

THE PROTECTION OF THE STAG

By

DrT

Chapter I

Tuesday, July 16, 1996

"Would you care for some tea, Professor McGonagall?"

"Thank you, Mrs. Granger. It was a long night for all of us."

"Are you hurt?" Hermione asked.

"No," McGonagall nearly snapped. "Due to my . . . accident at the end of term, I was not allowed into the fight at Privet Drive. I have been busy cleaning up the aftermath."

"Like moving Hermione's friend?" Mr. Granger suggested.

McGonagall blinked, showing Hermione's parents that she thought of Hermione as Harry's friend, not the other way around. It was clear who the dominate person was in the professor's eyes, which surprised the Grangers a bit. They were of course used to thinking in terms of their daughter.

"In part," McGonagall said. "I will be off to check on the other families as well. How long are you prepared to give shelter to Mister Potter?"

"Bill Weasley said 'a few days'," Emma Granger pointed out. "We are planning on leaving for vacation on the Tenth of August, to the States for two weeks."

"Mum. . . ." Hermione started. Her mother waved her quiet.

"How long would you like the boy to stay with us?" Dan Granger asked. "We could consider adjusting our plans, even to the point of taking him with us"

McGonagall thought about it, then said, "The greatest danger to you right now are the dementors. As long as Harry is with you, you are safe from them. They are unlikely to attack during the day, so it might be best of Harry were here at least until your vacation starts."

"But. . . ." Hermione started, and was stared down this time by McGonagall.

"I know what you were going to say; dementors can be instigated to attack during the day. Yes, it is possible. Still we have to play the odds, as detestable as that sounds." She turned to the Grangers. "Here."

"Flashlights?" Hermione asked.

"They look more like laser pointers," Dan said.

"They are, I have been told, in fact similar to these laser pointers, although these throw a somewhat wider beam. The difference is, they throw a combination of deep purple and ultraviolet light, which dementors cannot stand. If one of you is attacked by one dementor and you can keep your head, we believe this will keep them at bay, and perhaps even drive one away. If you are attacked by more than one, and you can put your back into a corner, these may save you even then. They will actually fluoresce under ultraviolet as well as be driven away by it, so that you can see them."

"A Muggle defense against dementors! Wow," Hermione said in admiration.

"Believe it or not, it was thought up by Percy Weasley and made by the twins," McGonagall said. "They are far from perfect, because it is difficult for most people, magical or Muggle, to think straight when a dementor is near. Still, it is a start."

"That's all we need," Dan said with determination.

"Yes, but that isn't what I needed to ask about Harry. . . ." Hermione started.

"Let's see how things work over the next few weeks," Dan said. "Alright, princess?"

Hermione frowned at the term, but nodded. Taking Harry to the States would have to left up to fate

for the moment.

"So, where is Mister Potter?" Emma asked.

"Have you seen the clothes his family dressed him in?" McGonagall said with a sniff. Emma nodded while Hermione also sniffed in derision. "Remus Lupin has escorted Harry to Gringotts, where he is withdrawing some money. Actually, they are probably at some Muggle stores right now. Knowing those two, they will likely stop and eat lunch before arriving. They should show up between One and Two. If they are not here by Two, I shall track them down and hurry them along."

All three Grangers were certain the pair would show up by 2:00, no matter what.

McGonagall finished her tea. "One of our people, Hestia Jones, will be with Hermione until Harry and Remus arrive, more for protection against reporters than against Death Eaters. Some aurors will be here tonight at Six. Try not to shoot them unless they are obnoxious, and if they are known to you, do not let on unless they are ALL known to you."

"Understood," Emma said.

"Lucius, if you do not stop pacing this instant, I shall kill you," Voldemort said in a hiss.

Lucius Malfoy paled and quickly sat back down.

"We shall soon see if our professor shows up. I have doubts about him, even if you do not. No matter if he is loyal or not, if he does come, he will tell us the truth. If he does not come, then either he was or has just become a traitor. Still, he did not know about last night, and so cannot be blamed for what happened."

"Yes, Master."

Voldemort suddenly looked towards the entrance to the cavern. He sniffed, and then his reptilian forked tongue flicked, tasting the air. "Ah. He comes."

Within seconds, Snape walked into the small cavern, escorted by Peter Pettigrew. Snape bowed low, while Pettigrew retreated silently to a corner.

"Have you a report, Severus?"

"A preliminary one, my Lord. I can gather more details later, if you command it."

"Then report. What of the eleven attacks on the Muggle-borns? Why did they not distract the Order?"

"Ten of the eleven failed, my Lord, and it appears as if they failed largely because of the actions of the Muggles. The majority of the most able members of the Order came to defend Potter. The Muggles actually managed to defeat, and some times even kill, your servants."

"What!"

"Lucius, do not interrupt. Explain."

"I am uncertain where to start, my Lord. . . ."

Malfoy spoke. "What about Draco. . . ."

"CRUCIO!" Voldemort held the curse for a few seconds, then released it. He turned to Snape.

"Give me some idea, Severus. Do not try my patience today."

"Yes, my Lord," Snape said, with another deep bow. "The attack on Dean Thomas, which was carried out by Goyle Senior and Junior, failed in part because one Seamus Finnigan, a half-blood of the same year, was staying over. In a brief firefight, they stunned the Goyles."

"Go on. What happened next?"

"There is a group of Muggles called 'skin heads,' British Muggles who hate immigrants, especially non-white ones. Finnigan removed the Goyles' hair and the pair threw them into a pub used by the Jamaican community, saying the Goyles had attempted to rape Thomas' eleven year old sister."

Even Malfoy winced slightly, since he could guess what had been done to the Goyles.

"The pair was severely beaten. They were taken to a Muggle hospital, where they were put back together with metal screws. It will take months for them to recover, if they ever do. I could spirit them out, but it would take a great deal of effort to fix them magically at this point."

"Forget fully rescuing them. See if you can't help them somehow."

"Yes, my Lord."

"And the other three Gryffindor Muggles? Leave Granger for last."

"Yes, my Lord. Johnson, Jones, and Macnair attacked the Creevy brothers. The boys, only just out of their Second and Fourth years remember, stunned Johnson and Jones. Macnair had stunned one of the boys' uncles and was concentrating on Crucioing the younger boy. The boys' father and another uncle had some sort of metal hooks, the kind stevedores used to use. They gutted Macnair like a fish."

"It seems the Defense teachers have not been as mediocre as I have been led to believe," Voldemort said, giving Malfoy a suspicious look.

"If I may, my Lord?" Snape asked. Voldemort signaled him to continue. "As much as it pains me to admit it, this was actually Potter's doing, along with Granger. Their 'Defense Association' taught all the Muggle-born students we attacked but one how to react. They and the Old Man in turn coaxed their parents into being ready, with warning wards on top of the Ministry ones."

"And when did you find that out?" Voldemort demanded.

"This morning," Snape answered ruefully.

"Very well, before dear Lucius does himself an injury, what happened at the Grangers?"

"Granger's father blasted Dolohov with a shotgun," Snape said. "I'm not certain how Bulstrode and Draco were captured. Bulstrode is apparently unhurt, however Draco. . . ."

"What?" Voldemort demanded, while Lucius was as taut as a drawn bowstring. Pettigrew, however, merely watched.

"Somehow, Draco was emasculated."

"WHAT!" Lucius demanded.

"Emasculated?" Pettigrew muttered in puzzlement, while the Dark Lord said nothing at first.

"How?" Lucius demanded.

Snape looked at Voldemort, who nodded with some slight sadistic enjoyment. "Somehow, his testicles were crushed in the confrontation. According to the healer, they not only could not be repaired, but because of the bleeding Dolohov had done into them, they were infected and had to be removed."

Pettigrew gave a soft snort, which brought Lucius swinging towards him, his wand upraised.

"CRUCIO!" Malfoy fell screaming to the ground. "That was your last warning for the day, Lucius. You can spawn another sprog after we have won." Voldemort sneered. "My Death Eaters became soft while I was gone."

Voldemort turned back to Snape. "Where is the Boy? Do you know?"

"He has been thrown out of his relatives' house. He is to go to the Grangers' today. I do not know for how long, but it will be for at least a week."

"Really?" Voldemort was slightly surprised. "Then the blood protection has ended at last?"

"Yes, my Lord."

"And how displeased was the Old Man?"

"Not very, actually," Snape answered in honest puzzlement.

"Interesting. Are there more defenses planned for the Grangers?"

"I do not know, my Lord. If there are any more defenders, I do know they will not be directly in the house after today."

"I see. I shall think upon this. I may need the lumbering Goyles after all. See what you can do with them, Severus. If possible, bring them to me in ten days."

"I obey, Master." Snape bowed and left.

Ron Weasley came into his room, slammed the door, and laid down on his bed. He just laid there, just looking at the ceiling, for some ten minutes.

At that point, there was a knock on the door, and Ginny came in. "What's your problem?" she demanded.

"You heard what George said," Ron grouched.

"What? That Harry is staying at Hermione's. Bill said that at breakfast."

"No, Bill said Harry would be with Hermione for a few days. Now it looks like he'll be there 'til mid-August!"

Ginny was confused. "So?"

Ron thought for a moment, and then asked, "Ginny, tell me honestly. Would you still like to date Harry?"

Ginny shrugged her shoulders nonchalantly.

"Ginny," Ron warned. He still had not fully forgiven her for teasing him about Dean when she really was not interested in him.

"So okay, I would," she admitted.

"Would you like to date Neville?"

"Maybe, why?"

"You know Neville likes you, right?"

"I suppose, but what's the point here?"

"The point," Ron said, "is that you would date Neville but would prefer dating Harry. Now, suppose you were to spend three or four weeks at Neville's. Would you still hold out for Harry, even if you decided that Neville was pretty nice and really liked you?"

"Maybe, but not certainly," Ginny admitted. "But Harry's never shown any interest in Hermione, or Hermione any interest in Harry. I mean romantically, that is."

"The difference between you and me, dear sister, is that when you're in a room with Harry, you only watch Harry to see if Harry sees you. Even if Hermione is right and I only have the emotional range of a thimble. . . ."

"Teaspoon."

"Whatever. The point is, I watch Hermione interact with people. Hermione watches Harry. She has since that fight she, Harry, and I had in our Third year. She ignored me, but followed Harry with her

eyes. I don't know if she has any romantic feelings for Harry or not, but one reason I can't get her to date me is because she is centered on two things: her studies and Harry. She loves him, Ginny. I don't know if she just loves him like a big sister, or if she could fall in love with him or not, but after three weeks or so with him, we'll find out."

"You have it bad, Ron," Ginny said sympathetically. "I like Harry, and I'd like to try and date him, but I'm not crushing anymore. You have it worse than I realized."

"I know," Ron admitted.

"Therefore, I will do you a favor, even if you don't deserve it. I will write to the one person I figure might have the inside track with Harry besides Hermione."

Ron was puzzled. "Cho?"

"No, idiot. Luna."

"Loony? Why would she. . . ."

"She and I had a long talk after the feast. Harry was, and maybe still is, hurting. She helped him. She likes him, and I saw him watching her when Patil and Turpin grabbed her for their compartment on the train. If looks could sizzle, the looks between them would have fried a steak."

"I never would have guessed," Ron admitted.

"It's nothing certain," Ginny warned. "They like each other. Harry and Hermione like each other. Who knows what could happen? Now, let me write Luna a letter. I presume I can borrow Pigwidgeon?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Good. Now, stop sulking and get ready for lunch. Since I'm writing the letter, you can set the table."

"Fair enough." Ginny turned to leave, but Ron stopped her. "Why don't I deserve it?"

Ginny paused. "Are you sure you want to know?"

"Yes."

Ginny turned around. "Why didn't you ask Hermione to the Yule Ball?"

Ron shrugged.

"Did you really not think of Hermione as a girl before that day you asked her to the Ball in such a backhanded way?"

"Well, I knew she was a girl, of course, but I thought of her as, well, you know. . . ."

"Another one of the boys? Hermione was hoping you'd ask, you know. She didn't answer Viktor the first two times he hinted around for a date, you know. No, she stalled him, hoping YOU would ask. And you didn't, so when Viktor asked outright, she gave up and said yes, because she wanted to go."

Ron frowned.

"Don't be a git, Ron," Ginny warned. "That's why I agreed to go with Neville. This was a big deal. We wanted to go with the boys of our dreams, and they, you and Harry, disappointed us. What do you expect us to do? Wait around and hope you notice?"

Ron had the grace to look abashed.

"You should look more ashamed than that. It's been almost nineteen full months since the Yule Ball. Other than that disgusting paint thinner you called perfume, have you done one thing to even hint that you want to date Hermione, other than growling every time she looked at a boy other than

you and Harry?"

Ron squirmed.

"The answer, dear brother, is no, you have not done a thing. What do you expect? Hermione to sit around on the off chance you decide to ask her out before she hits menopause?" Ron flushed. "I'll write to Luna, but if Harry and Hermione decide to date, you will be happy for them. I will, because even if I'd like to date Harry, I care enough for him to want him to be happy. Do you?"

"I suppose," Ron said, without much conviction.

"Well, work on your attitude, and hope for the best," Ginny said, leaving. 'Besides,' Ginny thought to herself, 'even if they do date, that doesn't mean they're engaged. I'll still have a chance, if it doesn't work out.'

"Just how much do you expect the poor boy to eat?" Hestia teased Hermione. "And your parents are dentists, all these sweets!"

"Those people always half-starve Harry," Hermione growled as she started to stash some of the junk food in the kitchen.

"Won't your Mum find these?" Hestia asked.

"Of course," Hermione said, surprised. "After she rations these, Harry can eat the rest upstairs. I'll put them away up there." Hermione ran up the stairs, Hestia's laugh echoing in her ears.

Harry and Remus showed up at 1:52. Hestia and Remus left together at 1:58 to prevent McGonagall's wrath.

Her hostessing duties finished, Hermione embraced Harry in a strong hug. "You look good, Harry," she said.

"Thanks," Harry said without much enthusiasm. He was in jeans that fit, and a dark green t-shirt that said, "MAGICK" in a medieval script, and which showed that Harry had not only not lost weight for once, but had put on at least seven to ten pounds of upper-body muscle.

"What's wrong, Harry?" Hermione asked, walking him from the front hall into the front parlor.

"Nothing. I'm fi. . . OW!"

"You're not 'fine', Harry," Hermione said sternly. "This is me, Hermione. No one else can hear us. No one will be here for more than three hours. I know you're a very private person, Harry, but if you can't be open to me then you can't be open to anyone, including yourself."

Harry said nothing. He sat on the large sofa very stiffly. Hermione sat next to him and placed her arm around him. Even though she felt the tension in him, she leaned over and placed her head on Harry's shoulder.

"Harry, you're my best friend. I care about you more than I do anyone else. Please, share with me."

"Really?" Harry said, doubt in his voice.

"Really," Hermione assured him.

"You care for me more than you care for your parents? More than you care for Ron?"

"Harry, I know Ron has a crush on me. I like him, and he's a good friend. I might have had a small crush on him around the Yule Ball, but that died quickly when he never followed up after the Ball. I still care about Ron, but I don't love him, I'm not attracted to him. I do love and care for my parents, but when I knew you needed me last Christmas, I chose you to go to. I'm not saying I'm in love with you, Harry. I honestly don't know if I am or not. I know you matter more to me than anyone else."

Harry started shivering slightly, trying to hold his emotions in check.

"Harry, tell me. Have you been sleeping?"

"Not well," Harry admitted, his voice shaking. After a moment of silence, he went on, "I haven't slept more than two hours straight, or four hours in all any night, since Sirius. . . ."

Hermione squeezed his waist.

"It's hard. . . . It's so hard. . . ."

"It's so hard what? It's hard to be you?"

Harry nodded.

"Have you had anything to do while you were at your relatives?"

Harry shrugged his shoulders. After a moment of silence (Hermione had decided that since nagging had never worked, silence might), Harry said, "My relatives were nastier than usual, but other than the insults they left me alone. I did chores in the morning, and Dumbledore had me working on Occlumency, hexes and defense with Remus in the afternoons, down in Mrs. Figg's basement."

"With an unmatched wand?" Hermione asked. The Order had given her one to defend her house with in questionable situations. She had used it to hex Draco Malfoy.

Harry nodded, and then said, "It didn't help."

"Help with what?"

"Sirius is still dead, and it was my fault."

"You mean it was partially your fault, right?"

"I know it's mostly Voldemort's fault, and that bitch Lestrangle's, and a lot of other people's fault, but it feels like it's my fault."

"That's because you love him and you miss him, and because you couldn't stop what happened."

"I suppose." Harry had stopped shivering, and now leaned just a little against Hermione. "How are you feeling? How's your side? Tell me honestly, and I'll try to be just as honest with you."

Hermione frowned, but said, "It still hurts. I'm down to two potions a day, one at night and one three times a day. I'm tired; we were both up fighting last night, and we could probably both use a nap. How else do I feel? I'm frightened, Harry. I saw my father kill Dolohov." Harry put an arm around Hermione to comfort her, and Hermione held on to Harry even more tightly. "I saw that little prick Malfoy and that cow Bulstrode right here, in my home."

"I heard what you did to Malfoy."

"I should feel bad about that, but I can't," Hermione admitted.

The pair sat in silence for a moment, then Hermione said, "Harry, did Dumbledore tell you the prophecy while Ron and I were in the Infirmary?"

Harry stiffened.

"Harry . . . do you have to die to defeat Voldemort?"

"No," Harry answered in a clipped voice.

"But you are the one prophesied to defeat him, aren't you?"

"No, I'm not."

"You're not?" Hermione said in a surprised voice.

"No, according to the Prophecy, either I kill him, or he kills me," Harry said flatly.

"Oh . . . Harry!" Hermione held on to him, and started to cry. Harry held on her as well.

After a few minutes, Hermione sniffed and let go of Harry. "I'm sorry. I think it was partly because I'm so tired."

Harry's mouth quirked. "I seem to have this effect on pretty girls."

Hermione snorted, and grabbed some paper tissues from a box on the coffee table. "I'll be right back, and then I'll show you the rest of the house."

Harry and Remus had come in through the back door, so he had figured out the floor plan of the ground floor. The back door led to a narrow pantry. Half of the back of the house was the kitchen, and the remaining space was taken up by the smallish (some 15 x 15) dining room. There was a room the same size between the dining room and parlor. The parlor was also the same size, although there was a rounded folly tower on the far front corner of the house that extended the parlor a few feet and gave it more light. There was also the large front hall, leading to the stairs. Off the short corridor leading to the kitchen was the side entrance Dolohov had come in through, under the stairs, as well as a small closet. He would later see that the backstairs that had led from the upstairs to the kitchen had been replaced by a small room with a toilet and sink, and that the cellar had been partially fixed over into a library.

Hermione came in, and she helped Harry carry his things up the stairs. Since Harry still had his spare wand, he was able to use magic to lighten his shopping bags and to guide his trunk up the stairs.

"Is that a new trunk?" Hermione asked, carrying eight bags of clothes.

"Yeah, it's a twelve compartment trunk. Since I don't have a home, it makes sense to store everything in one place. It's permanently charmed to weigh only as much as the stuff in the first compartment."

The upstairs had four rooms and a large bath. The Grangers' slept in the room over the front hall and part of the parlor. The other front room was the tv room. The round 'tower' had a small table with a chess board on it. Hermione's was the room over the dining room, while Harry would sleep in the room between the tv room and Hermione's.

"Do you want to change into shorts or something?" Hermione asked after she had shown him all the food she had squirreled away for him, and why. They had moved on to putting Harry's purchases away. "It's getting warm."

"Good idea," Harry agreed. Hermione went to her room, and Harry followed after changing.

Hermione's bedroom was the same size as his room and the tv room, some 15 feet wide and twelve feet deep. The common wall between Harry and Hermione's wall was all bookshelves, some 3/4's full. The other inside wall had a dresser and a wardrobe. There was a large bed, Hermione's trunk, a comfortable chair for sitting and reading (from which Crookshanks looked up at Harry and then went back to sleep), and a small writing desk and chair.

Harry was hardly surprised by the books, or, when he looked later, by the range of titles. He was slightly surprised that there was nothing on the other walls, other than a few family photos. There were three photos on her desk.

Hermione nodded at the photos. "I keep those on my desk at Hogwarts."

Harry looked, and saw one photo of Hermione with her parents, taken, he guessed, while they were in France three summers before. One had been taken at the Weasleys two summers before, showing the Weasleys, Harry, and Hermione. Since Percy had taken it, he was not in the photo, although Fred had directed a one-finger salute at him.

The third, of just Harry, been taken by Colin sometime the previous year, and showed Harry asleep in a chair in the common room. Hermione tapped the frame with her wand, which Harry then

recognized as a magical frame that was sold in Hogsmeade. It was full, and all twelve photos had Harry in them. Five were other solo photos of Harry, taken by Colin in the common room between their Second and Fifth year. One showed Harry and Ron wide-eyed in the common room, dressed for the Yule Ball. One showed Harry and Hermione, wet after the Second Task, while the others showed Harry and Hermione studying.

"Are you trying to tell me something?" Harry asked.

Hermione shrugged. "No, not unless you didn't believe me when I said how important you are to me, Harry." Hermione hesitated and held out her hand. Harry also hesitated, and then took it.

"Let me show you the security system, and then, unless you're hungry, we should probably rest a bit."

"McGonagall made me eat breakfast, and Remus stuffed me with Chinese takeout for lunch," Harry said, following her out of the room.

"Humph!" Emma Granger snorted softly that evening.

"What is it?" Dan asked from the kitchen.

"Come look," his wife called softly.

Dan came into the parlor and looked. Harry, his trainers kicked off and his glasses on the coffee table, was half laying and half sitting on the sofa (that is, he was leaning against one arm rest, with one leg on the sofa and one leg on the floor), sound asleep. Hermione, barefoot and also in shorts and a t-short, was laying against him on the sofa and cuddled in his arms, her head on his stomach. The pair was fast asleep. Crookshanks was laying on the back of the sofa. He looked at the parents, blinked, and went back to sleep.

"I didn't expect that," Dan said.

"Neither did I, but I think it's good for them," Emma said. She glanced at the clock. "Those aurors are supposed to be here in twenty minutes. I guess I have to wake them."

Chapter II

In part to recover from their embarrassment at being caught napping together on the sofa, Hermione and Harry went quickly upstairs to change before the aurors arrived. Hermione came back down at 5:50, Harry five minutes later, both in jeans and with their trainers back on. Hermione had already explained about Harry's sleeping problems, and so neither of her parents said anything.

The wards chimed at 6:00, and one of the aurors gave a password which signaled 'friends' to the wards. Hermione then opened the front door, although both she and Harry had their wands out.

There were three aurors, and the only one they knew was Tonks. She introduced the other two as Adam North and Sam Bryce. The two older aurors soon let the Grangers know that they were determined to interview the three Grangers separately.

Hermione objected. "The rules state that a minor may only be interviewed with a parent or guardian present, and that under these circumstances Muggles may have a witch or wizard present."

