, trying to see the sun. The Master was supposed to be here by noon, unless he had already caught up to their quarry. Still, it shouldn't be noon yet.

One of the dogs looked up, growling. The other stood, growing as well, arching its back. Keedu quickly stood, pulling out his wand. Down the path stood the most magnificent wolf he had ever seen.

Suddenly, his view went askew. As darkness fell on Keedu, he wondered what the bright explosions were, and why the world was up-side down.

Remus popped back into human form and had his wand out in a second. Edward was standing over the decapitated thug, near the two dead dogs. "Charlie, Tonks!" Edward called. "Duck in and see that the area is clear. If it is, set up the tent!"

"Clear!" Tonks yelled.

"Clear!" Charlie echoed a few second later.

"Ginny, Luna, Hermione! In!"

"In!" Ginny, Luna, and Hermione yelled in order.

"Neville!"

"In!"

"Harry!"

"In!"

"Come on, Moony!"

"In!" Remus yelled after he transformed.

"In!" Edward stated as he crossed the boundary. Then, as he un-disillusioned himself, "Tonks! Un-disillusion! Harry! Luna! In and get the shotguns. Ginny! Hermione! In and get the other supplies!" The group had traveled light, mostly to avoid noise. Tonks un-disillusioned the students, and then herself.

The wards flared as a hex hit them. Four men gathered next to the dead guard and gave the group a dirty look, knowing they could not get at each other. "Everyone inside," Edward said calmly. As the men started yelling threats, he pulled his pistol and took the clip of charmed silver bullets out. He carefully loaded a clip of regular hollow-points into the .44.

Edward looked at the cursing, taunting men. "Leave," he commanded.

"We can't get you, you can't get us," one man snarled. "Not until the Master gets here and chases you out!"

"This Master is a young outsider by the name of Tom Riddle, correct? Or does he call himself Voldemort?"

"Outsider! Do not take the name of the Master in vain!" another one shouted.

"We shall see you tortured beyond measure once the Master arrives!" the first man screamed.

"Well," Edward said, "**you** won't." The wards were set up to allow arrows out, but not in. What worked for arrows. . . . He pulled the trigger four times in a few seconds. He then went back outside the wards and partially destroyed the corpses, so that Riddle wouldn't know how they died. Hearing people crashing through the forest, Edward retreated back behind the wards.

This group of six did not come close enough to give Edward a really good look at any of them. He decided to retreat inside the tent for the moment.

It was just before noon when Tom Riddle came to the glade. He stood some twenty yards in front of the tent, his arms behind his back, a few steps from actually getting inside the wards. "Since you are still here, I presume you are willing to talk to me," he called.

It took just a moment to rearrange the tent so that Edward and Remus could come out what had been the back. Both realized that Riddle would be cautious enough to duck if they tried to shoot him, which would then give away their advantage, and no doubt lead to at least a partial arming of Ynunlle with imported Muggle guns. "And whom have I the pleasure of addressing?" Riddle asked. At that moment, Harry came out as well.

"You!" Riddle spat.

"Hello, Tom," Harry said simply.

"I should have guessed you'd be involved. I had hoped my older self would have killed you by now!"

Harry gave Riddle a twisted smile. "Nope. I killed him just over seven months ago."

"Nonsense!"

"No nonsense. We fought last November, and I seriously injured him. Then we fought in an Occlumency battle just before Christmas, and I killed him, with a little help from my cousin here and some friends."

"We did," Edward said. "If Regulus Black hasn't told you, it's because he wants to use you."

"You're dead," Remus said simply. "This little piece of you just doesn't realize it yet."

"I don't know about the adult you, but you, when you die, you're gone," Harry said savagely. "You're just a bad memory. No ghostly existence, no after-life. Gone."

While Harry was speaking, all three were slowly reaching behind them to their pistols. Riddle was staring into Harry's eyes, but he also saw they were up to something. He suddenly ducked behind a tree, and then left the area.

"I was afraid it wouldn't be that easy," Harry said.