"Now look. . . ." Bryce started.

"No," Hermione said firmly. "None of us have any reason to trust the Minister or you."

"You really don't have much of a choice," North said.

"We can force you," Bryce agreed.

"No," Tonks said, "we won't."

"You follow orders," Bryce snapped.

"Perhaps it would best if you either listen to Hermione or leave," Harry said quietly.

"Look, kid. . . ." Bryce started.

He did not finish. Harry had stood up and looked into the auror's eyes. The other five people had frozen just like Bryce had. Harry was just a tad over 5 foot 6, and despite his recently added muscle he would be considered thin rather than lean. Still, raw power seemed to radiate from Harry, and there was a slight aura around his wand, and he seemed to radiate power. "I stunned four Death Eaters this morning, dueled and captured Bellatrix Lestrange, and drove off Voldemort," Harry stated, exaggerating slightly. "I've fought Voldemort four other times in the last five years. Last year, I was set on by dementors sent by the Minister's assistant and nearly railroaded by the Minister personally. Excuse me for not being overly impressed or confident."

"Right," Bryce said, backing down. He turned to Hermione. "What spells did you perform last night?"

"I moved Dolohov and moved, bound, and stunned Malfoy and Bulstrode. I won't swear as to the order. The last spells before that were some feather spells on trunks for the First year students the day we came back from Hogwarts."

"Hold out your wand, and we'll see. That does agree with what the underage detectors claimed, but Malfoy claims you tortured him."

"The only pain he should have been in would have been from Dolohov and Bulstrode falling on him, plus he might have banged his head, but he didn't say anything about that."

"What did he say?"

"When I bound him, he said he would get me expelled for underage magic, and he also claimed he would pretend he was under the Imperius."

"Well, let's see."

Thirty minutes later, the three aurors were finished with their questions. North and Bryce were not fully satisfied, but there was really little they could do. Neither Malfoy nor Bulstrode had the Dark Mark, but they had been wearing full Death Eater regalia and of course Dolohov had been a convicted Death Eater who had twice escaped from imprisonment, while Draco Malfoy's father was also considered an escaped Death Eater, although he had not been tried before his recent escape. In any case, the Grangers certainly had the right to defend themselves.

"Tell them," Tonks told her two more senior colleagues. "Tell them both."

North grimaced but pulled out a piece of parchment after consulting his partner. "Due to the emergency conditions, and the threat posed by the Death Eaters of the self-proclaimed Dark Lord to those living within the Muggle environment, Hermione Jane Granger and Harry James Potter are hereby allowed to practice magic despite being underage. The usual restrictions about practicing magic within any Muggle environment apply, and both are responsible for any damages done, in either the magical or Muggle spheres of influence." He looked at a clock. "This will go into effect as of Eight o'clock tonight."

The three aurors took their leave, Tonks giving the teens a wink as she left.

Mrs. Granger locked the door and turned around. "Hermione, set the table. Harry, dinner will be ready in thirty minutes."

The household went to bed early that night. It was shortly after 10:00 that found the Grangers cuddled together in bed. "This has been a very weird evening, after an even more upsetting morning," Dan admitted. "It still hasn't really hit me that I killed someone."

"I know," Emma agreed. "It's also very strange to be partially protected by our daughter and by things we don't understand."

"True." Dan took a deep breath. "What about Hermione's relationship with this boy?"

"I was as surprised as you to see them this afternoon. I need to have a chat with her in the morning."

"Do you think it's safe to leave them alone for nine to ten hours a day?"

"Well, after what Harry did to those aurors, at least we know our baby is safe from outside threats," Emma teased. Hermione had assured them that Harry could drive off any number of dementors, and Harry had added that he had now been trained on how to destroy them, with a bright burst of concentrated light.

"Very funny. He's almost sixteen, she's almost seventeen."

"Hermione will not do anything she does not want to do," Emma said firmly. "I really feel Harry will let her take the lead, if they really are forming a relationship."

"That doesn't make me feel much better," Dan complained.

"Look, when we started dating at University, how many girls had you been with?"

"Well. . . ."

"You were my fourth," Emma pointed out. "I was what? Your sixth?"

"That's not the point. . . ."

"No, the point is you're acting like a father. Hermione is not going to go overboard, or do anything desperate. I really don't think Harry would ever force her to do anything. We can trust her to do what is right for her."

"That does NOT make me feel any better, either."

"Considering the danger we're all in, do you want to send Harry away? Even if he and Hermione do

fall in love and have a physical as well as an emotional relationship?"

"No, but I don't have to like it, do I?"

"No, you don't have to like it. Just don't take it out on Harry."

"And have him look at me like he did those two twits?"

"And he did that to defend Hermione. Remember that, dear."

Dan sighed. "I will."

Wednesday, July 17, 1996

3:51 am

Hermione woke up with a jerk, breathing fast. She listened very hard, wondering what had awoken her. It hadn't been a dream.

She heard nothing.

Hermione sat up and looked around her room. When Crookshanks raised his head from near her feet as if to ask, 'What's wrong with you?' that reassured Hermione. The previous night, Crookshanks had started to lightly dig his claws into her a few seconds before the first ward alarm went off. If Crookshanks wasn't bothered, she probably should not be, either.

Crookshanks stood and then jumped to the floor, strolling towards the door. He stopped and looked over his shoulder.

Hermione stood, barely noticing that it was a little before 4:00.

The night was hot, not at all common in East Anglia, but not totally unheard of, either. Hermione was only wearing a light cotton nightgown that didn't quite come down to her knees.

Hermione peeked into the upstairs hallway. All the doors were open, to keep some air circulating. Hermione took three steps into the hall, and looked into Harry's room.

Harry's room was in some ways a mirror of hers, although with only one window. There was the bed up against their common wall. There was a dresser on one side of the door and a wardrobe on the other. Shelves of novels and reference books were against the far wall, and there was a small desk near the shelves. Harry had pulled the captain's chair from in front of the books and placed it at the open window.

He was sitting there, just looking out into the night.

Hermione walked in, and felt a ward fall.

Harry spun out of his chair, wand at the ready.

"Sorry," he whispered.

Hermione made a gesture at the door. Harry put up another ward to insure that sound wouldn't escape. "Are you alright?" she asked, trying not to stare. Harry was only wearing boxer shorts, and despite being too thin and still having rather knobby knees, Hermione liked what she saw.

"I'm f. . . ." Harry started. "Actually, maybe I am okay, if not fine. I slept from around Ten-thirty until just after Three. That's far and away the best I've slept since, well, you know."

"I know." Hermione walked over and gently pushed Harry back into the chair. She sat on the window sill.

Harry had rather ambivalent feelings about that. There wasn't much light coming in from the night, but it was enough to make her nightgown transparent. Harry crossed his legs.

"Harry, may I ask you a personal question?"

"Anything you want," Harry replied, glad he was able to keep his voice steady and his eyes mostly on Hermione's face.

"If I tell you the main reasons why I shouldn't date you, or wouldn't want to date you, will you tell me the reasons you think we shouldn't?"

"Alright," he answered doubtfully, confusion fighting with both relief and disappointment.

"I had a goal, Harry. The magical world is very small. It's almost medieval in some ways. Who a person's family is really means a lot. Most people get jobs because of who they're related to. Even in the Ministry, who you know means as much as what you know and how well you do it. I'll have to make my way through that maze, and without much help. I need to show that I deserve to be taken seriously. Therefore, I really didn't want to have a serious boyfriend."

She looked more directly in Harry's eyes. "I could embarrass you with all your good qualities, but you're also moody, Harry. You have a difficult time trusting anyone. You have a harder time opening up to anyone than anyone I know, although you made a good start this afternoon. You're very independent. If we were to date, we'd have to be partners of some sort."

She gestured. "Your turn."

"I don't want to hurt your feelings," Harry said.

"Do your worst. Be blunt and get it all over at once."

"You're bossy and at times self-righteous, and I can't be bossed." Harry shrugged. "That's it. You're already known as my friend, and most people probably believe we're dating anyway, so you'd be in no more danger than you are now."

"Am I really self-righteous?"

Harry nearly smiled, and explained in detail the effects of Hermione's knitted hats for the house elves.

Hermione frowned. "Don't you think they should be free?"

"Yes," Harry said. "However, I don't know how to do it. I do know it won't be from knitting hats. House elves might be brainwashed, but you should realize that they might have to serve. We'd need to figure that out first. If they're brainwashed, then we can argue for direct freedom. If they really do need to serve, we'd at least have to figure out some way to prevent abuse."

"We?" Hermione asked, with a smile.

"If I do defeat Voldemort, I'll need to save someone else, won't I?" Harry teased.

"I'm sorry about that remark," Hermione said.

"I forgive you," Harry said.

"You're never going to be bossed by me, are you?"

"Never," Harry said. "If you want to be the boss, it won't work. It's not like I would want to be, either."

"We'll argue, won't we?" Hermione asked, sadly.

"We will, but not like you and Ron."

Hermione smiled. "No, we've snapped at each other, and even fought a bit, but never like Ron and me." Hermione heaved a great sigh of satisfaction. "Do you think you will be able to go back to sleep?"

"Well, I could try," Harry said, doubtfully. "Why?"

Hermione leaned over and kissed Harry's forehead, which caused her nightgown to gape open,

which pleased Harry even more than the kiss. "Get dressed," Hermione murmured.

"Eh?"

"Put on shorts and a vest," Hermione said. "Please. I'll be right back."

Harry watched Hermione disappear back towards her room, and then hurriedly did as she said. Hermione was back in less than five minutes, dressed in loose shorts and a sports bra, and carrying a pillow in one hand and a fan in the other. She plugged in the small fan and then tossed the pillow on the bed. She laid down. "Come here."

"Won't your parents have a fit?" Harry asked.

"I don't know," Hermione admitted. "That's why we're dressed and using your bed, and leaving the door open. If we tried to hide this, then they would certainly object. Now, come here and lie down. Please."

Harry did as he was told. In less than a minute, he was spooned against Hermione. In less than three minutes, Harry fell into a very restful sleep.

Hermione smiled, and fell asleep soon thereafter.

Emma Granger woke up early, a little before 5:00. She made her way to the bathroom. Coming out a few minutes later, she peaked into her daughter's room. Seeing it empty, she frowned. She stepped back and looked into Harry's room, and saw her daughter and Harry intertwined on his bed. Crookshanks was guarding the foot of the bed.

Emma frowned, and took a step into the room for a closer look, and Crookshanks got to his feet to glare at her. She saw, to her relief, that they were at least dressed, which also told her that her daughter had likely planned this, that this was not merely spontaneous.

Emma saw Harry move stiffly, as if he was in pain. Hermione moved and gathered him to her, cuddling his head against her breast and hugging him tightly. Hermione kissed Harry's scar, which Emma realized was standing out clearly despite the dimness of the room.

Harry gave a sigh of relief, snuggled even closer, and the pair settled down, breathing deeply.

Emma went back to bed, confused.

When Emma woke up again, she beat the 6:30 alarm by a few moments. She turned the alarm off and hurried out of the bedroom. She saw that the guest room was empty. She went into Hermione's room, and saw that her daughter was in her own bed, covered by the afghan Hermione kept on the back of her reading chair.

Emma adjusted the afghan to cover Hermione's bare foot, and after gently awakening her husband, she made her way to stairs.

Emma could smell the coffee part way down the stairs.

"You're up early," she said to Harry, who was reading the paper in the kitchen.

"Believe it or not, I slept better last night than I have in over a year," Harry responded. He stood.

"Hermione said you usually have half a toasted bagel and an egg for breakfast. How would you like your egg?"

"You don't have to fix breakfast for us, Harry."

Harry shrugged as he pushed half a bagel into the toaster. "I've cooked breakfast for my relatives for about ten years."

Emma's eyebrows went up at that, considering Harry's age, but said nothing. Obviously, Hermione

had not exaggerated the few stories she had told about Harry's relatives. "Fried is fine for both of us. Dan should be down in about ten minutes. Hermione's muselix mix is in that cupboard, and the yogurt and jam are in the ice box. There's some ham in the blue container in the back of the bottom shelf. Eat whatever you want. Are you confined to the house?"

"Not that anyone has said," Harry answered, cracking the egg into the hot non-stick frying pan.

"Then you and Hermione should go to the stores today. I'm sure I can cook anything you bring home." Then, in a faux whisper, she added, "Hermione can't cook, you know."

Harry smiled. "I can."

"I believe you," she said, as Harry flipped her egg without breaking the yolk. "I like it a little runny." She paused, and then asked, "Harry. . . . What are your intentions towards our daughter?"

Harry paused, but plated the bagel and egg, and then poured out the coffee. "I don't know," he admitted. "Even though I've always known your daughter was as attractive as she is smart, I always thought she was more attracted to Ron than she was to me. I wasn't going to get into the middle of that. I couldn't do that to either of them."

"And now that you know it's you she's interested in you, not Ron?"

"Ron's going to take that hard," Harry said.

"Is that going to stop you?"

Harry shook his head. "I thought about a lot of things these past few weeks. Nearly all of it was bad, frightening, or at least depressing. About the only thing that wasn't any of those things was, well. . . ."

Emma halted her fork to help out. "Thinking about girls, or Hermione specifically?"

"Girls," Harry admitted, now blushing a bit. "I tried to date a girl last year. It was a disaster. I thought about a number of girls, and I realized something."

"What was that?"

"That there were only two or three girls I could rely on. And of them, I was attracted to two of them, but I knew that one of them was away for the summer, and that the other was sort of dancing around my best friend."

"And now you're staying with the second girl, who, it turns out, is quite taken with you."

"Yeah. . . ."

"I saw the two of you earlier this morning."

Harry's blush now reached near Weasley-levels.

Emma finished her half-a-bagel and egg and then stood. "That sounds like Dan. A whole bagel and two fried eggs." She poured herself a second cup of coffee. "I'll wake Hermione up, and I won't mention any of this to Dan this morning."

Hermione was smiling, although her eyes were shut, when Emma sat on the edge of the bed. "Good morning," Emma said.

Hermione opened her eyes in surprise.

"Surprised it's me, or that you're in your own bed?"

"You saw, then?"

"I did. Perhaps fortunately, your father didn't."

Hermione shrugged as best she could from a prone position. "We weren't doing anything wrong."

"You weren't sleeping together? Not just napping, but spending the night together?" Emma inquired mildly.

"We were, fully dressed and with the door open," Hermione replied. "Mum, Harry hasn't slept much in over a month, and from Ron said, he didn't sleep all that well for over a year."

"Harry did say he slept better last night than he had for over a year," Emma admitted.

"Harry's awake?"

"Awake and he made breakfast for me, and was starting your father's," Emma answered.

"Hermione, I get the impression that Harry is a very powerful and determined young man, but that he is also both an abused and sheltered boy. Normally, it's the boy who is warned. I'm warning you. Harry is fragile. You either hold his heart in your hands, or you easily could. Be very careful, and don't think sex will either help mend him or bring you closer together."

Now it was Hermione's turn to blush. "Come on down stairs and eat with your father," Emma said. "We were late going in yesterday, and we both have paperwork to catch up on."

"Yes, Mum," Hermione said.

"I told Harry that, if you two aren't confined to quarters, as they say in the cinema, you can go shopping. You can cook."

"Ha, ha," Hermione said. "At least I can heat up the pre-packaged stuff. That's more than Daddy can do."

"Actually, Harry said he could cook," Emma offered.

When Hermione found her way to the kitchen, she found an owl awaiting her. There was a note, saying that if either of the teens left the property, they were to contact their minders 'in the usual way.'

"What way is that?" Harry asked.

"Believe it or not, with a telephone call," Hermione answered.

Chapter III

The pair roamed around the city for over five hours. Hermione enjoyed showing off the medieval sites, and Harry enjoyed the kebabs they had for lunch. It wasn't that Harry had anything against such things as architecture tours, it was more that he was unused to them.

Little Whinging had been nothing but fields and orchards before World War II, with not so much as a cottage or pub within three miles. There had been an impromptu military base erected on the site for the Free French and some other expatriate military and paramilitary types on the run from Hitler's Europe in 1941. They had had little to do until the summer of 1944 except intrigue amongst and against each other, and complain, hence the nickname for the base amongst the locals, which became attached to the town which grew up after the war.

The oldest buildings in the immediate area, the ones that Harry had lived and walked around before Hogwarts, dated from the late 1940s and early 1950s, hardly a glorious time in British architectural history, and all the public and commercial buildings in the area were the drabest of the boring.

Harry had only been to London three times before going to Diagon Alley with Hagrid, and none were educational or enlightening. His school had rarely had any interesting day trips, and on those few occasions, the Dursleys had gleefully refused to sign his permission slips.

Harry, therefore, was a very unrepresentative member of those with a middle class state education. Hermione was a bit surprised, as she always had been, at how plebeian Harry's background was. While normally she would have chattered away without even noticing the blank stares she elicited from her audience, she was determined to learn more about Harry, and managed to slip questions into her monologue, which more than made up for the fact that Harry really could care less about the medieval ecclesiastical and commercial history of Norwich, important as that was for Norfolk in particular and England in general.

After all, as Harry had ventured at one point, compared to Hogwarts, even the most ornate gothic church or largest medieval castle would appear somewhat lacking.

Since Harry appeared to be listening and was enjoying the walk, Hermione nattered on. After lunch, they prowled the markets while Hermione provided a running commentary. She was a bit surprised to see that Harry had acquired a bank card. She made no objections to Harry's paying for supplies.

Having to spend much time stuck in his cousin's 'second room' had forced Harry to read everything that was stored there, from the copious books none of the Dursleys ever read to the magazines and cookbooks his Aunt Petunia stored there after she had displayed them on her coffee table for the neighbors to see. He had absorbed a great deal.

Hermione wondered in passing if the forced reading Harry did the summers accounted in part for his disinclination for reading during the school year.

Harry took a quick shower when they returned to the Grangers, and then started in on dinner. Hermione decided to set the table in the dining room, rather than the kitchen where they usually ate. Other than that, she stayed out of Harry's way.

At 5:35, the Grangers came to a house that, unusually, held the smell of cooking -- dinners during the week were usually made quickly and involved take-out or the microwave. The Grangers enjoyed the fancy dinner Harry had prepared, while Harry was glad that for once he fully shared in a meal he had prepared. Looking over the table, the Grangers toasted Harry with the dry cider Hermione had bought, which made Harry flush a bit.

Harry's first course had been an unusual salad, served on small china trays Hermione had found. There was a stuffed egg half on the outside. Between the eggs were carrots, celery, sliced Roma tomato, a sliced radish, a variety of olives, and three quail eggs, covered with a light creamy herb

dressing. The second course was a small bowl of creamy leek soup. Harry had also picked up two large Italian boules, served throughout the meal.

The main course were pan-fried mutton chops. Harry had caramelized onions and then cooked the mutton and a large sliced turnip in the resultant sauce, finishing them off with some of the left-over leeks, with some steamed asparagus and the turnips.

"Amazing dinner," Dan told Harry as they enjoyed the creme brulees Hermione had picked up for pudding.

"Thank you," Harry said. "I always wondered what it tasted like."

"Oh, you saw this prepared on the tellie?" Emma asked.

"No, I made similar dinners for the relatives," Harry said. Hermione had noticed Harry had been avoiding the Dursleys' name or using possessive pronouns in reference to them all day.

The Grangers looked at each other. Hermione merely nodded. Harry had made dinners, but had not been allowed to taste them. Dan stood and went over to the sideboard. He poured four small glasses of Madeira. "Again, thank you for a remarkable dinner." The three Grangers made a small salute, which Harry returned.

"This is delicious," Harry said after a sip. "What is it?"

"A type of Madeira called Malmsey," Dan answered.

"We don't expect you to cook all the time you're here, either," Emma said firmly. "Maybe we can get some pizza tomorrow evening. What kind do you like?"

Harry shrugged. "I've never had it." He looked at Hermione.

"Get him one with lots of meat and cheese," Hermione said with a smile. "I'd like olive and artichoke."

"Of course, dear," Emma said, standing. "Since you cooked, Hermione and I will clean up."

"So what was it you wanted to talk about, Mum?" Hermione asked.

Emma Granger surveyed the kitchen. "Harry already cleaned up?"

"From what I understand, he was made to do the dishes and started cooking breakfasts at the age of six or so, and lunch by the time he turned nine," Hermione said.

"I wish I could turn those people in. Helping around the house is one thing, but this. . . ."

"Harry may or may not have been physically abused. He was probably emotionally abused, and he was certainly exploited," Hermione said, loading the dishwasher. "Again, I don't know if we'll become really involved, but while he's here, I'd really like to give him as much physical affection and companionship as I can."

"Meaning?"

Hermione looked her mother in the eye. "Cuddling, like we did last night."

"Which would also including being dressed, and having the door open," Emma stated in return.

"Yes, of course."

Emma thought about it. "Very well."

Thursday, July 18, 1996

Harry was dreaming of rolling around on soft white clouds, warm and perfumed. Then he seemed to

hit a rough floor with a bump. Even though he had 'landed' on his butt, it was Harry's scar that hurt. "Oh," Harry said. Harry sat up, and saw Voldemort was sitting on a stiff wooden chair, almost a throne, and they were in a stone chamber, like a dungeon. "There you are. I was wondering when you would work up the guts to try this."

"You have learned a bit, boy," Voldemort stated. "It actually took a little effort to break in on your mind. Not much, but a little."

Harry snorted. "Yeah, right. What do you want, Riddle?"

"Watch your mouth, boy!"

"Or what? You'll try to kill me? You've been trying to do that for going on fifteen years."

"If the old man hadn't interfered, you'd have died last month," Voldemort retorted.

"True," Harry said. "And if you hadn't skedaddled after you tried to possess me, you would have died. If you hadn't run for your life the other night, you would have died."

"I was going to give you one last chance to join me, but I see that would be of little use."

"Very little."

"Are you enjoying your time with the Mudblood slut? You won't for long."

"Tell me something," Harry asked, ignoring him. "You were supposed to be a good student. I'm just curious, how many O.W.L.s did you earn?"

Voldemort, who had been off-balance from the beginning, was now totally startled. "What?"

"How many O.W.L.s did you earn?"

"Ten, one in each subject, if you must know," Voldemort snapped. "They didn't have the theory O.W.L.s they have now. Why?"

"I was just wondering if Hermione would tie you or beat you. I'm sure she'll have twelve O's. You did score all O's I presume? No? I see from your face you didn't, so don't deny it."

"When I take over Hogwarts, I'll disperse all the ghosts, and Binns will be second, after Peeves," Voldemort stated. "However, you will not live to see that."

"Neither will you," Harry retorted.

"I'll see you soon, Potter," Voldemort snarled.

"You and who else?" Harry retorted. "You're too much of a coward to attack alone. You won't dare use any giants that have joined you, because you're afraid of the Muggles. Malfoy and Pettigrew would be a bigger liability than help. . . ."

"You could not stand up to Pettigrew a year ago. . . ."

"I couldn't stand up to Pettigrew after an exhausting Third Task a year ago," Harry agreed. "And as for Malfoy, hell, a house elf whipped his arse. What, he never told you how I defeated your diary self, freed his house elf, and then when he tried to threaten me, the elf threw him half-way out of Hogwarts? Well, I'm not surprised." Harry leaned into Voldemort's face. "He's a bigger blowhard than you are."

"You're lucky this is only a dream, Potter," Voldemort snarled.

"One of us is," Harry answered. He stood back and closed his eyes. Harry brought out his feelings for Sirius, for Hermione and Luna and Ginny, for Ron and Hagrid and Remus and Tonks.

Voldemort screamed in pain, and fled Harry's mind.

Harry opened his eyes. Hermione's worried hazel-brown eyes were looking back, very close. "How are you," she whispered.

Harry realized that the lights were on in his room, and the Grangers were looking at him from the edge of the bed. "Was I noisy? Sorry," Harry whispered.

"What happened, Harry?" Dan asked.

"Voldemort and I had a discussion," Harry answered. "Do I need. . . ."

"I told them," Hermione said. "You were thrashing about for almost ten minutes. Your scar turned dark red, and it was actually throbbing for a moment. Then you stopped, then the scar faded a bit, and then you woke up."

Harry nodded and sat up. "He was trying to threaten me, well all of us in a way. I taunted him a bit, and when I had decided I had had enough, I drove him out."

"You drove him out?" Hermione asked, her voice high in surprise.

Harry nodded. "He thrives on hate and fear. He tried to possess me at the Ministry. He was killing me, but at that moment, I didn't care. All I could think of was if I died, I could be with Sirius and my parents again. My feelings for them drove him out. The Headmaster told me that it actually injured him. Tonight, I thought of all my friends and how I feel about them. It drove him out, screaming."

He looked at the Grangers. "I'm sorry. If I had known I was disturbing any of you, I would have ended it more quickly."

"You're . . . you fought and drove a madman out of your head, and you're sorry you didn't do it faster, because it woke us up an hour and a half early?" Dan said, amazed.

"Yes. . . ." Harry said tentatively. The two parents shook their heads.

"He needs hot chocolate," Hermione said.

"Aren't you going back to sleep?" Dan asked.

"I need to write Dumbledore," Harry said. "Even if I don't stay here, you need more protection."

"You're staying," Emma stated. She leaned over and kissed his scar lightly. "You can go back to sleep, Dan, but I'm fixing hot chocolate."

Dan shrugged. "So we go in early two days in a row." He looked out the window. "Raining again." He shrugged. "We'll bring the pizza home a little early." Seeing Harry frown, he asked, "What is it? Doesn't pizza sound good? You can say, we won't mind."

"It does sound good," Harry admitted. "But we still don't have a lot of school work, so I was going to cook some more, if you didn't mind."

"We can have pizza tomorrow," Hermione suggested.

"We can have pizza anytime," Dan said with a smile.

"You would, too," Hermione teased her father. "Mum won't allow it."

"True." Dan laid his hand on Harry's shoulder. "Get some rest after we're gone."

"Yes, sir," Harry replied. He looked at Hermione. "Are you alright?" He couldn't mistake the look of concern on her face, not to mention the dried tears..

Hermione hugged Harry very tightly. "You are a great git, Harry Potter."

Harry hugged her back, and then they got up. Hermione fetched Harry quill, ink, and parchment. Harry stopped her, and fetched some parchment from his trunk. "This is charmed to go right to Dumbledore," Harry said. "After Hedwig was attacked, well, this is safer all around."

"That makes sense," Hermione admitted.

"You can read over my shoulder," Harry said, "just don't correct me."

"Very funny," Hermione said with a sniff.

After the Grangers left, Harry started in on a frenzy of cooking which would last until that evening. Hermione sat quietly at the kitchen table, reading and taking notes, seeing that this was a way Harry was dealing with working off the anger he had towards Voldemort. "Are you still planning on being an auror?" she asked at one point when Harry had slowed down.

"I'm not certain," Harry admitted. "If I manage the O in Potions, I'll at least go for the training. Why?"

"I thought maybe you could open a restaurant instead," she teased.

"Ha ha," Harry replied. "When I feel all . . . all mixed up inside, I just need to be doing something. If we were at Hogwarts or the Burrow, I'd be flying. If I were still stuck on Privet Drive, I'd be weeding the flowers or something. This is what I can do here."

Hermione looked at all the bowls, pans, measuring cups and spoons, etc. spread all over the kitchen, and simply shook her head. She decided to pursue something Harry had said. "What did you mean, you'd at least go for the training?"

"It's complicated," Harry said.

"Of course it is, but I think I've proven I can follow complicated things," Hermione replied.

"Good point," Harry agreed. "Okay, first of all, I talked with Tonks and Moody a few times while I was at Little Whinging. Having aurors is necessary, but I don't know if I'd really want to do the job."

"Why not?" Hermione asked. Auror was on her list of possible careers as well.

"One of three things is going to happen," Harry went on. "First, Voldemort kills me. In that case, I at least don't have to worry about such things. Second, I kill him. Third, it turns out that the Prophecy is a crock, and someone else defeats or kills him. If it's the second, how will the people who run the Ministry, people more like Fudge than Mister Weasley by most accounts, use me as an auror?"

"They'll use you to their political advantage," Hermione answered promptly, although she had never considered this point before. "The aurors are not independent of the Ministry. No matter if they like you or despise you, they'll use you."

"Exactly. Second, just like our regular police, part of what they do is necessary, but pretty routine stuff. They do most of the preliminary investigations, even if they end up referring a lot of the problems to Magical Catastrophes, or Misuse, or to people like Mister Weasley."

"That's probably true," Hermione said.

"Third, you can't pick and choose how to apply the law. Would you have liked to have been ordered to arrest Hagrid last month?"

"No!" Hermione thought about that for a few moments. "And the training?"

"If I do defeat Voldemort, who is every Dark-Lord-wannabe going to be after for the next hundred years?"

"Good point," Hermione agreed. "What would you do then? Professional Quidditch?"

Harry snorted. "No. It's not that I don't think I couldn't play. I mean, you know how small the magical community really is."

"A little over twenty thousand in Britain, less than that in Ireland," Hermione answered.

"Right. And there are thirteen teams, each with fifteen players and reserves each; that's a hundred

and ninety-five players, and between Hogwarts, the Irish school and the Manx Free School of Magic there are seventy-eight active players in any given year. That's not a deep pool to draw from, since nearly every player retires by their early thirties if not long before. About half the people I've played against who have left Hogwarts have at least signed as reserve players. Wood is the new Keeper and assistant coach of Puddlemere, Flint is a reserve player for Falmouth, and Angelina and Alicia have signed with the Harpies." Harry shrugged. "Playing is fun, but it's the flying I really enjoy. If someone else somehow brings down Voldemort over the next two years, then I might play for a few years, otherwise the fans would never leave me alone."

"Then what would you do?"

Harry had already started deboning a boiled chicken. "If I tell you something, can you really keep it a secret? I mean, not to mention it ever again, under any circumstances, unless we're guaranteed to be alone?"

"Of course!"

"I really mean it. I'm not telling Ron," Harry warned.

"Really? Alright. . . ."

Harry frowned. "Are your wards secure against animagi?"

"Skeeter, you mean?" Hermione smiled nastily. "In theory, yes, and in addition to that, somehow, I ended up with a few of her hairs. I made a Skeeter detector. Believe me, she isn't here." Hermione's face cleared. "What's the big secret?"

"I wish it wasn't a secret, I mean the general background. Have you ever wondered how some magical families got so rich?"

"Like the Malfoys?"

"For one."

Hermione thought. "Actually, no, I haven't."

"First of all, in the nineteenth century, there was an agreement between the various European Ministries and their Muggle counterparts."

Hermione frowned. "Binns never mentioned that!"

"No, he didn't. Basically, compared to Muggles, most incomes we get from the Muggle world are very under-taxed. At the same time, most wealthy magical families are heavily invested in the Muggle world. There just aren't many investments to be made in our world."

"Do you have any concrete examples?"

"Actually, I have two," Harry said. "Most of the Black real estate was entailed, but Sirius' death broke the entail."

"Because he was the last male Black, and it was entailed to males only."

"Right. And by a will Sirius made back in 1981, I inherited the lot."

"How much?"

"The Blacks were once as wealthy as the Malfoys. The Potters were a step down, but still pretty wealthy. The Muggle investments the Blacks had were worth over sixty million pounds, set up in a Trust. In short, nothing had to be paid in taxes on it when I inherited the income from the Trust."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing. The Potter Trust is currently worth about forty-two million."

"Wow." She understood why Harry couldn't mention this to Ron.

Harry waved that away. "Oh, Hermione, besides the Trusts, I have over a million Galleons in two vaults in Gringotts, and who knows how much jewelry and such nonsense. Believe it or not, I now have about ten thousand pounds of gold bullion!"

"Ten thousand pounds isn't that much money, Harry."

Harry chucked the chicken bones and skin into a pot of vegetable stock he was brewing after setting the meat aside. "You don't understand, Hermione. I didn't mean ten thousand pounds sterling, I mean ten thousand pounds, five tons, of gold."

Hermione face-faulted. "But . . . but . . . but that's. . . ."

"160,000 ounces, and gold is about £200 an ounce. That's £32,000,000. Now, even though I'm sure a lot of that started off as dirty money, especially the Black money, it also means I never have to work if I don't want to."

"I guess not." She sighed. "I can see why you wouldn't tell Ron. He'd faint and then be jealous."

"Exactly. Did you know the Black trust not only owns all of Grimmauld Place, but five adjoining squares?" Harry snorted. "Do you know what this really means?"

"What?"

"It means that if the Muggle world disappeared, families like the Malfoys would be back running a magical plow. The magical world is parasitical. Did you know that is exactly one magical dairy in Ireland and none in Britain? There is not one purely magical farm growing basic food stuffs in Britain, although there are a few which grow magical plants and such. The bottles and all the ingredients for butterbeer come from Muggle producers. All the food comes from Muggles. Most of the wealth comes from the Muggle world."

"Then why do Pure Bloods hate it?"

"Because they don't understand it. Did you know there is a Squib Weasley who's an accountant?"

"Ginny mentioned him once, why?"

Harry grinned. "Because he's a Chartered Accountant, and is a partner in the biggest firm that specializes in Magical investment. The firm handles the Potter Trust, and the other major firm is howling because I'm transferring the Black Trust from them, since there are a couple Squib Malfoys running it."

Hermione shook her head. "You mean. . . ."

"I mean I apparently slightly changed the financial balance of power in magical Britain," Harry said.

Hermione was speechless, just waving her hand at Harry.

"Right. And here I stand, making pie crust."

"So what do you think you'll do after we leave Hogwarts; after the war and your training are over?"

Harry shrugged. "Well, for one thing, I've hired Dobby for the summer. He's surveying all the properties I own. I'm looking for a couple of different places. One would be a small place in London. One where people wouldn't really notice odd people coming or going, but which isn't in too bad a neighborhood. The other would be a country house, in a setting sort of like the Burrow: lots of woods, a lake or pond, set off from everyone else."

"All alone?"

Harry looked at Hermione. "I hope not."

Hermione flushed, and went back to her reading.

The Grangers were impressed by dinner. The first course was a bitter green salad, with small deep-fried rounds of goat cheese, breaded with spicy bread crumbs and drizzled with balsamic vinegar. The centers of the rounds were still melted as the salad was eaten. The second course had small cups of egg drop soup.

The main course was more of the asparagus from the previous night (freshly steamed) and Harry's attempt at reproducing what Hermione had described as the Norwich Pie -- a chicken meat pie that had a 'dent' in the center of the pastry top crust, filled with carrots, potatoes, and turnips stewed in thickened chicken stock. Dan didn't think it was a lot like the local products (this was better), but all enjoyed it.

The pudding course was a plain custard, infused with lavender.

It was a pleasant end of the day. Harry only hoped the night would not bring nightmares.

Chapter IV

Friday, July 19, 1996

Harry's dreams were undisturbed. When he woke up, again in Hermione's arms, he saw that the constant rains of the day before had cleared off, and the Friday was a pleasantly cool, partly cloudy day.

Harry did find an owl waiting for him after breakfast, however.

Dear Harry

I received a rather odd letter from Ginny last night. Part of it was news and not odd at all. I am glad you are well, and tell Hermione I am glad that she and her family came through their ordeal without injury, although one other family was killed. I am certain we Ravenclaws will have a memorial service for the Clampetts when school starts in September.

The odd part came after the information that you are staying with Hermione and her family. Ginny seems to be under the misapprehension that I am madly in love with you, and need to fight to 'keep you' away from Hermione. This seemed very out of character for Ginny, on many levels, and I suspect that Ronald put her up to this, or that she is at least doing it in large part for his perceived interests.

I do think we made a close connection between the end of November and the end of term. I admit, I have entertained fantasies of walking to Hogsmeade with you, and doing the many little things together that both close friends and couples do. I have known, of course, that these are harmless little fantasies. Ginny pointed out that, should you find yourself staying with Hermione for some weeks, if you have any feelings for each other you will come together, and my little fantasies will be destroyed.

Should you and Hermione find happiness together, I will be happy for you both, for you are both dear to me. Should you not, we may reconsider our options. In any event, I wish you well, and I hope you can enjoy the rest of your summer. Tell Hermione the same. Please let me know how your O.W.L.s go. Please take care.

love from your friend

Luna

"What does Luna have to say?" Hermione asked.

Harry nervously handed the letter over.

Hermione read the letter. "I see," she said, in a soft, harsh tone.

"You aren't angry at Luna, are you?" Harry asked worriedly.

"No," Hermione admitted. "No, I'm not angry at Luna. She likes you, and if we're not dating by the end of summer she might want to date you. She's being honest, as she always is, and I really got to know her in the Infirmary." Hermione smiled grimly. "I know she bothered Ron, but she came to visit us three times a day. She has some very odd ideas, but beyond that, she is a beautiful person." Then Hermione grimaced. "No, I'm not upset with Luna. I'm not thrilled by Ginny and Ron."

"I understand. I need to send Luna a note."

Hermione nodded. "I should, too."

At that point, there was a sizzling sound, and a thick envelope appeared on the kitchen table.

"What's that?"

"That's the same sort of paper I used to send Dumbledore my message yesterday," Harry answered. He tore open the very thick envelope.

Dear Harry:

I am sorry to hear of your encounter with Lord Voldemort. There are now three watchers near the Grangers, all of whom are proficient with the Patronus. While it is possible that Voldemort may attack himself, it is more likely he will try dementors. Should you or Miss Granger leave the property, please notify the contact team by telephone fifteen minutes before leaving.

Dumbledore

"Pretty informal for the Headmaster," Harry commented. "He must have been in a hurry."

"What's the rest of it?" Hermione asked.

"Oh, these? Just our O.W.L. results a few days early."

"HARRY!" Hermione shrieked.

Harry smiled and handed one of the other envelopes to Hermione. "You first."

ORDINARY WIZARDING LEVEL RESULTS FOR HERMIONE JANE GRANGER

<i>Required Courses and Theory</i>	<i>Theory</i>	<i>Practical</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Astronomy</i>	<i>O</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>.O</i>
<i>Charms</i>	<i>O+</i>	<i>O</i>	<i>.O</i>
<i>Defence against the Dark Arts</i>	<i>O</i>	<i>O</i>	<i>.O</i>
<i>Herbology</i>	<i>O</i>	<i>O</i>	<i>.O</i>
<i>History</i>	<i>O</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>.O</i>
<i>Potions</i>	<i>O+</i>	<i>O</i>	<i>.O</i>
<i>Transfiguration</i>	<i>O+</i>	<i>O+</i>	<i>.O+</i>
<i>Combined Theory I</i>			
<i>(Defence, Herbology, Potions)</i>	<i>O</i>		
<i>Combined Theory II</i>			
<i>(Charms, Defence, Transfiguration)</i>	<i>O</i>		
<i>Optional Courses</i>			
<i>Arithmancy</i>	<i>O+</i>	<i>O</i>	<i>.O</i>
<i>Care for Magical Creatures</i>	<i>O</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>.O</i>
<i>Runes</i>	<i>O</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>.O</i>

All students are required to take between 5 & 7 courses in their Sixth year. At least two must be on the N.E.W.T. level. You are eligible for the following N.E.W.T.-level courses: Accounting & Introduction to Magical & Muggle Business Practices; Arithmancy; Astronomy; Care for Magical Creatures; Charms; Defence against the Dark Arts; Herbology; History; Medical Training (must be taken with Potions, Herbology, Transfiguration, and Charms); Potions; Preparation for Joining the Ministry; Preparation for Muggle University; Runes; Spell Building (must be taken with Arithmancy and Charms); Transfiguration.

You are eligible for the following vocational classes: Household Charms; Household Potions; Living with Muggles; Magical Traditions. You may also take Introduction to Apparation in the

Autumn or Spring.

"I knew that one mistranslated rune would ruin my score," Hermione complained. "And they really should have marked the Astronomy practical on a curve!"

"On the other hand, you got five O pluses on the individual scores, and one over all," Harry said. "You must be proud of that. In fact, you scored all O's on the final scores. It wasn't perfect, but I bet it was the best in years."

"I suppose," Hermione said.

"No matter how perfect you are, idiots like Malfoy will hate you. I'm proud of you, and you should be, too."

Hermione almost smiled.

Harry leaned over and kissed Hermione's cheek. "I really mean that, Hermione."

Hermione dipped her head, blushing. It was the first time Harry had kissed her in any way. "How did you do?" she asked, changing the subject.

ORDINARY WIZARDING LEVEL RESULTS FOR HARRY JAMES POTTER

<i>Required Courses and Theory.</i>	<i>Theory</i>	<i>Practical</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Astronomy.</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>A</i>
<i>Charms</i>	<i>O</i>	<i>O+</i>	<i>O</i>
<i>Defence against the Dark Arts.</i>	<i>O+</i>	<i>O+</i>	<i>O+</i>
<i>Herbology.</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>A</i>
<i>History.</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>-</i>	<i>T</i>
<i>Potions.</i>	<i>O</i>	<i>O</i>	<i>O</i>
<i>Transfiguration.</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>O</i>	<i>O</i>
<i>Theory I</i>			
<i>(Defence, Herbology, Potions).</i>	<i>A</i>		
<i>Theory II</i>			
<i>(Charms, Defence, Transfiguration)</i>	<i>O</i>		
<i>Optional Courses</i>			
<i>Care for Magical Creatures</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>O</i>	<i>E</i>
<i>Divination</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>A</i>

All students are required to take between 5 & 7 courses in their Sixth year. At least two must be on the N.E.W.T. level. You are eligible for the following N.E.W.T.-level courses: Accounting & Introduction to Magical & Muggle Business Practices; Care for Magical Creatures; Charms; Defence against the Dark Arts; Divination; Herbology; Potions; Preparation for Joining the Ministry; Preparation for Muggle University; Transfiguration.

You are eligible for the following vocational classes: Household Charms; Household Potions; Living with Muggles; Magical Traditions. You may also take Introduction to Apparation in the Spring.

"Huh," Harry said, "there really is a score of 'T'."

Hermione was scandalized. "Harry!"

"What? That's when Voldemort attacked, remember? I only finished one question."

"True," she said. "Still, ten O.W.L.s, five of them O's, with one of those a plus, you should be

proud. And you can still do the auror training."

"I can," Harry said. "Accounting; Care for Magical Creatures; Charms; Defense against the Dark Arts; Potions; and Transfiguration. What do you think?"

"What would you think about the 'Magical Traditions' course?"

"That would make seven courses. You might be able to do seven, but I don't think I could."

"Why not?" Hermione asked. "I always knew you were smart, but you really are more than just smart. Your scores prove that."

"Leaving aside Quidditch, remember I'll be preparing for Voldemort, and we might be running the DA again."

"We?" Hermione said.

"I wouldn't consider it if we weren't doing it together, just like last year."

"Thank you," Hermione said, although she suspected Harry would spend more time flying.

"Hermione. . . . I don't know where we're going, but you're my best friend and partner, at the very least."

"Thank you," Hermione said again. Seeing Harry was a little uncomfortable, she changed the subject. "I know you want to take Care for Hagrid's benefit, but are you really interested in it?"

"No," Harry admitted. "You?"

"No," Hermione admitted in turn. "I wish I could take the 'Traditions' course." She sighed.

"Arithmancy; Charms; Defense against the Dark Arts; Herbology; Medical Training; Potions; Preparation for Muggle University; Runes; Spell Building; and Transfiguration. That's ten courses, and Professor McGonagall already warned me that seven is a solid standard."

"Are you serious about the healer training?" Harry asked.

"I am thinking about it, why?"

"If you don't do the medical course, you can also drop Herbology. If you don't do the Prep course, you could take Traditions."

"Of course, the Traditions course doesn't carry the N.E.W.T." Hermione mused. "You may not have to worry about that, but I do."

"Actually, I do, too," Harry admitted. "I do need five N.E.W.T.s. for auror training."

"True," she admitted. "I guess we'll have to think about it, and I'll talk with Mum and Dad tonight."

"Okay." Harry hesitated. "I don't want you to over work. . . ."

"But?"

"But while you can only take seven N.E.W.T. courses, maybe you could take the Traditions course as an eighth course."

Hermione's smile grew. "Do you think?"

Harry shrugged. "I need to write a note to Dumbledore anyway. I'll ask him to ask McGonagall. That will also bring him into things without getting you in trouble. I'll ask about the DA, too."

"Good idea," Hermione said.

"We should also write to Ron, and not mention Luna," Harry said.

"No more cooking?" Hermione teased.

"We have enough chicken soup for days," Harry admitted. "You have a pasta maker, and I can also make a couple different kinds of dumplings."

In the end, they merely sent Ron their O.W.L. results. They did the same to Neville and Luna, although they included other notes to Luna as well.

Dear Luna

I've thought about walking to Hogsmeade with you, too. I don't know what will happen, or who, if anyone, I might be walking with. I do know I learned to appreciate you a great deal in a short time last month. No matter what happens, I hope we'll be close.

*affectionately,
your friend,
Harry*

19 July

Dear Luna:

Thank you for being honest with Harry (and me), both about your feelings and what motivated you to write the letter you did.

When are you returning to Britain? If it is possible, I hope we three may get together to talk. As of right now, Harry and I are still a bit uncertain of where we might be going.

*love from
Hermione*

The pair spent the rest of the morning looking over the detailed course descriptions. Harry decided, after repeated urging from Hermione, that the Magical Traditions course really would not be a lot of extra work. He did wonder if he would have made the same decision if he hadn't been staying with Hermione.

They decided to spend the afternoon at Diagon Alley. Hermione got permission from her parents and also notified their watchers. They ate an early lunch, and made their way to the one magical pub in Norwich. They ordered and each drank a small butterbeer, and then flooded to the Leaky Cauldron.