"Go get everyone out," Edward said. "That will give them a chance to put in our supplies, and we can put up a few minor wards inside these to warn us if Riddle comes back."

The group moved in and out of the habitat all afternoon, even eating an early dinner just as twilight fell. Charlie, Remus, and Tonks managed to take naps, as they would be up most of the night.

About an hour after dusk, Edward ducked out from the wards and quickly sent up one of the twins' special fireworks. This one hovered over a hundred feet in the air, and for nearly a minute went through the life cycle of a phoenix five times before exploding into a brilliant red and orange star burst.

"If these Old Ones are around, and able," Edward explained, "they should be here within an hour." If they hadn't shown up by then, he and Charlie would stay up part of the night, until Edward was relieved by Tonks. Charlie would later be relieved by Remus, and finally at dawn Harry would relieve Tonks. If nothing further happened by noon the next day, they would leave, Riddle or no.

About forty minutes later, six figures appeared at the wards. One was a fairly tall figure in dazzling white robes. "I am known as the Lord of the Day. Is one of you is known as Potter?"

"I am Edward Potter," Edward stated, taking a step forward.

Harry gave his cousin a dirty look. "And I am Harry Potter."

"Ah," the Lord of Day said with a slight smile. "Your son?" he asked Edward.

"My cousin," Edward said.

"You are the leader of this expedition?"

"I am," Edward acknowledged.

"We are not very happy with you. Nor are we very pleased that your world allowed this creature Riddle to be created, let alone allowing him to access this world." The Lord of the Day smiled as he saw the group spread out slightly into a defensive stance. "There is no need to react so defensively. We understand your motives. It is good that you did not destroy the cavern. Since you did not, we can forgive you." He was not about to reveal their need for those crystals for truly accessing the magic of this world.

He turned to Harry. "This does leave the problem of Riddle. It was in a symbiotic relationship with the evil wizard which created it. It has not just its memories and powers, but some of the attributes that dark wizard obtained over decades of disgusting transformations."

"Let me guess," Harry said with a sigh, "I have to kill it."

"If you want it destroyed, I believe that yes, you will have to do so. You were endowed by the Higher Magic, for reasons we cannot fathom in this life, with the power to oppose that Dark wizard. In this realm, you are closer to the source of Higher Magic than in your world. All you need to do is place your hands on this artificial creature, and recite, in whatever language you normally speak, a simple, basic magical formula. The creature will be destroyed. It is possible that it might rejoin its creator in whatever afterlife he has, if any. It may simply be destroyed." He shrugged. "There is no way to tell."

Harry snorted. "Somehow, I don't think Riddle will let me walk up to him, place my hands on him, and wipe him out of existence!"

Some of the people flanking the Lord of the Day looked amused, others looked offended. "We have captured the Unclean and the dark creation that once called itself Riddle. If you do not destroy it, we will have to try and keep it contained. That will not be easy. If any other than you destroy it, it may become an evil, disembodied spirit."

"When. . . ?" Harry asked.

The Lord of Day raised his hand, and a bound Riddle was brought into the glade and thrown on the ground. Neville averted his eyes. Harry just stared at the bound Riddle.

"Do it," Ginny snarled from near the tent. Harry and Remus looked at her in surprise at the tone of hate in her voice. "Do it, Harry."

Luna looked at Hermione and nodded towards Edward. They walked up to him and looked at him, silently pleading. "What?" he murmured.

"What's the incantation?" Hermione asked as Luna went over and stood next to Harry, placing a restraining hand on his upper arm.

"May I know the incantation?" Edward asked.

The Lord of the Day handed a piece of parchment to one of his followers, who then handed it to Edward. Edward looked at it for a few seconds, when a look of amazement passed over his face. He handed it to Hermione, and Remus looked at it over her shoulder. They had the same look within seconds.

Hermione took it over to Harry, then whispered the spell in his ear as Luna read the runes. "That is all I have to say?" Harry asked.

"That is all there is," The Lord of Day said. "This creation is merely that. A creation. Nothing more. But **you** must be the one to touch its skin to end the spells; that and simply say, 'end all enchantments.' Only you have the power to do so."

Harry quickly knelt and gripped Riddle's neck and wrist as he struggled against Harry's touch. Harry took a deep breath. "End all enchantments." Riddle faded away in less than five seconds, leaving only his clothes.

"Why are you here, anyway?" Edward asked the leader of the Old Ones.

"That creature had been unifying the worst elements in the western parts of this land. He was also trying to mediate between the Dementors and the vampires. Had he succeeded, then this land and the one across the Sea of Marthop would be in great danger. We came to look into the situation. Our sources told us that he was heading to the Crystal Cavern, with a strong force." He smiled. "Our powers are stronger than he anticipated. That he was not a real person made our mission easier."

"He sure felt real," Harry grumbled. He looked up. Ginny was crying in Neville's arms. Hermione spoke to Neville briefly, and he took Ginny into the tent.

Harry then realized that Luna was hugging him from behind. She helped him stand, and held out a hand to Hermione. The trio embraced. "Am I ever going to be rid of that monster?" Harry muttered.

"We can only hope," Hermione whispered back.

"We will always be with you, Harry," Luna whispered in turn. "No matter the path, we will be with you."

Meanwhile, the leader of the Old Ones was talking to Edward and Remus. He noticed that while most of the group was occupied, two (Tonks and Charlie) still stood back at the ready, in case they had to intervene. "When do you leave tomorrow to make the time connections?" The Lord of the Day asked.

"We can leave anytime," Edward said. "It would probably be best if we left around the ninth hour of the day."

"Shall we meet at the second hour?"

"Agreed."

The five teens showed no interest in meeting with the Old Ones, not even Hermione or Luna. They, and Neville, were more worried about the effects of the previous two days' excitement on Harry and Ginny. For both, having Tom Riddle come back into their lives opened wounds

that they had hoped would continue to heal. Now, at best, it would take a little longer, but perhaps they would now heal a little cleaner.

Shortly before the group made the trip back that afternoon, they all went out into the beautiful Ynulle day. The teens laid on their backs and looked up. "It is a beautiful sky," Luna said. "a beautiful, unspoiled place, except for people, including us."

"It is," Hermione agreed. "I'm glad we saw it, despite everything."

"I'm just glad for the visions we had when we came," Harry said. "That closure was more important than what happened yesterday."

"I am glad we had a chance to tell Ron goodbye," Ginny agreed.

The light increased, and when it faded, they were back in the Chamber of Secrets.

Saturday, August 2, 1997

"Well done, everyone, well done," Dumbledore said genially.

"Did you know?" Harry demanded angrily as he sat up.

"About Riddle? No, Harry, I did not," Dumbledore said. "I have learned my lesson. I would not have deceived you so."

"You didn't suspect?" Hermione demanded.

Dumbledore hesitated, then admitted, "I knew it was a slim possibility, nothing more."

Harry nodded, deciding to ignore that admission for now. "Is there anything else we have to do? Can the five of us go back to Potter Place?"

Dumbledore looked at Edward. "I think they should write up reports of their impressions, but they shouldn't have to turn them in until the Second of September," Edward said.

"Very well," Dumbledore agreed. "I had anticipated this, and have a portkey ready. Thank you, all of you. Have a pleasant summer."

Dumbledore handed them the portkey, and Hermione and Harry almost laughed.

"What?" Luna demanded.

"You should always know where your towel is," Hermione stated seriously.

"Harry!" Ginny interrupted in amazement, as they all gripped the very old ragged towel.

"What?"

"Your scar! Getting rid of Riddle must have broken the curse!" Hermione told him.

"What about it?" Harry asked.

"It's gone," Luna said. "You are no longer Harry Potter, the boy who has to save the world. You're Harry Potter, a powerful wizard with a family and friends."

"That's right," Harry said with a smile. "I'm just . . . Harry. Not the boy with the scar."

The End