Hermione wanted to compare the texts of the various courses. Harry wanted to take a quick look at the texts required for the Traditions course. There were nine, and he was not about to get in too deep.

Harry was a bit shocked to find that seven of the nine 'texts' barely qualified as pamphlets, and at least one of them looked like it was pro-Pure Blood propaganda.

It was a slow day in Flourish & Blotts, and an attendant was helping Harry while the owner assisted Hermione. "Are you going to be taking these five courses, Mister Potter?" she asked, pointing to the books for Accounting, Charms, Defense, Potions, and Transfiguration.

"Plus Care for Magical Creatures," Harry said. They were still using the book Hagrid had given him three years before.

"You may not know it, but 'Magical Traditions' and 'Living with Muggles' are seen as something like 'filler' courses. Sixth and Seventh year students have to have at least five courses, and sometimes they need one or two non-N.E.W.T. courses to make it up to five."

"I see. So, are these pamphlets all like this?" Harry asked, pointing at the suspect pamphlet.

"By no means. I think this is included because amongst all the prejudice, it does explain a number of old rituals which are still used."

"I see. Thanks. I'm just curious. What do they use for the Muggle course?"

The assistant handed over a dozen pamphlets, most of which looked rather silly to Harry.

"Interesting. Bung them all in a bag and shrink the lot, please. I need to look over the Defense and Hexes sections."

"Very good, Mister Potter."

Harry came by Hermione twenty minutes later, fifteen books barely balancing in his arms.

"You look like I do in a book store," Hermione teased.

"Probably. Be right back." Harry handed the books over to the assistant, and then he returned.

"Made any decisions?"

"No, not really," Hermione said. "I mean, I know some of the courses I'll be taking no matter what, but I just wish I had the time to take all of them. These all look interesting."

"Fine." He looked at the owner. "We'll take them all."

"What?" the owner said.

"Eh?" Hermione asked.

"Put them all in bags, along with the books for the Magical Traditions and the Living with Muggles courses, and shrink them down," Harry stated. He looked at Hermione. "We ought to get you a trunk like mine, too."

"You never noticed, but I did get a new trunk last year, a seven compartment one," Hermione said, amused as she stuffed all their shrunken books into her knapsack. "Thank you, Harry."

"You're very welcome," was all Harry said. "Shall we visit Fred and George?"

Hermione hesitated.

"What's wrong? I doubt if they'll turn us into canaries," Harry pointed out.

"Well, they might try," Hermione said. "You know they'll tell Ron and Ginny they saw us."

"True," Harry said. He hesitated, then asked, "Hermione, would you consider dating me?"

"You don't want to wait for Luna?"

Harry shook his head.

Hermione intertwined her fingers with Harry's. "Let's try." The pair walked hand-in-hand towards Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes.

"Well, well, well," Fred said, "look who we have here."

"Not very busy, are you?" Harry said, concerned. "Is everything alright?"

"Oh, sure," George said, not taking his eyes off of the hands clasped together. "This is the first down time we've had today."

At that point, the shop door opened, and six wizards in their mid-twenties came in, shouting and teasing each other. Fred and George exchanged looks, and Fred went to take care of the wizards.

"So, how are you two doing?" George asked.

"Well," Hermione said simply.

"The reason why I asked about business," Harry went on, "was that I was wondering if you thought Diagon Alley was the best place for you guys, as opposed to Hogsmeade."

"Rents are high here," George admitted, "but believe it or not, they're even higher in Hogsmeade,

and they have a lot of regulations about how the shops are supposed to look. Obviously, postal orders would be about the same, but we really think we're getting more stop-by customers here than we would there."

"Why is that?" Hermione asked, "and does that factor in Hogsmeade weekends?"

"It does," George answered. "Other than Hogsmeade weekends, Hogsmeade is pretty dead. Zonkos make most of their money via post owl. Gambol and Japes does mostly walk-in, and their line is a lot older and staid compared to Zonkos, and of course we're a lot more novel than either. In fact, old man Japes is offering to sell out to us, lock-stock, and long-term shop lease for 30,000 Galleons."

"That's not much," Hermione said. "Is it?"

George smiled. "Remember, we started all this with the thousand Galleons Harry invested with us and two hundred of our own, which together had grown into just over two thousand when we left Hogwarts."

"Then is it worth it, if their line is old?" Hermione asked.

"Old but solid classics," George admitted. "Plus we can close this shop and move into bigger quarters at a better price. We could save three hundred Galleons a year on rent over thirty-six years and have the bigger place. And wizarding patents are pretty tough to get around. After we splurged a bit in June, we've been putting most of our surplus cash into securing our patents."

"I gave you the thousand, free and clear," Harry said.

"Harry. . . ."

"I meant it then, and I still mean it," Harry said.

"Well, we can argue about it again later," George said.

"Actually, I have a proposition for you two," Harry said.

"What's that?"

"If you'll give me fifteen per cent of the net, starting in six years, I'll invest the 30,000 Galleons."

George was rendered speechless. Hermione said nothing, having made a guess at what Harry was about to do. Finally, George said. "You're serious?"

"I am," Harry answered. "I have the money to do it."

"Then I'm sure we'll say yes," George said simply. "We'll have the documents drawn up." He turned to Hermione. "We can call on the two of you?"

"You may, or we may be able to come back here," Hermione answered. She glanced at her watch. "We do have to get back."

George walked ahead of them, and bowed them out of the shop. "Thank you," he said sincerely.

"George," Harry said, "you know you and Fred are the big brothers I never had."

"Thank you, Harry," George said sincerely.

"Oh . . . drat," Hermione spat. George and Harry turned to see what she was looking at.

What they saw was Rita Skeeter, a broad grin on her face, hurrying towards them.

"I wish we could avoid her," Hermione muttered.

Hermione's wish was granted. Rita's wish for a big scoop was also granted.

At that moment, with a large boom, a burst of fire and brimstone erupted between Hermione and Rita.

When the smoke cleared, a collective scream when up in Diagon Alley, for there stood everyone's

worst nightmare.

Lord Voldemort stood there, and he was starting to raise his wand.

Chapter V

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Harry was faster. "Helios!" he cried. This was the sun spell, which, in the hands of a powerful wizard, could drive off and even destroy a dementor.

The tight beam of concentrated light hit Voldemort full in the eyes. He screamed as his retinas burned out.

Hermione cried out, "Expelliarmus!" Voldemort's wand flew into her hand. She snapped it with great satisfaction.

George was the next to act. Seeing Harry was still on guard against Voldemort, and that Voldemort was on his knees, screaming and holding his bloodied face, George took six running steps and crashed his boot into Voldemort's groin. Voldemort's hands went from his still-bleeding eyes to his crotch. George's left fist crunched into the slit that served as the Dark Lord's nose.

Then George started putting the boot to Voldemort. Six other wizards leapt at the chance. Voldemort managed to trigger a portkey, and disappeared.

"We got him!" someone called out. "He got away, but we got the bastard!"

Fred, who had come to the door, pulled George back and together they hauled Harry onto their shoulders. The crowd started to applaud.

Harry amplified his voice. ""You see!" Harry called out. "He's a dangerous, evil, sorcerer, but if we work together, we can destroy him!"

The crowd cheered. Harry jumped down. By then, Remus and two other Order members had fought their way to Harry and Hermione. "Let's get you out of here," Remus said.

"Use our floo," George said.

"Good job," Harry said to George as he was hustled by.

"You, too," George said.

Harry turned to Remus. "Actually," Harry said softly, "it wasn't nearly as big a deal as it appeared. We need to get to Dumbledore, quickly."

"I was afraid of that," Remus said. He grabbed onto Hermione and Harry's wrists, and activated an emergency portkey.

"Are you impatient, Severus?"

"No, my Lord," Snape answered, bowing low.

"Not at all?"

"I admit to being curious as to what we are waiting for, my Lord," Snape admitted, "but I know you will reveal it to me when you want me to know."

"True," Voldemort replied. "I decided that Lucius needed to take a risk. I sent him after the Boy and his Mudblood. If he succeeds, then I shall reward him magnificently. If he has failed, well, then we shall see."

At that moment, a screaming version of Voldemort appeared on the cavern floor, clawing at his bleeding eyes with one hand and holding his crotch with the other. "Stupify," Voldemort said, and the screams stopped.

"Examine him. He used Polyjuice, so he should return to himself in . . . thirty-five minutes." Voldemort stood.

"Do I treat him, my Lord?" Snape asked.

"Yes, once he transforms back. He will be easier to question then. Wormtail, remain. Seek me out when Lucius is ready to be questioned."

Snape and Pettigrew bowed low.

"So, you do not believe it was Voldemort?"

"No, sir," Harry answered. "My scar didn't twinge a bit, not even when I blinded him. I can't imagine there not being a reaction of some kind."

"No, no I suppose not," Dumbledore agreed. "It will not be easy to convince the Minister or the public, however."

"We don't need to convince them that it wasn't Voldemort," Hermione pointed out. "We just have to convince them that this doesn't lessen the threat of Voldemort very much."

"That will still be difficult, although perhaps not as difficult," Dumbledore said. "Very well. Remus, could you escort these two back home? I shall see what can be done."

"Would my writing Skeeter a note help at all?" Hermione asked.

"What could you write?" Dumbledore asked, pointing at writing supplies on the corner of his desk.

"**Dear Rita,**" Hermione said as she wrote, "**I know you have the scoop of the decade, but I ask you to listen to Dumbledore. . . .** You, or an emissary, sir?"

"I think I will have to go myself, as my first stop."

". . . **listen to Dumbledore. Your career will benefit in the long run.**" Hermione signed it. "I know it's presumptuous of me, but between us. . . ."

"She might listen. After all, she has a history with you. Remus?"

"Come on," Remus said with a sigh.

"Well, Severus?"

"He is permanently blinded, my Lord." Lucius Malfoy laid curled in a corner, rocking back and forth.

"Very well. AVADA KEDAVRA!" Voldemort turned to Snape. "Tell me, will the failure of this idiot fool the Boy and the Old Man?"

"Where did Malfoy attack Potter, Master?" Snape asked.

"Diagon Alley, actually." Voldemort actually chuckled. "I bet that made quite the stir."

"Then I doubt if it would fool the Old Man. Even if he actually does believe the Boy will some day defeat you, he cannot believe it would ever be this easy."

"True. But others will believe it. Fudge will believe it. People will let their guard down, at least for a while. Wormtail!"

"Master?"

"Preserve it, and remove its arms and legs, and then feed them to Nagini as needed. We'll see if his alleged pure blood will satisfy her hunger." Voldemort looked at Snape. "Begone to your other master. Watch him squirm, as the world believes I am of no account, and watch him fail to convince them otherwise, until I am ready to show them."

Snape merely said, "As you command, my Lord," and left the cavern. Only then did he feel the shock of what had happened.

Alerted by Hermione, the Grangers had arrived with four pizzas. Although he was very hungry, Dan Granger sat at the kitchen table, staring at his beloved daughter, Harry, and Remus Lupin as they related their day.

When they were done, everyone else was well along with their dinner, but Dan just placed his slice back on the plate and said, "You . . . you blinded a crazed wizard, who was not this wizarding Hitler after all?"

"Yes," Harry answered.

"And you wrote a note explaining this to a scurrilous insect who's also a reporter?"

"Well, Skeeter is more of a reporter who sometimes is a beetle, but yes," Hermione answered.

"And you're a werewolf, who is going to babysit us tonight?"

"Yes," Remus answered. Just then Harry reached in front of Remus for another slice. Remus bared his teeth and growled at Harry.

Harry blinked, then bared his teeth and growled back.

"Down, boys!" Hermione ordered, "before I wap you both with a rolled up newspaper." She turned to her father. "He's joking. He's only infectious when he changes, and that's only during a full moon," she said.

"A full moon at night," Remus added with a smile, having successfully won the slice from Harry. "This month the full moon is at Ten o'clock in the morning on the Thirtieth. I'll be pretty sick, but at least I won't change. And Dumbledore is trying to free up an auror you know, Tonks, to take over here, but even if the Minister agrees, and you agree of course, it will likely take a few days."

"But where. . . ."

"I'll sleep on a sofa or something," Remus said with a shrug.

"That will not be necessary," Emma said, standing. "Daniel, may I speak with you?"

"Why not?" he said, and the pair went into the front entrance hall. The trio in the kitchen heard nothing for a short time, then Dan was heard to scream, "They're going to be doing WHAT WHERE?!" Then all was quiet. Finally the couple came back in.

"Will Dumbledore or someone be here tomorrow?" Emma asked.

"I believe so," Remus hedged.

Dan looked at the pizza. He placed three more slices on his plate, went to the fridge and pulled out three bottles of brown ale, and said, "I'll see you all in the morning."

"He'll be alright," Emma said. "Harry, why don't you take your friend to your room. Take whatever pizza you want. Hermione will be up shortly."

Harry didn't know what to say, and so wisely said nothing. He and Remus took the rest of the meat pizza slices, some cola, and left in a hurry.

"You know, you never really told us how dangerous your world is," Emma said, sitting back down. "We've learned rather piecemeal."

"So have I," Hermione admitted.

"Have you decided that you're in love with Harry?"

"Yes, I have."

"And has Harry decided he's in love with you?"

"Yes, he has. I'll be sleeping in my room. Where will Harry be?"

"In your room, with the door open. It's going to be warm again, although nowhere near as hot as the other night. Wear whatever you wish, but remember, your father will see it."

"I will."

Emma paused, and then said, "You're both rather on the young side, especially Harry. Still, when I was sixteen, I was sure every boy I really wanted could be the right one. I was wrong about all but one."

"True," Hermione agreed. "Harry and I are such good friends, though. . . ."

"It more common for your true love to be that first, and then you grow to be friends, than the other way around," Emma said gently.

"Mum, I'm not ready for sex, if that's what you're worried about. Short of that, I could never regret sharing any affection with Harry. He's not perfect, and I know that. We squabbled like, well, not to be icky about it, like brother and sister last year. But there is something about Harry. Something . . . wonderful, and filled with light. Three or four thousand years ago, he would have been a hero, like Theseus or Odysseus, but without the hubris that so many of the Greek heroes had."

"And would you be Penelope and wait twenty years?" Emma teased.

"Yes, I would," Hermione said proudly, "if Harry had promised to come back before he left. Harry has his flaws, but he is good, in a way that makes me believe that humanity, with all the disgusting examples, can still be redeemed because it has produced a Harry Potter. I will follow Harry through hell, because I know if he leads I will make it through. If I'm also lucky enough that he falls deeply in love with me, then I will give him my heart and cherish his in return. If it turns out that we're not life-partners after all, then I will have this time to hold him, and know we'll always be special to each other."

Hermione stood. "I know that sounds silly, but I really do believe that."

"I hope you're right, dear," was all Emma could say. For all her practical genius, Hermione was still a sixteen-year-old girl. And who could tell? if magic was real, then perhaps fairy-tale endings were, too.

Hermione held Harry in her arms. "Harry . . . we're dating, right?"

"I suppose I never did formally ask, did I?"

"You asked if I would consider it, and I said yes, but we never said anything more than that, did we?"

"Hermione, will you be my girlfriend?"

"Oh, yes!" They kissed on the lips for the first time.

"You are fantastic," Harry whispered in awe.

"Really?"

"Really."

"Go to sleep, my own," Hermione said, snuggling Harry's head to her small breasts. She kissed his scar. "If he comes tonight, I'll be here for you again."

Saturday, July 20, 1996

"Ah, I was wondering if you were going to try and break in tonight," Harry said.

Voldemort said nothing. He merely glared at Harry.

Harry looked around. They were out in a sunny glade, and Voldemort did not look happy. Harry realized that he was in charge of the dreamscape. "You don't look too good there, Tom," Harry said. "Don't tell me that really was you that I blinded?"

"No," Voldemort spat, "it was not."

"I thought not. I was at least one and a half beats ahead of whoever it was on the draw, and I would only have been about half a beat ahead of you."

"Oh, you've gotten that much stronger, that much better, in a month, boy?"

"Yes," Harry said simply. He really was not that confident, but saw no reason to let Voldemort know that. "Who was it? It wasn't Pettigrew. I would have even been further ahead of him."

Voldemort scowled. "Do you think this arrogance will save you?"

Harry stared into Voldemort's eyes, to the Dark Lord's shock. "It was Malfoy?" Harry said, surprised both at the identity of his opponent and the fact that he had read it so easily. "You killed him?"

Voldemort was even more shocked than Harry. He turned and tried to leave.

He couldn't. He then realized that by invading Harry's mind, he was on Harry's home ground. Harry had learned to control his own mind, and here he could even control Voldemort to some degree.

Voldemort turned on Harry and roared in anger. Harry's scar exploded in agony, and he dropped to one knee. Harry managed to block part of the pain. Where the last time this had happened he had concentrated on his general feelings of his loved ones, now he concentrated on his feelings for Hermione. He thought of her, and the pain receded.

Voldemort roared again, this time in agony. He was flung away from Harry.

Harry opened his eyes.

He was firmly in Hermione's arms, her lips were pressed against his scar. She released him. "Are you alright?" she whispered.

"I am," Harry said softly. "The scar hurts, but other than that, I seem to have been charge."

"Really?" Hermione asked, dubiously.

Harry scowled. "I know I probably deserve that, after the Occlumency thing, but I'm trying,

Hermione."

"I'm sorry," Hermione answered. She kissed Harry's scar again, and Harry relaxed in her arms. "Can you go back to sleep? It's not even Four yet."

Harry shook his head. "I have to write it down for Dumbledore, and I should probably tell Moony, too."

"Alright," she said. Hermione sat up and grabbed her light dressing gown, and then she went to get Harry's special writing paper. Harry threw on his dressing gown as well and switched on the light. He was not surprised to see that this attracted Remus Lupin from the next room. Remus and Hermione looked over Harry's shoulders as he wrote out his dream confrontation.

"What were you thinking about when you forced Voldemort out of your mind?" Remus asked when Harry seemed to have stopped.

Harry dipped his head. "Hermione," he muttered.

"Yes, Harry?" Hermione asked.

"No, I meant I was thinking of my feelings for you," Harry muttered. Hermione simply placed her hand on Harry's shoulder and squeezed, pleased.

"Send that off and go back to sleep," Remus said fondly. He too patted Harry's shoulder, and the three all went back to their beds.

Harry and Hermione woke up a little after 7:00. They dressed and went down the stairs, and found Dumbledore, Tonks, and Moody were eating breakfast with Remus and Grangers in the dining room.

"Fix whatever you two want, Harry," Emma said.

"Fine. Does anyone need anything?" Harry asked.

No one did, and Harry went and fixed himself and Hermione breakfast.

"What's wrong?" Hermione asked her parents, when Harry had served them.

"Your Professor Dumbledore had made us an interesting offer," Dan said with a slight scowl.

"You know that we've had a standing offer to sell the practice," Emma said. "He suggested that we take the offer, and join your uncle's practice in Adelaide."

"Not you, of course," Dan added to Hermione, with a glare at Dumbledore.

"Of course not," Harry said. "He wouldn't want to risk his weapon's well-being." Dumbledore winced.

"Harry," Moody broke in, "you know that isn't Dumbledore's intention."

"Just the effect?" Harry asked.

Moody shrugged. "Eh, maybe."

"That does not help, Alastor," Dumbledore pointed out.

"What do you think, Harry?" Emma asked.

"I wouldn't want anything to happen to you," Harry said, "but I wouldn't want Hermione to leave or to be away from you, either."

"If Voldemort realized what was generating Harry's power last night. . . ." Dumbledore started. Harry rolled his eyes, Hermione scowled, and Dan and Emma demanded explanations.

"How much danger is Hermione in now?" Dan demanded after Dumbledore was finished

explaining (and embarrassing Harry).

"Hermione will be very well protected," Dumbledore said. "However, once the term begins, we may not be able to save you from a large dementor attack. There are no dementors in Australia, and the Australians would be able to detect any that attempted to infiltrate."

Dan and Emma looked at each other. Emma nodded.

"Very well," Dan said. "We'll need some help. . . ."

"May I help?" Harry asked.

Dan frowned. "How?"

"Harry will be very wealthy when he turns seventeen," Hermione said. "I would imagine he could access some ready cash."

"That would avoid a strain on our war chest," Dumbledore said, "and Harry can well-afford it."

"Second," Dan said sternly, "Hermione, with or without Harry, visits over Christmas."

Dumbledore looked at Hermione. "I presume you have no objection?"

Hermione shook her head. "Of course not."

"Good. You can start working out the details with Remus this afternoon. Second, Remus or Miss Tonks will be here from now until you leave for your American vacation. . . ."

"We're still going on that?" Emma asked, surprised. "I mean. . . ."

"We will supply a magical moving company," Dumbledore said. "Packing this household will be done in about three hours."

"Oh. . . ."

"Third, I was able to persuade Miss Skeeter to write a reasonable article about the attack yesterday. I have already leaked the information that we believe that it was actually Lucius Malfoy under Polyjuice to her, and she will have that as part of her follow-up article tomorrow."

He turned to Hermione and smiled at Hermione. "Fourth, while I am here, perhaps we should discuss your last two years and future career plans."

Harry tried to fully follow the ends and outs of the two hour discussion that followed. He fully tuned back in when Hermione had her schedule set: Arithmancy; Charms; Defense against the Dark Arts; Preparation for Muggle University; Runes; Spell Building; and Transfiguration. She had tried to convince Dumbledore to let her take Potions, but he refused, while her parents had insisted on the Muggle Prep.

Chapter VI

After the group had decided Hermione's course of studies, they set down to hammer out the details of the Grangers' move from Norwich. Harry excused himself, but it seemed as if only Hermione and Remus had really taken notice of his leaving.

The group was still at it at noon. Harry came in, bustled around the dining room table, clearing it off, and then came back setting the table. "What's all this?" Dumbledore asked, amused.

"You didn't know?" Hermione asked archly. "Harry is quite the chef."

"If he weren't a wizard, I could get him placed at any restaurant in town," Dan agreed.

Harry merely rolled his eyes, and served up a large pot of chicken stew with dumplings. "Are these the Norfolk dumplings my father talks about?" Tonks asked. Emma explained the reference, since Dan was coughing and Hermione was giggling. They then had strawberries and seedy cake for afters, and went back to the discussion.

"You're unexpectedly domestic," Tonks said to Harry in the kitchen as he finished charming the pots clean.

"Well, I don't care much about neatness or cleaning, but I do enjoy cooking, when I actually get to eat the results," Harry retorted. "And who knows, I could easily end up living more or less alone, and taking care of myself."

"Do you think Hermione, let alone that elf of yours, would allow that to happen?" Tonks asked.

Harry shrugged. "So I'll let Dobby do the cleaning and some of the cooking. I still don't know where Hermione and I will go with this."

"Really?"

"Tonks, you're pretty in your natural state, and you're smart, funny, and nice. Did you date while you were in school?"

"Sure, why?"

"Then why aren't you married?"

Tonks shrugged in turn. "In part because I wanted to start a career, and in part because I didn't find the right person to settle down with. I mean, I'm only six years older than you. . . . I see."

"Exactly. Hermione is brilliant. She won't want to settle down in two years, assuming the war is over, and maybe I won't either. I really like her; she's pretty, smart, and my best friend."

"If a little bossy."

Harry snorted. "That's like saying I'm a little stubborn or Snape doesn't have the most even temperament. Still, if I can ignore the Dursleys I can easily live with Hermione's need to boss people around for their own good. But I'm not even sixteen. How many people do you know who found their life partner before the start of their Sixth year?"

"Not many, although there have been quite a few who were in their Sixth year when they started seeing their 'life partner', including your parents," she answered. "I was at your parents' wedding, you know."

Harry's parents, he knew, had started dating at the end of their Sixth year. "You're the little girl in the photos I have?"

Tonks wrinkled her nose. "Yes, I was four."

At that moment, Dobby appeared in the kitchen, bowing low to Harry. "Hi, Dobby," Harry said.

"Have you finished your survey?"

"Yes, Master Harry."

"I told you that you didn't have to call me that," Harry said.

"If Dobby is to be Harry Potter's chief elf, Dobby should call Master Harry Master Harry, especially when addressing Master Harry."

"Chief elf?" Tonks asked.

"Why?" Harry asked. A thought occurred to him. "Does 'chief elf' mean there are other elves?"

Dobby nodded. "All of Harry Potter's property, except for three places, are rented. Dobby cannot find the Black house. . . ."

"The Headmaster has it under an enchantment," Harry said. "That's fine."

Dobby nodded. House elves did not need explanations. "The cottage on one property was destroyed. It was cleared, but not rebuilt."

"Godric's Hollow?"

Dobby nodded. "The third property meets Master Harry's requirements for a country house, except that it is large. Very large. Very very large. Potter Place. . . ."

"Potter Place?"

"Is the manor at the center of the Potter estate. . . ."

"There's a Potter estate?"

"Yes, Master Harry. Potter Place is a large manor house, which has portions dating back to the early Thirteenth century, but most dates from the early 1500s, the mid-1600s, and the late 1800s. It has a hundred-and-thirty-two major rooms. . . ."

Harry shook his head to clear it. "And the house elves?"

"There is a family of house elves living at Potter Place. May Dobby?"

"Sure, whatever," Harry answered in a daze. Dobby snapped his fingers, and five elves appeared, wearing blue pillowcases with a large 'P' on them.

Harry sat on a stool, stunned. "Tonks? Could you ask Remus to step in?"

"Not Hermione?" Tonks teased.

"Not if you value your life," Harry growled.

Forty minutes later, Tonks came into the dining room and asked Hermione to join Harry in the kitchen. "Could you ask Remus to come back?" Dumbledore asked. "We could use you as well, Nymphadora."

Tonks frowned, and Hermione said she would send Remus back. She breezed into the kitchen, and stopped abruptly. Speaking very stiffly, she said, "Remus, the Headmaster would like you back in the dining room." Remus fled. Hermione then said, very tight-lipped, "Harry . . . why are there five elves in pillowcases in the kitchen standing behind Dobby?"

"It turns out that there is an ancestral Potter manor, called 'Potter Place'," Harry said. "Dobby said there are what? a hundred-and thirty-two major rooms?"

"Yes, Master Harry." Harry winced. "Along with sixty. . . ."

"'Master Harry?'" Hermione demanded, her fists on her hips.

"Yes," Harry said. "Hermione, these are Toby and Brailu, and their children Cam and Letys. The

elf in the back is Toby's father, Coke."

"Hello," Hermione said stiffly.

"Coke's family has been working. . . ."

"Slaving," Hermione corrected.

". . . for my family for hundreds of years. Did you know elves generally live until they're in the late sixties or early seventies?"

"Yes, and they reach their full growth around the age of ten," Hermione said dismissively. "Harry. . . ."

"I asked them if they wanted to keep working for me. All five want to. That's what they want, Hermione."

"Yes, but. . . ."

"I then offered to free them, but to keep them working for me." The five elves started whimpering. Hermione wavered slightly.

"Hermione, I am NOT going to throw these five elves out of what is more their home than mine just to satisfy your ideas of social principles."

Hermione stared at Harry, open-mouthed.

Harry gestured to the elves. "They have agreed to take pay. . . ."

"Really?"

"Really. They do not want clothes." The elves shuddered and whimpered. "However, I have told them that should they ever want clothes or wish to leave, all they have to do is ask. If they take clothes, they are welcome to work for me or to leave, as they please. Both Cam and Letys need to mate soon. I have told them I would support any arrangements they wish to make on the matter."

"Go on."

"Dobby is working for me during the summers until I leave Hogwarts, then he'll join me as my valet." Dobby grinned and bowed. "Remus said that he would arrange for us to visit Potter Place sometime next week. Obviously, I'll have to decide if I'm going to live there at least part time once I leave Hogwarts, but there's no hurry."

"Go on."

Harry was worried about that toneless voice. He shrugged. "That's it for me." He turned to Cam and Letys. "Did you have anything to add?"

"Cam is enjoying working at Potter Place and is enjoying meeting Master Harry," Cam said nervously. "Tradition would say that Cam is going to work for Goldie at the Grindels when Goldie has elfling with Cam. Cam is not able to be going unless Master Harry approves."

Harry picked through the grammar. "So, you work for your mate, at a family called the Grindels, when she has your elfling, but you can't have the child with her until I give you approval?"

"Master Harry is correct," Cam said with a bow.

"You have it, of course." Harry turned to Toby. "Since Cam might be gone soon, would you like more help at Potter Place?"

"We is able to do the work, Master Harry," Toby said.

"Of course you can," Harry agreed. "Could you use the extra help if I arranged it?"

"Free elf?" Toby asked, glaring at Dobby, who glared back.

"Yes, but not Dobby." He turned to Hermione. "I think Winky might be happier working at a place like a manor than Hogwarts."

"Maybe. . . ." Hermione said, softening a bit.

Harry turned to Dobby. "What do you think?"

"Winky is not liking clothes," Dobby said.

"Winky can wear anything she likes, even a pillow case, as long as she takes payment," Harry said.

"Dobby will ask," Dobby said.

"Master Harry will have Dobby inform loyal elves of Master's arrival next week?"

"Yes," Harry said. "I was wondering, would it bother you to call me 'Mister Harry' instead of 'Master Harry'?"

The elves looked torn. "Feel free to talk it over amongst yourselves," Harry said.

The five elves moved to the back of the kitchen, and talked very high and fast, in a language neither Harry nor Hermione had ever heard. After a minute or so, they invited Dobby to join them.

"At least they'll take pay," Hermione said. "How much?"

"Only a Galleon a week, but at least they agreed to two days off a month. I figure we can also give them gifts."

"We?"

"I can hope, can't I?"

"You know how I feel about house elf slavery, Harry."

Harry nodded. "I do, and you know I basically agree with it. We need to find some way to prevent elf-abuse, and I doubt if it can be done without freeing them at some point. Still, are there any places where elves are free?"

"I don't know," Hermione admitted. "I can't find much out about them."

"Hermione . . . are you aiming to be a spell-builder?"

"I think so," Hermione said. "There are so many things I'd like to study, so many things I'd like to do. However, I am very good at Arithmancy, not to mention charms and such. Why? Are you disappointed I'm not studying medicine or going for auror?"

"Not at all," Harry said. "I thought you might be a civil rights campaigner, or I guess I would say sentient rights advocate, that's all."

"I'm sure I'll do some of that, too. What?" Hermione looked confused at Harry's body language.

"Nothing. You should do what you want to do. If that's spell-building, then that's what you should do."

Hermione shrugged. "There are a lot of careers possible with the choices I made. While I might make a good technical healer, I don't think I'd be all that good with patients. And I did think about working for sentient rights, but there's no infrastructure to support that kind of work in the magical world. There's no Amnesty International. There is not even anything like Greenpeace. You'd think, considering how much Pure-Bloods whinge on and on about Muggles destroying the planet, there'd be SOME sort of Green movement, but there's not a thing."

"I never thought I'd hear you say something shouldn't be done because it's too hard," Harry said, amazed.

Hermione glared again, but then got a very horrified look on her face. "I am saying that, in a way, aren't I? But Harry, never mind the up-hill struggle, do you have any idea what that would cost?"

Harry shrugged. "It can't cost more than five tons of gold."

"What are you saying?" Hermione asked, her eyes narrowed.

"Hermione, am I or am I not your friend at the very least?"

"You are," Hermione agreed, "and more."

"Don't I care about the rights of beings like elves and centaurs?"

"Honestly? You seem more concerned about individuals than groups, but you're a very unprejudiced person," Hermione agreed.

"Therefore, I would fund a movement like that, not because I'm humoring a girlfriend, but because I believe in the cause."

"Really?"

"Really. Look, I like Luna. I have no idea what a snorkack is. If I were dating her, I'd happily go on a snorkack hunt. I'd post a reward for the capture of a live, healthy snorkack. I wouldn't launch the International Friends of the Snorkack, or fund the Snorkack Protection Association unless I was certain there were such a thing as snorkacks and that they should be befriended or protected." Harry suddenly smiled a self-deprecating smile. "Besides, if I beat Voldemort, just think what a good patron I would be of any organization."

"So that's what you think I should do?" Hermione said slowly.

"Absolutely not," Harry answered. "I meant it when I said that I think you should do what interests you the most."

"What interests you the most, Harry? What do you want to be seeing yourself doing in twenty years?"

"Honestly?"

"Yes, please."

"I want to live as normal a life as possible, which includes having a family. I also will want to protect that family, so I will get the best training I can get. If I don't make it into auror training, then I'll get it some other way."

"I do want to understand magic better," Hermione said. "For that, I need Runes, Arthimancy, and Spell Building, plus practical work in Charms." She sighed. "We'll figure out some way to start a Green movement and a rights movement. I promise."

"Fair enough."

"So, more cooking?"

"How about we send Remus out for take-out."

"We haven't had Chinese in a while." Hermione pulled out some take-out menus. She was till explaining some of the dishes to Harry when Dobby reappeared, saying that Winky had agreed to work at Potter place. The Potter elves had requested that they be permitted to address Harry as 'Master Harry', and had agreed to accept Winky and Dobby.

While Hermione checked to see who would be staying for dinner (they all would be there, plus Moody would be coming), Harry heard a noise by the window. He saw that it was Hedwig, who had brought a note back from Ron. Harry ducked into the dining room and showed Hermione, and then took Hedwig up to the guest room. Hermione joined him there a few minutes later.

"Well," Hermione said, "what does he have to say?"

Harry took a deep breath and looked. "He says his scores haven't arrived yet, and then he just says. . ."

"Well?"

"He said, **'Is that all the two of you have to tell me?'**"

"Well, we do have more to tell him now," Hermione said.

"Let me try and write him a note that won't upset him too much."

Hermione looked doubtful but only said, "So he doesn't know what he'll be doing, either."

"True," Harry agreed. He turned the letter over. "Actually, he started another letter over here. If he doesn't make the scores for auror, he wrote alternative courses on the back."

Hermione took and turned the parchment over. "Charms, Care, Defense, the Ministry Prep course, Transfiguration, and the Living with Muggles course. Well, his father will be happy about that."

"True. How does this sound. 'Ron, when we wrote yesterday morning, we didn't have anything else to tell you for certain. Now, we do. We don't know how things will work out, but we're going to try things out as a couple. We both hope you know that we are still your close friends. There is likely to be more news about other things. We wish we could put them in a note, but we can't, since owls are being intercepted. We hope to see you soon, but if we can't, we'll try to get you a note through other means. We both hope you get your scores soon.' Then we can sign it, 'your friends, Harry and Hermione'."

Hermione thought about that. "Maybe you should rewrite in just the first person. I don't think he'll want to see our names together. And what other news are you thinking about, and what other channels?"

"It looks like you're not only still going to America, but that I might come along, too, not to mention the info about Voldemort and visiting Potter Place. And we can ask Tonks or Remus to pass a note to Ron."

"Good points."

"Once we send that, Ron is going to be very hurt, and angry," Harry said.

"I know," Hermione agreed sadly. "I hope it doesn't hurt our friendship with him, or with Ginny or Luna, for that matter."

"I don't think it will Luna, but it's hard to tell with Ginny," Harry said.

Hermione stepped up to Harry and hugged him. Harry hugged her back. They noticed that Hermione, only an inch shorter than Harry, fit with Harry in some very nice ways. They pulled slightly apart, and then kissed very deeply.

"Wow," Harry said three minutes later.

"Wow," Hermione agreed.

And then they kissed again.

The next few days passed by in a whirl. The only events of note in Harry's view, besides a slight escalation in the physical affection between himself and Hermione, were notes from Ron, Ginny, and Luna. Luna's was very happy for Harry and Hermione. Ron and Ginny's were bland, almost chill, but at least they weren't hostile.

Ron's was the worst, because he had not scored nearly as well as Harry. While he had, to his own and nearly everyone else's surprise, managed to achieve every one of his O.W.L.s, his only O was in Defense, and his only E's were in Charms and Care. He therefore had no chance at auror training, and was very uncertain as to what career path he might even prepare for, other than that it was likely to be with the Ministry.

Harry barely noticed two attempts by Voldemort to break into his mind. Harry drove him out easily. He didn't notice that Voldemort had picked up some of Harry's surface thoughts, such as his impending trip to Potter Place and Godric's Hollow.

Chapter VII

Thursday, July 25, 1996

Dumbledore had left a multi-use portkey with Hermione. They activated it at 9:00 am, and found themselves in a glade.

"Welcome, Master Harry, Miss Hermione," a voice said from behind them.

"Good morning, Toby," Harry said. "Where exactly are we?"

"Toby only knows magical places," the elf replied. "Toby only knows Potter Place is located near something called Offa's Dyke."

"The Welsh side," Hermione mused, looking around. "How large is the estate?"

"Manor is on island in stream, perhaps seventy-five yards across at the widest, and hundred-eighty yards long," the elf replied. Gesturing, he went on, "Woods are four by nine miles. To the west to the hills are magical tenants, including the one Master James gave to Mister Remus to use for his lifetime. Woods is also surrounded by magical tenants, but they change to Muggle towards Godric's Hollow."

"Where's that?" Harry asked as they followed the elf down a twisting path, since he and Hermione would be visiting the site near the Hollow later on.

"Fifteen miles downstream," the elf answered. "Master James' cottage was this side of Godric's Hollow, maybe fourteen miles from the Manor."

"Would you know why my parents stayed at the cottage instead of the Manor?" Harry asked. "I would have thought some place like the Manor would be heavily charmed and warded."

Toby looked torn, looking at Harry and Hermione with agitation. "Is it a family secret?" Harry asked.

Toby nodded. Harry put an arm around Hermione's waist. "You may speak in front of Hermione," Harry said.

Toby smiled and bowed. "Thank you, Master." Hermione frowned, but said nothing. She had agreed to observe the elves, and not to argue with them. Yet. "The Charm used to hide the Master and his family would have interfered with the ancient wards of the Manor, or so Toby was told."

At that point, they came to the edge of the woods. Some ten yards away was a small stream, perhaps some six feet across and shallow enough to have a few rocks sticking above the swift current. The trio moved across the bridge.

Harry stopped just on the bridge. "Did you feel that?" Harry asked, excited.

"It was like I was pushing through a barrier of warm air, but air that was somehow solid," Hermione said.

"Really?" Harry said. "It felt like . . . like I walked through a barrier, and suddenly all the colors got just a touch brighter."

"The wards is recognizing the Blood of the Family, Master Harry," Toby said. "None other but those loyal to the House of Potter may enter, unless a member of the Master's Blood invites them."

"They would probably have been better off trusting to these wards than the Fidelius," Harry said. He looked up at the pile in front of him. "On the other hand, it's hard to imagine something this size as a home."

The Manor House of Potter Place consisted of nine structures connected together around a common courtyard, all on foundations, Toby informed them, dating back to at least the mid-1100s, although all the structures but one were newer than that. The main gatehouse, the stables, and the great hall

dated from the early to mid-1200s. The oldest part was likely a stone structure, now mostly used for storage, that had held the medieval kitchen scullery, and elves' quarters. There were five residential parts of the structure. Two were from the late 1400s to mid-1500s, one was from the mid-1600s, and the final two were from the early and late 1800s respectively. Only the last structure had anything close to modern plumbing, for despite having been finished in 1896, the interior had been redone in the mid-1950s. The residential blocks were mostly commonly called by their dates.

There were many paintings, and Harry recognized some of them from his run-in with the Mirror of Erised in his first year. All the portraits welcomed him, and hoped he would be back soon. Hermione had been astounded to find five large libraries, all with several thousand volumes, and three museum/muniment rooms. Of course, both Harry and Hermione would both have acknowledged that astonishment was their main reaction to the Manor complex. Hermione, who had had a phase when she had been very interested in medieval stained glass, had almost swooned over the stained glass in the small chapel that made up the eastern end of the great hall. Harry had been impressed by the muniment room that held a collection of brooms, papers about Quidditch, and the prototypes of the first magical snitch, created by Bowman Wright, of nearby Godric's Hollow.

The portrait of Wright was pleased that Harry had heard of him. Wright, it turned out, was a cousin, and the then-head of the Potter family had been his patron.

Hermione and Harry had interrupted their tour to eat lunch in the kitchen with the elves, much to the elves' excitement and embarrassment. Finally, however, around 2:00, Harry and Hermione took out their portkey and left for the site of the Potters' cottage just outside of Godric's Hollow.

There really was not much to see. There were woods on the far side of the stream behind them, a country lane which looked as if it might have been paved for the first time only within the last year or two ran ahead of them, and there were orchards beyond the lane. A small two-lane road ran just on the other side of the village, which was less than a quarter mile away. They were standing in a small open field, with orchards on either side, and the tops of a few other cottages could just be seen.

"I guess there's not much to see," Harry said.

"No," Hermione agreed, "we might as well go home."

"But I have waiting here all day to welcome you back to where everything began," came a voice from the trees to their left.

Harry swiftly turned and placed himself in front of Hermione, his wand drawn.

"Are you going to introduce me to your friend, Harry?" Voldemort asked. Hermione, of course, needed no introduction. In the country sunlight, Voldemort looked horrendous. He looked like an alien out of a bad sci-fi movies, too reptilian to be believed.

But there was no doubt that he was real, and, Hermione and Harry saw, he was flanked by two other wizards: Severus Snape and Peter Pettigrew.

"I think she knows who and what you are, Tom," Harry said. Now that Voldemort had revealed himself, Harry had to fight to keep the pain from his scar under control. "Still, Tom Marvolo Riddle, or Lord Voldemort, former Head Boy, please meet Hermione Granger, future Head Girl."

"If I had know any Muggle-borns like you," Voldemort said, "I still would have hated Muggles, but perhaps my approach would have been slightly different."

Hermione said nothing, but made a slight bow to him.

"No offense," Harry said, "but I have to admit I never thought I'd see you out in the daylight."

"The sun does feel unpleasant to my current form, but that is a matter of little consequence," Voldemort answered. "With the proper inducement, many a creature of darkness may be seen

during the day." He raised his left hand, and Harry and Hermione saw dozens of dementors start to gather at the edge of the trees.

"Is this all of them?" Harry asked, puzzled. "I thought there'd be a lot more than this."

"The dementors had an internal disagreement about following me, after giving up the assured if unsatisfactory meals of Azkaban. They had a short period of civil strife, where each side tried to eat the other. The winners decided to follow me."

"You're lucky the winners didn't decide to eat you," Harry retorted.

"They are not so foolish. They, the winners at least, know that I shall triumph in the end."

While Voldemort spoke, Harry had whispered to Hermione without turning his head, "If he and I both get a hex off, hold on to my belt."

"Right," she murmured back.

"So what next?" Harry asked Voldemort.

Voldemort whipped out his wand, shouting, "AVADA KEDAVRA!"

Harry shouted "Expecto Patronum!" at the same moment. The green flash hit the stag, which charged through the green light, discharging it and crashing into and through Voldemort, making him scream in agony and knocking him back a few steps, but it did not make him fall. The stag's path had also recreated the magical connection between the wands as it disappeared into Voldemort. As the magical paths were created, Harry said, "Are you with me, Hermione?"

He felt a tug on his belt. "Show him how a great wizard really acts, Harry," Hermione said simply, but with total faith.

"I will," Harry promised, watching the cage of phoenix song form from their wands. "You're inside the lines of power?"

"I am, and it's beautiful," Hermione said, a bit in awe at the power being generated.

"Do you think this will save you, boy?" Voldemort demanded.

"Well, it's working so far," Harry retorted. "What about it, Peter? Ready to pay back your debt?"

"Debt? What 'debt'?" Pettigrew demanded as he stalked around the growing cage of phoenix song. "Yes, you stopped Sirius and Remus from killing me, but you wanted to feed me to the dementors! That hardly creates that powerful a debt, you know! As far as I'm concerned, I payed back all I owed when I tried to get the Master to use someone else's blood. That was far and beyond anything I needed to do."

While Pettigrew was continuing his shouting, Harry asked Hermione softly, "Can you reach the portkey?" This was a broken comb with most of the teeth missing, now in Harry's back pocket.

"Yes, why?"

"If you can, pull it out and activate it when I tell you to."

"Only if we're both going."

Harry spoke to Snape next. "I suppose you're a lost cause, too, Professor?"

Snape, seeing what the pair was up to, gave vent to a three minute tirade.

"If you can get the portkey in your wand hand, touching the wand, then yes, we can both go," Harry hissed under Snape's harangue.

"Got it," Hermione murmured.

"No one and none of this will save you, Potter," Voldemort declared. "Either I shall break the connection this time, and kill you both, or you will break it, and my servants will stun you and feed

you to the dementors." He ginned. "They long for you, Potter. They have wanted to feast upon you for years."

"Well, if they feed on happiness, they wouldn't get much out of you and your lot, would they?" Harry retorted.

Voldemort scowled. "You haven't won so easily this time, have you, boy? I'm not as weak as I was when I was first reborn!"

"Keep telling yourself that, Tom. I haven't tried." Harry wrinkled his nose in disgust. "Who was the last person you had the guts to kill yourself, Tom? Malfoy? I'd just as soon not see an echo of that prick."

"Ha!" Voldemort shouted. "Do you have anything to say before I kill you and your lover, boy?"

"Hermione, do you love me?"

"Yes, I love you, Harry."

"Would you like to see how much I love you?"

Hermione was a bit stumped at that, considering their situation, but said, "Ah . . . sure. . . ."

Voldemort took a deep breath to send a curse down the connection. "AVADA. . . ."

Harry was half a beat ahead of him, however, "Expecto Patronum!" Again, the stag shot down at Voldemort, even bigger and brighter than ever before. This time, it barreled through Voldemort, knocking him onto his back screaming in pain, and then turned and began to gore the evil sorcerer with its antlers, which also broke the cage of phoenix song.

"Portus!" Hermione shouted, and the pair disappeared.

The portkey took them back to Hermione's house. After she reset the wards, she called the minders' phone number and reported.

Moody and Remus were there in three minutes. Dumbledore was there in five. The couple repeated their story twice. Dumbledore then left them and returned with Shacklebolt and Tonks, and made them repeat the story a third time. Kingsley nodded, and he disappeared to lead a team to check on Godric's Hollow.

Waiting for Kingsley or Tonks to return, Dumbledore conjured them all some tea, and they sat around the Grangers' dining room table.

Harry was squirming the whole time, because of the looks he was getting.

"Is there a problem?" Remus asked.

"What? No," Harry said.

"Are you sure? Do you have an itch in, well, a delicate place or something?" Remus teased.

"Remus!" Dumbledore scolded.

"Why is everyone looking at me like you are?" Harry asked.

"Well, lad," Moody said, "I don't know about the others, but I am damned impressed. I was in two firefights in the first war where Voldemort fought. I . . . I just don't have the words to say how impressed I am with what you did."

"Should I ask what thought provided you with a Patronus like that?" Remus asked.

Harry placed his hand over Hermione's. "I wouldn't have thought I would need to tell any of you." Hermione put her head down to cover her blushes, her mane of hair covering her face.

"Miss Granger . . . Hermione," Dumbledore said kindly, "surely you don't object to what Harry said?"

"No, Headmaster," Hermione whispered, "but Harry and I are both . . . private people."

"I believe I can assure you that this information shall not be printed in The Prophet," Dumbledore said.

"I must say, I never would have thought about using a Patronus against Voldemort," Remus said. "It does make sense, since you at least can drive him away with feelings of love, but I never would have thought of it."

"I have to confess that neither would I have," Dumbledore admitted, "and I should have. That was likely the only thing you could have used to beat this attack, Harry. Anything else may have resulted in your deaths. Well done."

"It drove him off," Harry said. "It may have even really hurt him, but I didn't destroy him, and that's what I have to learn to do. I have to destroy him; I have to kill him."

Moody placed a gnarled hand on Harry's shoulder. "We'll help you figure it out, lad, I promise."

Harry managed a smile. Hermione, despite the group at the table, put her arm around Harry and put her head on his shoulder. "I was impressed at how cool you were, Harry."

"You were, too," Harry pointed out.

"I just had to follow your directions and not panic," Hermione said dismissively.

"Tell me," Dumbledore asked her, "how did you feel when you first saw Voldemort?"

Hermione made a face. "Disgusted."

"You see a horrific being, knowing that it is a mass murderer, who wants you, your family, your friends, your world, and at the moment your boyfriend all dead, and all you can feel is disgusted? That says a lot about your courage."

"Hermione is only afraid of one or two things that I know of," Harry said, "and someone like Voldemort is not going to be one of them."

"I don't think I want to know," Hermione tried to growl, but she was smiling too much to pull it off. Harry leaned over and whispered in her ear, "Heights and a bad grade."

"Git," Hermione said.

"You both kept a cool head, and got yourselves out of the situation by thinking calmly and coolly. You both did well."

At that point, Shackbolt and Tonks showed up with a shaken and bruised Snape between them. "Pettigrew?" Harry asked.

"He died under Crucio," Snape said. He had obviously suffered the same.

"It looked like a heart attack," Tonks put in as Snape nearly collapsed, closing his eyes in pain.

Hermione nudged Harry's shoulder. She jerked her chin at Snape, and then got up and went to the kitchen, making certain that she left the swinging door set to open.

"Thank you, Professor," Harry said to Snape.

Snape opened one eye. "For what, Mister Potter?"

"You picked up on what Hermione and I were doing, and covered for us perfectly."

"So I did. You are welcome. You both did moderately well. When you left, the Dark Lord was dizzy for several moments, perhaps three minutes. After, he was more furious than I had ever seen before, which is saying a great deal. Then he saw that your Patronus had totally scattered those

dementors, and he went berserk, venting most of it on Pettigrew."

"Well, Pettigrew didn't help himself by admitting he had tried to influence his Master," Harry said.

"True. And I hope you do not feel guilty about this, Potter. Pettigrew shot his mouth off and refused to disappear, either before or after you broke the connection. You gave him one last chance to switch sides, and he refused to take it."

Harry nodded as Hermione came back in with more tea for the adults, and a double shot of brandy for Snape. He eyed the glass, lifted the snifter and examined the liquid. He nodded. "Thank you, Miss Granger, and my compliments to your father's taste."

"Is there anything else you need to tell us before I take you to the Infirmary?" the Headmaster asked.

Snape held out his arm, and pulled up the sleeve. There was a large patch of raw flesh exposed, with no skin on it at all. "The Dark Lord said that he had no further use for me, unless I were to kill you or Potter here. I have no idea what his plans are, but I am certain you all know that he will be back. He has certainly not given up. He might attack tonight, he might launch a plot which takes years to materialize. There is no way to tell."

"That we do know, alas," Dumbledore agreed.

Neither Hermione nor anyone else told the Grangers about the end of their sightseeing trip. They did arrange for the Grangers to make a trip to Potter Place Saturday afternoon.

The teens spent Friday morning shopping for clothes and suitcases suitable to the trip to America, accompanied by Tonks and Remus. There were no reports of Voldemort by any of the Ministry or Order agents. It looked like the situation would be up in the air until Voldemort made his next move, unless they got lucky.

After returning to the Grangers, Harry and Hermione shoed the older couple away, promising to stay in and study.

"And what exactly are we going to be studying?" Harry asked with a tolerant smile as he chopped up a combination of greens, carrots, celery, tomato, walnuts, and a boiled egg into a salad for Hermione's lunch.

"I'll be right back," Hermione said. Harry shrugged and finished Hermione's salad, and then made himself a hot corned beef, egg, and melted Cheshire cheese sandwich.

Hermione swept into the room a few moments later, looking very nervous. She laid a large book face down on a far counter and picked up her salad and a glass of Bulgarian yogurt. "Study the section I marked with the green bookmark," Hermione said. "If you're interested, you can demonstrate after lunch. Then maybe I'll try the section I marked with the orange bookmark." She fled back upstairs.

"That was odd," Harry said aloud. He shrugged and finished building the sandwich, adding some sweet pickle relish he had found in the back of the fridge. Harry poured himself a large glass of milk, and then went over to retrieve the book.

He swayed, a bit dizzy, when he saw it was a large, illustrated edition of The Joy of Sex. He tentatively opened to the green book mark. "Oh . . ." he managed to say, nervously.

More than a little unnerved, Harry opened to the other bookmark. "Oh . . . Merlin," he whimpered. He rushed through his lunch.

Chapter VIII

Harry sat up in Hermione's bed and put his glasses on. He noticed that the room was still brightly lit, so it was still mid-to-late afternoon. A glance at Hermione's alarm clock confirmed that they had hours before they had to get dressed.

Harry turned and looked at Hermione's prone, napping figure. He drank in the sight of her bare skin.

Harry had led a very sheltered life in many ways. Still, Dean had shared some art books with his dorm mates, and Fred and George had loaned Ron some Muggle men's magazines. Therefore he had had a general idea of what girls looked like. It had not prepared him for the sight of Hermione, nude on her bed, in the bright sunshine streaming in from the back window, let alone the view of her when he had entered her room several hours before.

Except for a few hugs from Hermione and his horrible date with Cho, Harry had had no tenderness in his life until he had come here to the Grangers'. Not even his recent snogging adventures with Hermione had prepared him for what they had done for each other that afternoon.

Harry therefore did not know what to think, or what to feel, as he sat there looking at his best friend, his girlfriend, and now in many ways his lover. He did know that if any dementors had shown up at that moment, his Patronus would stomp them into the ground. He felt like he could rip Voldemort apart with his bare hands, should he even threaten Hermione with so much as a glance.

Harry let his eyes wander, from the incredibly messy head of hair, down the perfect skin of her back, to the taut lushness of her tush, the thin but well-formed legs, to the perfect feet and cute little toes and back again. Hermione rolled over, and Harry couldn't resist any longer. He leaned over and kissed Hermione's nose.

She opened her eyes. "Hi," she said softly. Harry had never heard her use that tone of voice before.

Harry smiled. "Hi."

"Any regrets?" she asked.

"Not a one," Harry answered. He kissed her gently. "I love you, Hermione. Thank you."

"For what?"

"For always loving me; for always caring about me. For believing in me."

"What?" she asked, seeing the serious look on his face.

"Nothing. . . ."

"Come on, Harry."

"I was just thinking about how of all my friends, only you and Luna have always tried to stick by me."

"I've tried," Hermione answered. "Is that one reason why you thought you might date Luna before you turned your attention to me?"

Harry flushed. "It wasn't like that."

"I know. I shouldn't tease. Neither of us is very good at it, and I'm even worse at it than you."

Harry smiled and shrugged. "Then yes, since I thought you were unavailable, that's one reason why I thought about dating Luna. I'm sure you would both deny it, but you two are more similar than either of you would admit."

"Well, we approach things very differently, but we both have a passion for truth and knowledge, even if we consider what they are somewhat differently." Hermione shrugged, which made her small breasts move in ways that delighted Harry to no end. "We made friends in June. Well,

actually, I made friends with her. She was always trying to be nice to me, and I wasn't always nice to her."

Harry then told Hermione about how Luna's Housemates treated her. Hermione was appalled. "We'll have to think of something to help her," she finally said. By now, she and Harry were intertwined on the bed.

"As long as we don't make things worse," Harry said, going back nibbling her neck.

Hermione decided not to worry about Luna for a while.

Crookshanks lifted his heavy head ten minutes later, as he heard his mistress laughing and shouting in pleasure. He put his head down and went back to sleep. Humans, he had always thought, were very odd creatures, but apparently these two had finally learned what was important.

Saturday, July 27, 1996

The Grangers stared at the huge pile of buildings before them. "You own that?" Dan finally gasped.

"Apparently," Harry said, embarrassed.

"Harry, that's twice as large, and a lot better looking, than Malfoy Manor," Tonks said.

"Thanks, I think," Harry replied. He turned to Remus. "You've been here before, right?"

"Oh, yes. Many times." He shook his head. "Both sets of your grandparents, and most of your extended family were staying here during the last war, because the wards are very strong. They only came out for James and Lily's wedding. The wedding and the reception went off well, but James' parents hosted a supper that evening, hoping to get to know Lily's family better. James and Lily had already left on their honeymoon, of course. Sirius, Peter, and I came back here, to set up pranks on James and Lily's suite. Petunia and Vernon refused to attend the dinner, of course. The Death Eaters attacked and killed everyone. Twenty-seven wizards and witches, fifteen Muggles. I can only say that they took out an even dozen of the Death Eaters. James and Lily hated coming here after that, and that was the last time I was here." Tonks stood behind Remus and wrapped her arms around him. She hugged him tightly.

"This is going to be a happy place," Harry stated determinedly. The others looked at him. "Life should be happy. I'm tired of running. All my life I've been looking for a home. This is going to be it." The wards around the island flared pure white.

"It seems like the Manor agrees," Remus said, a bit in awe.

"Come on," Harry stated. "Let me show you my home."

The tour lasted all morning. To Harry and Hermione's surprise, there were three family ghosts, none of whom had showed themselves on their previous visit. They now introduced themselves, and added their own insights to the tour. One was his paternal grandfather, killed at the dinner he had hosted for James and Lily's wedding. While the other two ghosts had feared death to the point of not leaving the Earthly plane, Henry Potter had not left because of his anger.

He controlled his anger well, however, and over lunch Remus, with some help from Harry and Hermione, filled the ghost in on some recent history. Afterwards, Harry met with his grandfather, and told him about the Prophecy, and some more personal observations of his battles and life. Hermione took her parents to one of the libraries, while Remus took Tonks on a more personal tour.

"You probably know little about me as a person," Grandfather Henry said, after Harry was done and he had thought about things for a bit.

"True, sir," Harry said. "About the only things I knew were seeing you in a magical mirror once,

and that you and Grandmother took in Sirius when he left home."

The ghost nodded. "You probably don't believe that 'blood will out', do you?"

"Not as such," Harry answered. "Still heredity and environment together determine a lot, don't they?"

"They do. Sirius could have gone either way, and whether that was nature or nurture, or knowing his parents a lack of nurture, I couldn't say. Your father was a noble, if some what arrogant, pup, and if Sirius had been Sorted into Slytherin instead of making friends with your father and then being Sorted into Gryffindor, he might have turned bad. I wasn't going to let him slip away, though, so we let him in. Still, that wasn't what I meant. I opposed your parents' marriage."

"What? Why? Because she was Muggle-born?"

The ghost nodded. "I was wrong, of course. Still, the habits of the past are difficult to overcome. I was a very powerful wizard, Harry. So was your father. When I got to know your mother after I was killed, I learned that in some very interesting ways, she was powerful, too. But you, you are two steps above us all. There probably aren't a half-dozen witches on Earth who could add to your blood. This Muggle-born girl you're with, she isn't one of them but she seems like a fine witch, powerful and brilliant."

"She is," Harry stated.

"Well, you're both young yet. She may or may not be the one you end up with, but if she is, I won't complain. I just wanted you to know that."

"Thank you, sir." Seeing his grandfather hesitate, Harry asked, "What is it?"

"I liked Sirius, do not misunderstand me. I did rather wish that James was closer to Remus. I was quite shocked to learn . . . well, you do know, right?"

"That Remus is a werewolf? Yes." Harry's face contorted. "It came as a big shock to us, too."

"My maternal grandfather was a werewolf," Henry said.

"Really?" Harry was surprised.

"My other grandfather and father gave him shelter here. The room is still available, should Remus need it."

"There's a potion now that helps a bit," Harry said. "Did my father know about this?" Henry nodded, and Harry understood why his grandfather and his father had been more tolerant of werewolves than most others in the magical world. "What did you think about Pettigrew?"

Henry shrugged. "A useless little tag-a-long. Is he the one that betrayed James and Lily?"

"He was. Voldemort just killed him the other day for not being subservient enough."

Henry snorted. "It is difficult to believe that he couldn't be subservient enough. It says more about the Dark Lord's sadism than it does Pettigrew's nature." Henry forced a smile. "So, tell me son, do you feel like learning some of the secrets of Potter Place?"

Harry smiled. "Yes, Grandfather."

"What is it you have there?" Dan asked. Emma was a bit overwhelmed by the grand dining hall and the gold dining service to pay much attention. Hermione and Tonks were keeping an eye on Remus. The day of the full moon was approaching. While it would take place during the daylight hours, and therefore did not involve a full transformation, it would be a painful time for him.

"Plans to partially modernize some of the rest of the Manor," Harry said.

"Partially?"

"Well, electricity won't work, especially on a large scale," Harry pointed out. "We wouldn't need gas, either. What we do need is some decent plumbing outside this building. It turns out everything was laid in, except the actual fixtures. Toby and Dobby assured me that since the plumbing and drains were taken care of, they could do the fixtures in about two weeks' time, if I asked them to."

"Are you going to?"

"Of course," Harry said. "Hermione?"

"Yes?" Hermione and Emma looked at him.

"If you and Mrs. Granger would be interested, after dinner Brailu could show you where all the toilets and bathrooms are going to be." He held up some Muggle brochures. "You could double check what's going in."

"You don't want to?" Emma asked.

"I don't think it matters, as long as it works, but if you'd like to check on eighty-four toilets, ninety sinks, thirty-three bathtubs and . . ." Harry frowned. "Twelve bidets? What are bidets?"

"I'll tell you later," Remus said, as Emma and Tonks snorted in laughter.

"Right."

"Will you stop pacing?" Emma told her husband.

"No."

"Then will you tell me why you are pacing?"

Dan scowled. "Emma, I know Hermione is a solid, intelligent young woman, but look at all this! I mean, a gold dinner service!"

"It made the food grow cold fast, didn't it?" Emma mused. "I believe we used it since Remus is allergic to silver."

"That's not the point! Whose head wouldn't be turned by this place?"

"Harry's and Hermione's," she said firmly. "Hermione did say that in many ways, as amazing as this place is, it is somewhat pedestrian compared to Hogwarts."

"That must be some place."

"I take it that it is. And as for Harry, he is incredibly pleased about all this, of course, since he was treated so poorly by his relatives, but when he gets used to this, I would imagine he'll think of this place as a trust to pass on."

"Exactly. To pass on to his children, which he and Hermione might be working on!"

"Nonsense," Emma stated, although she had some doubts. "Trust our daughter, Dan."

He sighed. "I don't have much choice, do I?"

"No, you don't."

"How was the great toilet expedition?" Remus asked Tonks.

"Interesting," Tonks admitted. "Emma has excellent taste, and so did Lily and her mother-in-law." She looked around the small bedroom they were in. "Not the luxurious suite I expected."

"This was my room when I stayed here," Remus said. He pointed at three photos on the wall.

Tonks went and looked. "You, Sirius, and James look happy."

"Doesn't Peter?" Remus asked, curious.

Tonks looked carefully. "It looks like he's hiding behind the frame in this one."

Remus came over. "Come out, Peter," he called. "You did something horrible, but you've paid the price. In this room, at least, you are welcome." The stout, short, blond peeked out, and when he saw Remus smiling he looked at his friends in the photo. All three waved him over, and in all three photos, they took up their positions of friendship for the first time in years.

"Are you nervous, Harry?" Hermione called from the other side of the open bathroom door.

"Actually, I am," Harry admitted.

"Harry, whatever we might do, we're not doing THAT tonight. I'm not quite ready for it."

"Alright. . . ."

"Harry . . . we know we love each other. Why are we nervous?"

"I don't know. Maybe because as much as we've always cared for each other, we were never very physical." He paused, and then said, "You do know, don't you, that you were the first person who ever kissed me that I remember?"

"Really?"

"Really. Except for a rather bone-crushing hug from Hagrid and a few motherly hugs from Mrs. Weasley, and of course those few wet emery-board kisses of Cho's, you're the only person who's ever been physically affectionate with me."

Hermione poked her head through the door. "Not even Luna or Ginny?"

"Not Luna, and I don't remember Ginny ever hugging me or anything. Hermione?"

"Yes?"

"Were lonely before you came to Hogwarts?"

"Yes and no. I was lonely at first, because I never had anyone to play with. I imagine they didn't like me for the same reasons you and Ron disliked me."

"I never disliked you, I swear," Harry said.

"If you say so. I didn't go to regular schools, though. I went to a private academy. I didn't have any real friends there, but we got along better than I did with the children who live around us in Norwich, or than I did at Hogwarts at first. But none of the children lived near us, so I didn't get to interact or play with them outside of school." She paused, and then said, "Tell me honestly. Whose idea was it to come after me that first Halloween?"

"Mine," Harry admitted.

"Who kept up the fight with me third year?"

"Ron," Harry admitted.

"Would you have honestly not talked to me because of the Firebolt?"

"Honestly? I probably wouldn't have for a few days, and then we would have drifted back together."

"Ron and I rub each other the wrong way," Hermione said, now coming into the bedroom wearing a light dressing gown. Harry was seated on the bed in his boxers. "I always hoped our fights would become witty banter and scintillating repartee, but they never did."

"We've never been all that witty or scintillating," Harry pointed out.

"No," Hermione admitted, "we haven't. I think we've always been so close that we haven't had to be. I feel comfortable with you, Harry. I feel safe. I feel . . . more myself when I'm with you than at any other time in my life. It's as if you complete me. I would never have gotten on Buckbeak with Ron. I would never have ridden a thestral except to follow you or to save you. I would never have led a crazed teacher into the Forbidden Forest, or faced a three-headed dog, flying keys, or a squad of Death Eaters for anyone except you." She dropped her robe. "I love you, Harry."

Harry dropped to his knees and hugged Hermione close. He kissed her belly. "I love you, Hermione."

Sunday, July 28, 1996

Six people quietly ate in the breakfast room of the newest section of Potter Place. Each wondered if the reason the other two couples were as silent-but-happy as their own couple was the same.

It was.

All three couples had spent a very satisfying evening in very comfortable beds, doing very pleasant things with and to each other. None wanted to break the happy silence, although Dan Granger was sorely tempted.

As three of the four adults sipped their second cup of coffee, and Remus and the teens sipped their second cup of hot chocolate, Harry finally broke the silence. "Mister Granger?"

"Yes, Harry?"

"Do you still want me to go to America with you?"

Dan held his coffee cup with both hands and thought about that question without looking at his wife or his daughter. "Why?" he finally asked, shifting the burden, "do you think you could stay here?"

"It may not be fully safe until Harry reaches seventeen," Remus pointed out.

"My grandfather disagrees," Harry said to Remus. He turned to Dan Granger. "But to answer your question, I would like to go with you. I've never really traveled. I'm just not sure you're as comfortable with the idea as you might have been when you first offered."

"True," Dan admitted. He finally glanced at his wife and daughter. "Somehow, I think I'm the only one with any concerns, and I know I can trust the two of you."

"Thank you, sir," Harry said.

"Thank you, Daddy," Hermione agreed.

Dan sighed. He had been out-manuevered. "When are we leaving this morning?"

"I need to talk with Coke and Dobby about the plumbing and the drains," Harry said. "An hour?"

They all nodded.

"Just one thing, Harry," Remus warned. "Dumbledore is likely to meet with you this afternoon, remember." Harry nodded. The possibility had been mentioned. "I think he might suggest you stay in Britain for those two weeks, and receive some extra training in dueling."

"That's the only reason why I would consider staying," Harry said, getting up.

Harry went off to talk with the elves. Emma, Hermione, and Tonks went off to look at some tapestries.

"Do you have any concerns beyond what any father of a teenage girl might have?" Remus asked.

"There is still this madman running about loose," Dan pointed out.

"True, but you're likely in more danger than Hermione."

Dan made a face. "I suppose all parents worry about their children. I was especially worried about how Hermione might find her way in your world. If she does settle down with Harry, well. . . ." He waved his hand around the room.

"Tell me, what do you think about Harry?" Remus asked.

Dan sighed. "I like him. He's not quite on Hermione's intellectual level, but hell, neither am I. Neither is Emma for that matter. However, Harry isn't an intellectual, either, like the three of us."

"No," Remus agreed. "Harry is very bright, but he's never going to be reading poetry, plays, or philosophy for fun. I don't know what he would do in the Muggle world these days, but a hundred years ago, he would have been on of those blokes from the upper-middle class or from the lower rungs of the gentry who went out and explored the Empire. I can easily see him popping up, one year in Kenya and three years later in Afghanistan or Tibet. He would have made friends with most of the locals, rescued a few missionaries from the others, mapped hidden valleys and the sources of rivers, and had fun doing it."

"I think you read to many Tarzan and Allen Quartermain books," Dan said.

"And Kipling, and Sir Richard Burton, and so much more, fiction and non-fiction," Remus agreed. "Now James, and Sirius for that matter, they would have done the same, but they would have had a wilder time and fathered children on every continent."

"Really?"

"Really, unless James had met someone like Lily then, too. She really settled him down." Remus smiled. "If Harry does maintain a relationship with Hermione, he will worship the ground she walks on. He will love, honor, and cherish her. He will help her in every way a lover and partner can."

"But?"

"But he will never be controlled by her, or anyone. As long as she knows that, and can live with it, they will be a terrifically happy couple."

"I suppose you're right." Dan sighed. It was tough being the father of a brilliant teenage witch.

Chapter IX

Dumbledore arrived at the Grangers to talk about summer training soon after they had come back from Potter Place. Harry met with him privately while Mrs. Granger made everyone a light lunch. He listened to everything Dumbledore had to say about the training he should undergo for the next two weeks instead of going to America with Hermione, and then Harry said, "Maybe."

"Harry. . . ."

"Professor, you can't keep jerking me around like this! I can't control when Voldemort scratches, messes up my life. All I can do is fight him. I would rather not be fighting you as well, but you're making things difficult."

"I had not anticipated acquiring the services of the tutors who are now available," Dumbledore said in his own defense.

"Be that as it may, I am certainly not thinking about leaving here until the Grangers leave on holiday."

"Granted," Dumbledore said. He would have preferred Harry train longer, but he knew by now Harry had reached his limit with being controlled like a small child.

"Second, if possible, I would like to stay at Potter Place."

Dumbledore thought about that. Finally, he said, "It will be a little inconvenient, but if Remus agrees to stay with you it is acceptable."

"And finally, Hermione stays with us when she returns from America. Tonks is welcome to chaperon."

"You don't want to go to the Burrow?"

"What I thought we could do is stay at Potter Place until the morning of the Thirty-first. Then we could go to Diagon Alley. Ron, Ginny, Luna, and Neville could meet us there, and we could spend the day together. Obviously, I'd pay for it. We can go to the station from there."

Dumbledore sat back in his chair and thought about that. Finally, he said, "Agreed. Do you anticipate leaving here for any more side trips?"

"I'm supposed to meet with Fred and George sometime this week. There might be . . . less chance of incidents if I went there than if they came here."

"True," Dumbledore admitted. "You may go Wednesday, Thursday, or Friday." He seemed to hesitate.

"What is it, sir?" Harry asked.

"The Hogwarts letters will be arriving the First of August. Professor McGonagall mentioned that she was thinking of Mister Weasley as the Quidditch captain. Do you agree?"

"Am I still banned?" Harry asked.

"Of course not."

Harry sighed. "I hope Ron doesn't kick me off the team, but yes, he should be captain. He knows a lot more about the game than I ever could."

"True," Dumbledore said, "however, he is not a leader, and you are."

"Well, people are willing to follow me, but that's not what's really needed in a Quidditch captain."

"Very well. She will also inquire if Mister Weasley wishes to stay a prefect. . . ."

Harry shook his head. "If that's for my benefit, please don't."

"Very well. Since your courses are set and you and Miss Granger have your books, the letters shall be largely pro forma, then." Harry nodded.

"Please stay on the property, or at least within the wards boundaries until Wednesday," Dumbledore concluded. "Remus is already being affected, and will likely be available before Tuesday evening. Tonks has to return to her regular duties for a while. There are watchers, in case of an attack, but it would be best if you stayed in, or at least nearby."

Harry agreed. When Dumbledore left the front room, he was replaced by Hermione. Harry explained what had happened, and then said, "But you look like you have something on your mind."

"Besides being disappointed about your not coming with us to America? Well, we both thought it likely the Headmaster would divert you. You made a good deal for us. As for the other, I just received a letter from Ginny. The good news is that she and Neville have agreed to start seeing each other."

"That is good news," Harry said. "I think they'd be good for each other."

"The bad news is Ron."

"The twins told him we are not just dating for certain but are . . . affectionate, and he's been sulking ever since, right?"

"Right. He's a fairly jealous person, as we both know." Harry nodded. "Ginny also thinks that he's worrying himself because he thinks Katie, or more likely you, will be named Quidditch captain, and that he'll get stripped of his prefect's badge. Which he should, since he did such a mediocre job at best. You should have been the prefect."

"I should have, but I told Dumbledore not to take the badge away from Ron. He wasn't a very good prefect, but he wasn't horrible. McGonagall's also named him the Quidditch captain. He'll find out Wednesday."

"You don't mind?" Hermione asked, slightly surprised.

"No," Harry said. "I have you."

Monday, July 29, 1996

While the teens were not to roam around the city, they were allowed to stroll around the immediate warded area around the Granger house. Hermione led Harry to the chemist's. She whispered in his ear before she sent him on in, and then she waited for Harry to run the errand.

Harry, still very red-faced, came out with a large heavy bag ten minutes later.

"Well?" Hermione asked as they hurried away.

"It could have been worse," Harry muttered.

"Really?" Hermione teased. "How?"

"Your parents could have been there."

Hermione smiled and led him back to the house.

"So, Harry," Dan called out jovially that evening, "what culinary delights have you for us tonight?" He was happy about Harry's staying in Britain, and did not really realize that Hermione would be staying at Potter Place afterwards, not the Burrow.

"Daniel," Emma reproved. They were sitting in the dining room, while Harry and Hermione were in the kitchen. There were certainly some lovely smells in the air..

Hermione came in and announced in her most upper-class accents, "Tonight for your approval, we have a French onion soup followed by a Stilton soufflé. We will then have a bitter greens and tomato salad with a garlic yoghurt dressing. This shall be followed by a duck with shallots. The wine will be a 1994 Taval rosé. The pudding is a pumpkin custard." Hermione gave her parents a playful curtsy.

"And why is the table only set for two?" Emma asked.

"Harry was trying to teach me to cook a soufflé," Hermione admitted. "We did four and they all fell. We've been snacking on them all day."

"They wouldn't have been good for that long after they were finished," Emma pointed out.

"I just wanted to get one right," Hermione admitted. "Harry did this one." She bounced out of the room.

"Since when has she bounced like Tigger?" Dan whispered.

"I think she just realized she's very much in love," Emma told him.

Dan did not enjoy the lovely dinner nearly as much as he had thought he would.

Wednesday, July 31, 1996

"Good morning, Harry. Did you sleep well?"

"Yes, Mrs. Granger. And you?"

"Very well. I see you're still up early."

Harry shrugged. "The usual?"

"Please. Happy birthday."

Harry smiled shyly. "Thank you."

Emma frowned. "I'm afraid we didn't get you a present yet. Is there anything you'd like?"

"You've let me stay, and I do realize that might not have been easy for you or for Mister Granger." Harry hesitated, then said, "You and the Weasleys have been very good to me." He looked off into space.

"What is it, Harry?"

"It was five years ago today that I learned I was a wizard. You can't imagine my life before then. There have been some very awful things that I've seen, that I've lived through, since then. As terrible as they are, I couldn't trade this life away to go back to that." He shuddered slightly. "Despite Voldemort and Death Eaters and everything, I sometimes think my worst nightmare should be that someday I'll wake up and this will all be a dream. I'll be eleven, and in the cupboard under the stairs again."

Harry suddenly flushed. "I'm sorry. I don't know why I went on like that. I never have before."

"It's alright, Harry," Emma said gently. "I understand, and I'm glad you told someone. We'll be late tonight, and we'll be bringing pizza and cake. Please, enjoy your birthday. Now, you let me fix your breakfast for once."

The Grangers left before 7:30. Harry quietly climbed the stairs to Hermione's room, where they had spent the night. Hermione still lay above her covers, dressed in shorts and a City of Norwich football jersey.

Harry sat the tray he had brought with him down, placed his glasses on her nightstand, and carefully

laid down. He brushed the hair out of her face, leaned over, and gently kissed her awake.

"Good morning," Harry said softly.

"Good morning, and happy birthday." Hermione kissed him gently.

Harry smiled and ran his fingers through Hermione's curls. "I really should cut my hair short," Hermione said.

"Well, you can if you really want to, but I love your hair," Harry said.

"Really? Why?"

"It's wild and beautiful."

"Flatterer. Have Mum and Dad left?"

"Yes, they have," Harry said, sitting up. Neither said anything, but each imagined what kind of hair any child of theirs might have. Both smiled, and then Harry stood.

"I didn't mean for you to leave!"

Harry stood and retrieved the tray. "Breakfast," he said simply.

Hermione smiled and attacked the bowl of cereal as soon as she had poured it.

"Hungry?" Harry asked.

Hermione smiled and pulled her jersey off. Harry's jaw fell open. "Harry," Hermione said in a pitying voice, "what did I have you buy on Monday?"

"The three largest boxes of condoms they had, and a large bottle of lubricant," Harry said, slightly embarrassed. "I think it will take a while to use a hundred and eighty condoms, Hermione."

"Perhaps. But I thought we should use one or two today."

"Really?"

"Really."

It was nearly two hours later. Harry and Hermione had just showered and were cuddling together. Both felt very shy.

Hermione finally said, "I hope you liked your present as much as I did."

Harry just kissed her forehead and hugged her. "I love you."

"I love you, too," Hermione said. "Did you get any other presents?"

"A few. They're in the other room."

"Then I suppose we should get dressed and look at them."

Tonks showed up in the middle of the afternoon. She told them that Remus was fine, and that she was going to be with Harry and Hermione until the Tenth. She, and the Grangers, eyed the young couple speculatively. Harry and Hermione, however, had five years of experience of looking innocent together, and so nothing was said.

Thursday, August 1, 1996

Remus showed up to escort Harry to Diagon Alley. Tonks stayed with Hermione, where they would do some of the very preliminary planning for moving the household.

"We're not going to the shop?" Harry asked.

"No," Remus said. "The contracts have to be notarized and witnessed. That means Gringotts."

Harry was surprised to see that Remus looked distressed. "Remus . . . you don't approve of what I'm doing?"

Remus shook his head. "No, no that's not it. Didn't you ever wonder about how we endorsed the Marauders' Map?"

"Not really, no," Harry admitted.

"The four of us thought about opening a joke shop. The idea came up in our Third year, and we planned many plans for the shop, and how we would take over Zonkos. James would be the finance man, Sirius the chief tester. Peter had a decent commercial background. All of us would have been involved with the manufacturing."

"What happened?"

Remus shrugged. "The war. The massacres increased between our Fourth and Fifth years. By the time our O.W.L.s arrived, we, or at least three of us, knew we would have to be involved with the fight. Peter took the death of the joke shop the hardest. Who knows, maybe being left in a lurch like that started him thinking he couldn't trust us."

A goblin Harry didn't know led them to a back conference room. The goblin looked surprised when Harry thanked him, using the name the goblin had mentioned. Remus added his thanks as well.

Fred, George, two goblins, two Ministry representatives, Mr. Japes, and Mr. Diggle were waiting for them. The actual signing only took ten minutes. Afterwards, George left with Japes, while the others dispersed, leaving Fred to hold back Harry for a talk.

"I'll wait in the lobby," Remus said.

"Harry. . . . Harry, we can't thank you enough," Fred said.

Harry smiled. "Make us money," Harry answered.

"Mum is very confused about you right now," Fred said.

"Why is that?"

"On the one hand, she has to admit that George and I know what we're doing, and that with your new backing, we might just become respected businessmen. It wasn't what she hoped for any of us, but," Fred admitted, "she's happy that we'll be respected anything."

"On the other hand?" Harry asked.

"Well, she had hoped you'd be spending more time at the Burrow. More importantly, she had some hopes that you and Ginny would get together," Fred answered frankly. "Now, she likes Neville, and thinks he's good for Ginny, but she would rather have had you."

"And how is Ron taking all this?"

"Badly," Fred said. "He's not angry or jealous about any of this anymore. He knows it's at least partially his fault. If he had moved faster and hadn't fought with Hermione as nastily as he did, he might have had a chance. So he's more angry at himself right now than with you or Hermione."

"That I believe," Harry agreed. "How is he taking this deal?"

"He's taking this badly, too," Fred admitted. "He was probably as shocked to learn about Potter Place as I imagine you were."

"How. . . ?"

"Mum and Dad. They learned you had found out about it and visited it, and explained it to us."

George and I know you well enough to know that you didn't know anything about it, because no one ever tells you anything useful until the last minute at best."

"That's true," Harry said bitterly.

"So, we, and Ginny, knew instantly what had happened and that you weren't keeping it from us. Ron is still trying to understand."

"He's my best friend," Harry said. "Does he really think this changes anything?"

"No, he doesn't," Fred retorted. "Little Ronnie's always felt inadequate. Since he doesn't think he can succeed, he doesn't try too hard. There is no such thing as a dumb Weasley. Percy might be a git with no common sense, but he and Bill were brilliant in school and like it or not, he's good at what he does, and so is Bill. Charlie was near the top of his class, and Ginny has been after her first year. I think George and I have proved we know what we're doing. I really think Ron is the most naturally smart of the lot of us, but he has no drive. Ron has to grow up a bit."

"Easy to say, hard to do," Harry pointed out.

"True. He started working at the store Sunday. We've hinted that, if he does a good job, we might let him open a Hogsmeade branch after he leaves Hogwarts." Fred shrugged again. "We'll see if it helps him at all."

"I know I can't buy his friendship," Harry said. "At least tell him I asked after him."

"I will." Fred hesitated and then asked, "Did you turn down Quidditch captain and prefect?"

"No and yes," Harry answered. "Dumbledore would have given them to me, to make up for how he treated me last year. If Ron doesn't go all Wood, he'll make a much better captain than I would. As for prefect," now Harry shrugged, "he didn't do that bad a job. I would have liked it last year, but I would hardly want to take it away from Ron."

"I don't think I'll tell Ron that," Fred said candidly. They both knew that doing so would turn the badges to ashes for Ron. "Still, we'll see if he can't turn Ron's remaining emotions against Dumbledore instead of against you and Hermione."

"What do you think about me and Hermione?" Harry asked.

Fred grinned. "She's too bookish and too interested in rules, but she's cute and we've always thought she'd be hot in the clench."

Harry grinned and said, "You'd best not tell Ron that, either."

"True."

"Where are we going?" Harry asked.

"Cogyddes," Remus answered. "Everything the witch or wizard might want for the kitchen, Muggle and magical in one store. Maybe you can make something fun for dinner tonight."

"Who's going to be there?"

"The Grangers, you, me, Tonks, Diggle, Dumbledore, and Moody."

"Why Diggle?" Harry asked.

"He's a Muggle solicitor as well as a magical one," Remus explained. "He's taking care of the paperwork for the Grangers' sales of their practice and house."

"Well, let's see what we can come up with."

Harry cooked and Hermione served that night. He had made a cream of asparagus soup, and then

made individual galettes -- buckwheat crepes from Brittany, which could be savory or sweet. Harry had assembled various cold meats, cooked mushrooms, chives and leeks, cheeses, and three different cheese sauces. They were deceptively light, and even Tonks had eaten three before realizing they were also filling.

Harry served them each a final galette of poached pear and honey topped with clotted cream and sugared cinnamon, and then he and Hermione retreated to eat up the rest of the food while the adults went over all the paperwork.

While it would only take a magical moving company a few hours to pack the Grangers' home, the ever-organized and orderly family spent the weekend before leaving on their vacation sorting through all their belongings, deciding what they might leave for charity and what they would need first in Australia. Harry spent the weekend looking through photo albums before they were put into their chronological order and making the family sandwiches. He enjoyed watching a happy family grow up before his eyes in the photos.

Dumbledore did stop by Sunday afternoon, to discuss the basic situation. The giants who had been leaning towards Voldemort made a deal to stay in western Asia. The dementors, to Dumbledore's disgust, were being allowed back to guard Azkaban, although under tighter rules. Voldemort still had a few Death Eaters, and yet Dumbledore apparently had some sort of pipeline to at least one or two of them.

Voldemort had already physically recovered from his run-in with Harry. He had personally attacked a small caravan site around midnight on Saturday, killing the four Muggle families camping there. It was a sign that he was not going to give up, even in the short-term. His remaining Death Eaters had been warned to be ready to start up attacks on Muggles and the families of the Muggle-born sometime in the autumn.

Despite some grumblings and misgivings on their part, the Grangers agreed to still carry out their move. There was little doubt that they would be high on Voldemort's hit list if they stayed.

Harry and Hermione had very little time together, except at night. Then, of course, while they could talk and snuggle to their hearts' content, they could do little else. Despite desiring to continue their physical intimacy, the two shy teens were still happy to be able to have what they had.

Both had hoped against hope that Harry would be allowed to travel to America with the Grangers. Professor Dumbledore, however, was now convinced that the final confrontation could come sooner rather than later. Therefore, he was determined to cram more coaching into Harry when he had the chance.

Soon, however, Friday morning arrived. Tonks and Harry rode to the airport with the Grangers. They had an early morning flight, and had to be at the airport by 7:30. Harry and Hermione shared a chaste embrace and soft kiss, and then she disappeared after her parents past the security check point.

"Come on, Harry," Tonks said sympathetically.

"Where are we going?" Harry asked. "We're not going back to the estate car?"

"No," Tonks answered. "Arthur Weasley's bought it, actually. Bill will pick it up later today. There's a special floo station here, believe it or not. We're going through to the Three Broomsticks. Remus has arranged a portkey from a private parlor there."

"And we're going home? to my home, I mean?" He didn't want to say the name in public.

"That's right, we're off to that little shack of yours."

Harry was surprised to see that Remus was not alone in the parlor. There was a mid-sized, lithe witch and Mood-Eye Moody with him.

"Well, Harry, this is Melissa Holly. She's a Muggle-born from New Zealand, and she'll be giving you some pointers in physical fitness and hand-to-hand defense. Mad-Eye, Tonks, and I are going to be seeing how much information we can pour into your head without it running out your ears." He smiled. "I'm betting it's more than any of us can guess."

"And if you can do that, you're in for a treat," Tonks teased.

Chapter X

Thursday, August 22, 1996
The 'Florida Mall', Orlando Florida

"I'm surprised you're not more interested in shopping, dear," Emma said to Hermione. "we've never been in a shopping center like this."

"Mum, over the last twelve days, we've been to Toronto, Niagra Falls, New York, Philadelphia, Washington, Williamsburg, Charleston, and now Orlando. In the three days we've been in Florida, we've rushed through some studios, Sea World, Epcot, and a winery for goodness sake. And this afternoon a mall? What could I possibly want in a mall?"

"Good question," Emma agreed. "Still, why don't you go over to that shop? It seems to be all kitchen gadgets, and perhaps you can find something that interests you."

"Well," Hermione replied, glancing over towards the store, "maybe I can find something for. . . ." Her eyes went wide, and then she let out a shriek that cut through the noise of the crowded mall. **"HARRY!"**

Harry turned around, and his eyes sought out the source of the scream. He smiled. He didn't move, he just braced himself. Hermione launched herself at him from six feet out, but he managed to catch her in his arms.

"Now ain't that just sweet," Tonks said to Emma as she came up to her.

"At least she should be more cheerful for a while," Emma agreed.

"Well, between missing Harry and knowing she's going to be missing you, why wouldn't she be a bit down at heart?" Remus asked, coming up on the other side.

"True," Emma agreed. "Is everything going well back home?"

"Fairly well," Remus said. "There have been no more attacks on Muggles. Riddle is gathering his forces, but if you could have seen how Harry responded to the special training these last thirteen days. . . ."

"Special High Intensity Training," Tonks muttered.

"What?"

"That's what Harry called it by Saturday night," Remus said with half a smile. "James would have been proud, and disappointed that I didn't get it straight away."

"Get what?" Emma asked. Tonks snorted.

"Think of the acronym," Remus replied.

"Special High . . . oh. Moderately clever," Emma agreed.

"Still, to go on about Harry . . . he is remarkable."

"Can you put it terms I can understand?"

Remus thought and then said softly, "In some ways, he has a long way to go. By the end of this next school year, though, he'll be well prepared in hand-to-hand, and even if he still might not have the range of spells an auror or hit-wizard might have, he already has a greater command of the spells he knows than anyone I've met, other than Dumbledore. He can defend himself against anyone, and he will protect Hermione. Hermione and his other friends will be given some of the same training. I know you can't help but worry, but believe me, barring really bad luck, they'll do well."

Harry and Hermione came over to them, hand-in-hand. Harry was smiling contentedly, while Hermione was now grinning broadly. Dan, who had stopped to stare at a store devoted to golf,

caught up to them.

"Here's where we say goodbye, princess," he said, hugging Hermione tightly.

"But. . . ."

"I know you thought our flight was Saturday. Your friends arranged an alternate mode of transportation. Your Headmaster also arranged for you and us to have some of that special paper Harry had last month, so we can stay in close contact."

Hermione said nothing. She just hugged both of her parents, and then Harry shook their hands. The group then broke apart quickly, Remus going with the Grangers and Tonks with the teens. Remus would give the Grangers their portkey in their hotel room, and then bring Hermione's things to the new hotel.

While Remus, Emma, and Dan went back out the front of the mall, Tonks, Harry, and Hermione went to the large side entrance. "Do you have a bathing suit?" Tonks asked. "Maybe we should get you a bikini," she suggested. "There's a pool at the motel."

"A suit, yes, a bikini, no," Hermione said.

"Ah. Harry don't you. . . ."

"Hermione should be comfortable," Harry said wisely.

They therefore stopped and Harry bought Hermione a conservative two-piece suit, a light beach robe, flip-flops, sun screen, and a straw hat. They also purchased large fruit smoothies and made their way out of the mall.

"Where's the car?" Hermione asked. The Grangers had arrived by taxi. "Or are we going by cab?"

"Remus will pay for a cab," Tonks answered. "Don't worry. We've got reservations at that Best Western right across the street."

"Have you ever been to a motel?" Hermione asked Harry as they crossed the busy street.

"Only when Uncle Vernon was fleeing the Hogwarts letters," Harry answered. Hermione had heard the story.

"Well, come along," Tonks called to them. They had to walk away around a security fence to get to the motel entrance. "Keep your questions for a while, and don't act like it's all new," she instructed. They followed her into the large lobby, and watched her check them in and Remus in. She took their room key-cards and led them past the dining room, outdoors past the pool, and to the rooms at the far end of the row of bedrooms. There were two buildings of bedrooms facing each other, their doors opening to the outdoors.

"Okay, in here," she pointed to the last room. She showed Harry how the key-card worked.

"Now, this is room in mine and Remus'. Hermione, Harry, you're in the room next door. There are two beds, and that's all I'll say on the subject. Any objections?" Dumbfounded, the two teens shook their heads 'no'. "There's a four hour time difference, so it's a bit past One o'clock but for us it's Five." She handed Harry a small vial. "Go to your room, use the bathroom if you need to, then take this diluted sleep potion. It will put you to sleep for less than thirty minutes. Your body clock should be reset then. I'll knock and Remus will bring over your things when he gets back, Hermione. Tomorrow, we'll see the so-called Magic Kingdom. Saturday, we go to Potter Place. Okay?"

The two teens agreed.

Harry and Hermione hurried to their room. Harry did not immediately take the potion. Instead, they merely held each other for ten minutes, glad they were together again. Only then did Harry do as he had been told. He managed to fight the potion for a few minutes as he lay on the bed, Hermione

partially laying atop of him.

When Harry finally drifted off, Hermione sat up and just sat on the edge of the bed for a few minutes, watching Harry sleep.

Compared to the Harry she had seen that first afternoon in July, he looked like he had been managing to get some sleep, although he still looked tired. She would be shocked to learn that Harry had been working out and practicing magic at least six hours every day since the morning she had left, and studying three hours on top of that. He had certainly earned a vacation.

Hermione realized that except for the two weeks he had spent alone in Diagon Alley and the time they had been taken to the World Cup, Harry had never been on a real vacation. She got up and changed into her suit and put on the robe. Even though it was amazingly hot and humid outside, the room was quite cool.

She sat in a chair and watched Harry sleep some more.

Remus came by just before 2:00. Harry woke up as Remus enlarged Hermione's baggage. He then cast a glamour on Harry's scar and handed him a plain baseball cap. When Harry didn't look too thrilled by the red cap, Hermione dug out one she'd bought on a whim at the winery the previous afternoon.

Harry preferred the dark blue cap. He ducked into the bathroom and came out in his speedo and flip-flops, wearing the Lakeridge Winery hat and sporting a pair of tinted wire-rim glasses.

"You've been working outside a lot," Hermione said. Harry had probably added ten pounds of muscle since he had first arrived at the Grangers and he was well-tanned all over.

"Tonks had me swimming laps in the stream for twenty minutes every afternoon, rain or shine," Harry answered.

There was nobody at the pool (which was surrounded by five sets of buildings with the motel rooms and the lobby/giftshop/restaurant), since all the other guests were out being good tourists or conducting their business. That evening, the pool area would be full. Harry and Hermione took a pair of chairs under one umbrella, and spent the afternoon catching up on what they had been doing and jumping in the pool every fifteen minutes or so to stay cool. Tonks did much the same.

Since Remus was so scarred, he stayed dressed in a very light and loose cotton outfit. He made certain that they all had plenty of drinks to stay hydrated. The quartet only abandoned the pool around 5:15, when the area started to fill up. They returned to their rooms and took quick showers. Afterwards, they walked back over to the mall, to eat at the California Cafe, a fancier experience than Harry was really used to, although he liked the food (Remus, however, grumbled that the wine was served far too warm).

Filled with good food, they made their way back to the motel. In the case of both couples, they fell asleep early (just after 10:00), but had been in bed since before 8:00.

Friday, August 23, 1996

The 'Magic Kingdom' opened early, so the quartet woke up even earlier. They had a light breakfast in the hotel's restaurant and took a bus that made the rounds of some of the hotels and the various Disney sites.

Thorough in this as in everything else, the Grangers had looked over a map and a list of attractions. Hermione didn't mention any of this to Harry, however. Instead, Harry was telling her of even more events since she had been gone, although it looked more like he was whispering endearments in her ear.

"The dementors have been behaving themselves," Harry said, "but the captured Death Eaters haven't been sent back to Azkaban yet, just the other criminals have been. Riddle's been reported in central Asia, working on a new power base of some sort."

"There are a few traditionally dark communities there, although most were rooted out the Soviets and their wizarding allies back in the 1930s," Hermione noted.

Harry almost remembered Binns mentioning that, so merely nodded. "Ginny sent a nice apologetic letter -- she and Neville are getting along really well -- but Ron's still a bit shirty. The twins told him about the investment, of course, and he's also heard more about the manor."

"I'm not surprised he didn't take that well," Hermione agreed.

"There will be quite a crowd there Tuesday," Harry said, his whisper softening.

"Who? Why?" Hermione asked. Then her eyebrows went up. "Luna? Ginny and Ron?"

"All three will show up on Monday," Harry said. "Tuesday night Ernie, Justin, Hannah, and Susan from Hufflepuff; Anthony Goldstein, Terry Boot, Lisa Turpin, and Padma Patil from Ravenclaw; all our year from Gryffindor, and even Blaise Zabini, Tracy Davis, and Daphne Greengrass are all coming. We're going to form the core of the new D.A."

"Are you alright with the Slytherins?" Hermione asked.

"The Headmaster arranged a meeting for me with Zabini," Harry answered. "Hopefully, with Malfoy and Bulstrode in prison, we'll even have some effect on Slytherin. Pansy-the-Pug and a few others will likely cause trouble, but Zabini feels he can win a majority of the House."

"What did Ron say about that?" Hermione asked.

"I don't know," Harry answered. "Bill was going to be telling him and Ginny the full plan today. He's probably already done it."

"Who will be overseeing us?"

"Remus, Tonks, Moody, Bill, and Fleur," Harry answered.

"It's a good thing you got all those toilets installed," Hermione teased.

"Grandfather told me that his wife was from a very traditional household, chamber pots only. She apparently fell in love with the idea of plumbing and drains at Hogwarts," Harry said with a shrug. "Anyway, you and I will have the master suite -- technically it does have two bedrooms. Ron, Ginny, Luna, and Neville will be in the same part of the manor, the 1896 wing. Remus and Tonks will, too. The other students are in the 1830 wing, along with Bill and Fleur. Moody wants to sleep in a different room every night for some reason."

"Constant vigilance?"

Harry shrugged. "I suppose."

"You seem a little wistful," Hermione pointed out.

"I just wish Dumbledore could have found some family who could have stayed with me at Potter Place. I might have grown up happier."

"Why couldn't he?"

"Well, whoever he got to live with me would have been at a disadvantage, since I would have owned everything," Harry pointed out. "None of them would have had any real authority over me, if I had any personality traits like Malfoy."

"But you don't," Hermione retorted. Before Harry could say anything, she acknowledged, "I know, I know, the Headmaster couldn't know that then."

"Right."

Hermione frowned. "And you wouldn't have had any blood protection there."

"On the island, I wouldn't have needed it," Harry answered. "Of course, then I couldn't have left the island." He shrugged. "Who knows; maybe things have worked out anyway."

Hermione leaned over and kissed Harry's temple. "Let's look at the Disney map. There's a Haunted House, that might be fun."

Of the four, only Hermione had ever been to an amusement park of any kind. In that respect, Disney was a very remarkable experience. Hermione wasn't overly-thrilled with fast roller-coasters, but she put up with them. Tonks and especially Harry of course loved them all. Hermione contented herself with holding tightly on to Harry and insisting that they have at least one slow ride and a walk between any of the coaster-type rides.

Being used to real ghosts, the Haunted Mansion made them laugh for reasons other than the ones amusing the Muggles. They rode most of the rides, explored most of the stores, watched the bands, the parades, and the characters, and enjoyed watching the people and looking at the grounds. They spotted the magic flowers that added special colors for the young witches and wizards, since only they could see them. They bought some simple toys that would amuse Mister Weasley, and what for the British teens were odd American-flavored sauces and syrups for Mrs. Weasley along with some Disney dinner-wear and stem-wear which would please Mrs. Weasley and amuse her husband. They also bought some odd little trinkets that would inspire the twins, and hopefully amuse Charlie, Bill, Ron, Ginny, Luna, Neville, and others.

They stayed late, watched the fireworks, and went back to the hotel, tired from the day out.

Saturday, August 24, 1996

The quartet got up very early. Remus had checked them out the evening before. "Why are we up so early," Harry grumbled. They were standing in Remus and Tonks' room with all their luggage. It was 5:12.

"Remember the time change," Remus said. "This way, we'll be tired enough to go to bed at a reasonable time."

Harry wasn't happy, but said nothing as the portkey swept them back to England.

All the elves were waiting for the quartet. Hermione frowned when she saw that Winky was wearing a pillowcase. Still, she had to admit, the elf was clean and sober, which was an improvement. She resolved to see if there were any books on house elves in the Potter libraries. Remus had them put all their things down on the luggage.

Toby took charge. He bowed to the quartet. "Dobby is to take care Master Harry." Dobby came forward and disappeared, taking Harry's suitcase, bookbag, and the bag of souvenirs off. "Winky is to take care of Mistress Hermione."

Hermione blushed. Winky came forward shyly and disappeared with Hermione's two suitcases, the other souvenirs, the two bags of books she had bought at the Mall when she had realized that she would be portkeying home, and several others sacks of odds-and-ends.

"These three boxes are other gifts," Remus said. "I'll sort them out." Toby bowed and said, "Letys will take care of Mister Remus and Miss Dora." Toby turned to Harry. "Would Master care for brunch soon?"

Harry was about to answer, when he realized that as the host he should consult the others. He looked at them.

"Maybe we should clean up first?" Hermione suggested. Remus and Tonks looked agreeable.

"Half an hour?" Harry asked. The other three nodded. Harry turned to Toby.

"Would Master care to eat in the Breakfast Room or the Dining Room?"

"The Breakfast Room," Harry said. The other elves disappeared and the quartet went off to their rooms.

Harry told Dobby what he wanted to be done with his things and went into the large common bathroom. He quietly looked into Hermione's room. He smiled to see Hermione and Winky in a silent struggle over putting Hermione's things away. So far, they had not even started.

Harry called Hermione over. "What?" she nearly snapped from the stress.

"Hermione," Harry said softly, "Winky is not a slave, even if she still thinks as one right now. She is a servant and wants to serve you. Tell her what you want done and let her do it, or send her off to check on the guest rooms or something. Neither of us is going to take advantage or overwork or abuse the elves. If you want to study how they act, then you have to win their trust, and you won't get it by arguing."

Hermione grimaced, and then said, "Mistress Hermione?"

Harry shrugged. "This is the bedroom suite of the master and mistress of Potter Place. I hope you'll share it with me."

Hermione sighed, admitting defeat. "Winky? The clothes in that suitcase are all dirty. Take care of those and whenever you're done, put the clean clothes on the bed. I'll unpack everything else, so that I'll know where they are, and that includes those boxes." All of Hermione's things from the Granger household were here as well. "Once you see where I put things away, then you can take over, alright?"

Winky bowed, "Thank you, Mistress." She grabbed the suitcase and disappeared.

Hermione turned and glared at Harry.

"What?" he asked defensively.

"It's worse than having servants," Hermione grouched.

"It is," Harry agreed. "They won't complain. We need to figure out how to get around that. Maybe if we listen to Dobby enough, we can figure out how to get them to understand us."

Hermione smiled. "I love you, Harry."

"That's good, since I love you, too." Back on the same wavelength, they retreated back into the bathroom, so Hermione could have a wash-and-brushup before brunch.

Chapter XI

Monday, August 26

Harry and Hermione stood at the bridge leading onto the island of Potter Place. "Are you nervous?" Hermione asked.

"A little," Harry admitted. "Aren't you?"

"Ron is a good friend, but he means even more to you," Hermione answered. "I really hope he can understand."

"About?"

"About us, about this place, about, well, everything!"

"We'll see," Harry said. A portkey had already popped Luna into existence, and now Neville followed. Ginny and Ron came together a few seconds later. "Hi," Harry called out. "Come on over. Dobby will pick up your luggage in a few minutes."

"THIS is your house?" Neville asked, his eyes wide.

"Well, this is my family's estate," Harry said a bit dubiously. "It's a pretty daunting inheritance."

"It looks like Hogwarts gave birth," Ron muttered. Hermione and Ginny rolled their eyes.

"Come on in and take the tour," Harry said gamely.

Ginny and Neville came across the bridge hand-in-hand. Ron followed, grumbling. Luna looked around and said simply, "Very pretty."

As Harry had anticipated, Ron's mood mellowed after lunch. Luna and Hermione had been happy with salads with duck meat, while Harry, Ginny, and Neville had enjoyed roasted duck with chips and oil-and-herbs-drizzled tomatoes. Ron had plowed through a whole duck and a double serving of chips drenched in vinegar. Hermione had been surprised that Harry had planned a pudding course -- a huge plate of American tollhouse cookies. The group cleaned them up, with Ron eating over a quarter of them, with Luna not far behind. Therefore, by the end of lunch, Ron was smiling.

"Mum's going to ask if you ate healthy," Ginny said with a sniff.

"Tell her yes," Ron suggested. "It will make her happy." Ginny and Hermione again rolled their eyes.

After lunch, Hermione took Luna and Ginny off to look around the manor, while Ron and Neville stayed with Harry.

"Go ahead," Harry told Ron.

"And do what?" Ron asked cautiously.

"I'm sure you have something to say about all this," Harry said, waving his hand in the air. "Please, let it out. It will help clear the air." Neville tried to look invisible.

Ron looked thoughtful, and held that pose for two very long minutes.

Finally, Ron said, "There have been a lot of things I really wanted you to be around to hear me say about you this summer, but right now I'm glad you didn't hear me say any of them. I could complain about you and Hermione, but Ginny threatened to bat-bogie me if I did. And she was right when she told me, several times, that if I had really wanted to date Hermione, I should have actually asked her at some point over the last year and a half."

Harry swore to himself that even if Dumbledore, Snape, and Voldemort all hit him with

Legitimacy at once, he would never reveal that Hermione had given up on Ron the year before.

"As for all this," Ron said, imitating Harry hand gesture, "well, you didn't have a clue about it before this summer, did you?"

"Not the slightest," Harry agreed.

"Or about the money?"

"Or about the money," Harry agreed. Neville looked a little lost, but decided it would be safer to ask Ginny or Hermione later.

"Do you know when I knew you were something special, Harry?" Ron asked after a pause.

"I'm nothing special," Harry insisted.

"You are," Ron retorted. "Isn't he, Neville?"

"You are, Harry," Neville agreed sincerely.

"I decided you were something special when you told off Malfoy on the train five years ago. Even though Dad despised the Malfoys, they really were held up by 'society' and the people who count at the Ministry as the best wizarding society had to offer."

"You're kidding!"

Neville jumped in, "No, he's right. Every time I was with Grandmother in Diagon Alley, someone would comment that I would be in the same Hogwarts cohort as Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy."

"And nobody knew anything about you after, well, after that Halloween, so we were left with Prince Draco," Ron nearly spat. "And there you sat, all alone in the compartment, dressed in clothes scruffier than most of my own, which was saying something. This manor is the sort of background I associated you with. When you hauled out that fist full of gold and bought so much food, I should have realized that this was in your background somewhere."

Ron shook his head to clear it. "Sorry, I got off the path. Anyway, when that prick and his two clods came barging in, I thought, 'well, it was nice while it lasted. The two princes will be off together.' And you preferred me. That meant a lot to me, Harry."

"You've always stuck up for me, and tried to help me," Neville said. "Not just with classes, I mean Hermione has always helped me more there. I wasn't much of a wizard until last year, but you never looked down on me, never treated me like a joke. You've never just tolerated me, you actually liked me and thought I was worth something."

"Neville," Harry acknowledged, "you weren't a very good wizard until last year. I've always thought you were a very good person."

"I don't want to see you snogging Ginny, if you ever do," Ron said, "but I think you two do make a good couple. I hope it works out for you." That was a very high compliment from Ron.

"Thanks," Neville said.

"To change the subject," Harry said, "this property is all very . . . oppressive in some ways. There are only three reasons why I'm glad we're here instead of the Burrow."

"No one can really tell you not to snog Hermione, for one," Ron teased.

"That's one," Harry agreed. "Second, while we six would fit at the Burrow, the others wouldn't."

"And third?"

"I've always wanted a family," Harry said. "My grandfather's ghost is here, and there must be dozens of portraits. . . ." He turned around, and Neville and Ron realized there was a large portrait over the fireplace. "How many portraits are there who can talk to here, sir?" Harry asked.

The portrait had been still, but now the powerful, almost lion-like man smiled and replied, "A hundred and fifty-nine, of ninety-three different individuals." He lowered his voice, "My grandson, your great-great grandfather, was a very vain man, and has eighteen painting of himself, and nine of his favorite mistress, later his third wife!"

"Is she the one in the master study?" Harry asked curiously.

"The naked blonde with the skinny waist and the big tits? Yes, that's her, the trollop. She doesn't usually talk at all in any of the portraits, thank Merlin! She has a voice that could cut glass. Whistle a tune and any of her paintings will dance. Whistle one she likes, and she'll strip down in the other portraits and give you a show."

"Really?" Ron asked, shocked.

"Really. She was a rather disturbed young witch named Mary McGonagall, and she did the same thing in life. Made her rather popular with the lads while she was alive, and after, well, many of my male descendants liked her, too. Your father and his friends liked to play the penny whistle, looking for tunes she liked." The elderly lion shook his head. "Perhaps it was a good thing they had no children who survived. They might have been . . . odd."

"Shall I ask one of the elves to put one of her in both your rooms?" Harry asked.

"Ginny would murder me," Neville said, perhaps a bit disappointed.

"Sure, but only if you promise not to tell Professor McGonagall," Ron said.

"Good advice!" the painting called out. "I believe your grandfather got a black eye teasing her about it in school, and your father and his friend each served a detention or two over the subject."

The boys thanked the painting, and then Ron asked, "How many elves do you have? How is Hermione on the subject?"

"There were five, and I've hired Dobby and Winky, although Dobby will be going back to Hogwarts during term. Hermione isn't thrilled, obviously. I mean, I know she's right in theory. It's not right to enslave any sentient being. On the other hand, elves seem to want to serve. There must be some way to allow them to serve while preventing abuse."

"At least that's sensible," Ron said. "SPEW would never work, any more than her leaving hats about did."

"True," Harry agreed. "All these elves have accepted pay and days off, and know they can get their freedom any time they ask. Hermione's accepting that for now, and is going to try and learn how they think before causing any blowups."

"We'll see," Ron said, before changing the subject again. "So what are all these people coming here for? Especially three Slytherins?"

"Malfoy's father is dead," Harry said, "Malfoy has been expelled, along with Bulstrode, Goyle, Crabbe, and five Seventh year Slytherins, not to mention two Seventh year Ravenclaws and a Hufflepuff. There are still some pro-Death Eaters left. . . ."

"Like Parkinson," Ron put in, to which Harry nodded.

"Exactly. Still, not even all the Slytherins are pro-Death Eater. Of the remaining Sixth years, Dumbledore reckons those three are will to come out against the Death Eaters."

"How many are left?" Ron demanded. "Nott's the only other boy, and he was about as bad as Malfoy last year."

"There are some other girls," Neville pointed out.

"True," Ron admitted.

"Plus Dumbledore believes that even the pro-Death Eaters left in the Seventh year aren't all that

'avid' -- they might still go over to him after they leave, but none is so committed as to be dangerous next year. So with them doing their N.E.W.T.s, he's hoping those three Sixth years will be a stronger influence on the younger students."

"What about Seamus and Lavender?" Neville asked. "Neither was overly sympathetic to us last year, except at the very end."

"And Dean and Parvati didn't exactly reign in their friends," Ron pointed out.

Harry shrugged. "Do you really want to punish them for that? Even more, do either of you think any of those four are pro-Death Eater?"

Neville and especially Ron flushed at that. Ron had obviously thought exactly that at least once. "Oh, come on, Ron," Harry teased, "can you imagine Parvati or Lavender joining any group that made them dress in costumes like the Death Eaters wear?" Ron and Neville snorted in amusement, as they imagined what the stylish pair of pretty girls would have to say about the Death Eater regalia as fashion statements.

"Ron seemed to be in a good mood all evening," Hermione commented as she sat in front of the vanity and brushed her hair.

Harry was laying on Hermione's bed, watching her. He was content, because he had never thought he would be part of such a domestic, homey scenario with a beautiful witch, one that he not only was in love with, but who loved him back. He was also excited, because they were both nude, and Hermione's motions while brushing her hair were extraordinarily arousing. "What makes you say so?" was all he said, however.

"He was whistling dance tunes under his breath all night!" Hermione shook her head. "Odd, even for Ron."

"True," Harry said, holding back a smirk. "How are Ginny and Luna?"

"Ginny seems happy with Neville," Hermione said. "It's difficult to tell with Luna, but she's a bit like you."

"In what way?"

"She's had to put up with more than her share of abuse, you with your relatives, and she with her Housemates. She's happy for the acceptance and affection you, Ginny, and I all feel for her."

"Ron does seem a bit skittish," Harry acknowledged.

"Well, with Ginny dating Neville and you and I dating, he's probably worried you're going to try to set him up with Luna," Hermione said frankly.

"Luna liked him last autumn, but I've never seen a flicker of interest on his part," Harry agreed. "I'm just glad Ron accepts us, and doesn't hold all this against me."

Hermione smiled, stood, and turned around. "I think it's time to stop worrying about our guests, don't you?"

Harry smiled in return. "Absolutely."

The other fifteen guests arrived late Tuesday afternoon. All of them were shocked at the size and luxury of Potter Place. Even Justin, from a moderately old and well-off, if minor, aristocratic Muggle family, had never seen the like.

After the tour, there was a feast to rival one at Hogwarts in the great hall. The chaperones, however, ate in one of the dining rooms. Afterwards, Harry escorted the students into the largest drawing room, which was in the same section of the manor where the new guests were staying.

Harry had talked with his friends that morning, telling them what he planned to do that evening. That also entailed him telling them the exact Prophecy. With Harry revealing so much about himself, they all felt they could not hold back. Harry wanted to tell the other students everything of importance that had happened to them. He wanted to draw them into an alliance, so that they could lead the students into the coming war that Voldemort was sure to start now that all his secret attacks had failed and open terror was about all he had left.

Therefore, that night Harry told them about all his 'adventures', from the troll in his First year through the confrontation at Godric's Hollow that summer, with the other students adding what they knew, and how they felt, where appropriate.

The group had to learn to trust each other to some degree, not an easy task, especially when it came to the three Slytherins. Still, if it worked, they would be able to build the type of inter-House loyalty the Sorting Hat had been asking for the previous year. Hogwarts would stand all the stronger, a beacon against the Dark Lord and his forces.

There was no doubt that Voldemort would be back. He would find allies and servants. There would be battles, and some good people would be lost along the way, but Harry was becoming certain that in the end he and his friends would win.

Hermione and his closest friends, Ron, Luna, Ginny, and Neville, all agreed. Of course, they had all had fewer doubts than Harry all along.

Hermione told Harry those things that night. She had awoken a little after 2:00 am, and saw that Harry was not in their bed. She tracked him down to his bedroom, where he was sitting in front of a magical fire, which was casting light but almost no heat -- unneeded since it was warm even in the thick-walled manor.

She had thought for a moment he had had a dream contact with Voldemort, but he was just thinking. Thinking about the future, on which she reassured him, and on the past.

"You have to know the past so you have some idea of where you're going and why you're going there," Hermione said. "Don't dwell in the past, Harry. You're the future. We're going to face it together with our friends, and we will make it ours."

Harry smiled. "That seems a bit much to plan on, even for magic."

"If Voldemort can make things worse, then we can make things better," Hermione answered.

Harry smiled. "I like the sound of that."

Hermione had been kneeling next to Harry, but now she stood, holding her hand out. "Come to bed, Harry."

Harry smiled and did just that. "I guess the future will be nice after all," he joked.

"As long as we're together, we come out ahead," Hermione assured him.

They went back to bed, confident in the future.