

Harry Potter and the Flying Squad

by

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01 - Homework at Privet Drive

Harry Potter sat in his room, at the table he called his desk. It was a simple table, medium-sized, pretty battered, however it was a real place to do paperwork. This was as close to heaven as he would ever expect while in the Dursley house at Privet Drive.

A year ago, he had been forced to do his writing while lying in the bed, hiding parchment and pen, always at the risk of spilling the ink across the sheet. But no longer. Things had changed.

The change hadn't come by itself, and not at all from his uncle Vernon or his aunt Petunia. No, Harry had fought for it, although the fight had been a short one, with a determined Harry at one side and his horrified relatives at the other.

It started two days after Harry's return for summer vacation. It ended the next morning. But let's tell it in order ...

Back from Hogwarts, Harry had spent two days thinking about the current situation and his state. Then he realized - he would need weeks to recover from the recent events, the death of Cedric Diggory, his fight with Voldemort, the fact of Voldemort alive and free.

He became aware also that his tolerance had grown too thin for what the Dursleys considered a *normal* treatment in their house - for him, mind, not for their own son. But what could he do? Using magic was unlawful.

Only - the Ministry of Magic was in a shattered state.

He came to a conclusion. If he was supposed to face the risk of a Voldemort attack any day, a minor investment of unlawful magic was certainly the least to worry about. And so, next morning during breakfast, Harry started the *War of Just One Day*.

"I have to tell you something," he began. "it has to do with my position in this house."

Aunt Petunia, busy with the large quantities of Dudley's breakfast, had twitched at Harry's first word. Now she stood frozen, unable to turn.

A moment before, Uncle Vernon had been reading the newspaper, which lately was full of weird little stories. The paper fell down, presenting a face of utter disbelief. "What did you say??"

"What I'm saying is - I won't accept the way you're treating me any longer. From now on, I'm going to make sure I have a decent living here ... For starters, that ..."

"Shut up, you perverse creature! ... What do you think you are? - You ungrateful ..."

"*Stupefy!*"

Uncle Vernon's shouting stopped in mid-sentence. His body froze, keeping the ungraceful reddish purple in his face.

Aunt Petunia turned, stared at Harry's wand. Slowly, two trembling hands approached her own throat.

Dudley was trying the impossible - to shrink in place until his enormous body would no longer be exposed to the scene.

"You will listen to me!" Harry stared at his uncle. "You never have - but now you must ... I'm stuck with you, and you're stuck with me. I cannot change it, not until school starts again ... Until then, you can give me duties and errands to perform - up to a maximum of four hours a day. It's my payment for my room and the food I get - probably an overpayment, but so what ... And it's four hours more than your own son is giving."

Dudley showed the good sense not to move nor to speak.

"Outside these four hours, I'm on my own ... Whatever that means - it certainly means I'm not at your command ... You won't see much of me, for the better of all of us."

Harry glanced at Aunt Petunia whose hands had found their destination. "I'll change a few things in my room, and while using it, I'll develop a normal level of noise, until I feel like sleeping ... If that bothers you, get used to it."

Uncle Vernon tried another impossible - to break the stupefying spell.

"What you say about me, or my parents, while I'm not around is up to you - what I can't hear, I don't care about. But - if you ever insult me again, I'll make you regret it."

Harry's voice dropped to a strangled hissing. "And if I ever again hear you insulting my parents, you will dearly wish you hadn't."

He rose from his chair. "Don't expect the authorities to be coming around just because I keep you at bay with a little spell. They have their own problems right now." His wand pointed at Uncle Vernon. "*Enervate.*"

For a second, nothing happened.

"Any orders for today?"

Uncle Vernon was moving. "Wait a second, I'll give you orders!" His face showed the fear of God - still, he seemed driven by an impulse impossible to suppress. "You son of a ..."

He stopped in mid-sentence, and mid-step - staring at Harry's wand.

"That was close ..." Harry's face showed calm determination. "As a last warning, today's four hours are cancelled - I have to do business anyway."

He went out.

* * *

Walking down the street, he tried to come up with an idea how to get a table, a chair, a few other items like bookshelves ... His own money - wizard money - wouldn't buy him the

smallest piece of furniture. Asking the Dursleys was out of discussion - a matter of pride more than of morale. Then what?

Gringotts would change his money to Muggle currency, only - how to travel? The problem looked insoluble.

Passing a corner, Harry saw an office building across the street. People - Muggles, what else - were moving old furniture out and new furniture in.

Old furniture?

There was a man, giving orders. Harry walked over. "Excuse me, sir."

The man seemed as broad as high. His muscles - he wouldn't breathe harder after having thrown Harry across the street. The face turned to Harry. "What's up, son?"

"Sir - I'm looking for a bit of old furniture ... Then I saw this here, and I thought - maybe, if you don't need them any longer ... I'd like to ask if I could have some pieces."

The man examined Harry's body. "Your manners are okay, son, only - with them, you won't move a chair ... How you're goin' to move the stuff?"

Harry looked at the pile of desks. No way - unless, in the dark, with nobody around, and a wand ... He glanced at the man. "I don't know yet, sir. But I'll find a way."

"Tell you what ... You work with me - till five o'clock ... Then, you pick your choice, and I'll give you a lift - for your items and for yourself."

Five o'clock - six hours. Would he ever get paid?

The man's eyes didn't blink, didn't look away. Two calm, hard marbles were awaiting Harry's answer.

"A lift - and something to eat at lunch ... I've no money at all."

The marbles sparkled. "That's what I thought ... Okay, son - we have a deal. Get moving."

The work turned out harder than anything Harry had done before. A single piece of furniture was no problem, nor was the second. The third - not quite. The fourth ... And there seemed no end.

The man's hand was on Harry's shoulder. "Son, I didn't mean to drive you into a breakdown ... Look, you have to get into a rhythm ... Steady does the job. Don't run. Walk your step, be it empty handed or loaden ... That's all you have to learn about moving."

It was true. Switch off your mind, and walk.

At lunch, the man appeared with a bag. "Here, my boy ... Thirty minutes break - hope you don't mind tap water."

"Thank you, sir ... No, water's fine."

Inside the bag were three rolls and an enormous piece of sausage. At the first moments, just holding the food was hurting as much as with the furniture before. But Harry felt great. Maybe, he thought, the turning points in your life were marked by sausages.

The break had done a small wonder, which held for quite a while. Then it was the routine that kept him moving. Then it was the thought of a desk and a chair ... Then it was five o'clock.

Harry already knew which pieces to take - each turn had been marked by a glance at the selected items, a desk, a chair, a small filing cabinet. There weren't lamps around - so what, his wand did the job.

A semi truck appeared, came closer, stopped. The man jumped out, looked at Harry's selection. "Them?"

Harry nodded.

Before he could move, the desk was on the loading space, followed by the cabinet. He just found the time to pass the chair into the man's hand - one hand, for a chair, this figure didn't bother using two arms.

"Jump in, son."

They reached the Dursley home. Examining the building, the man asked, "This your parent's house?"

"My relatives."

A glance from the driver's seat. "I see."

They moved the desk upstairs together. Stepping down, they passed an open-mouthed Dudley, who took care not to come closer than two yards in their path.

With the second turn, the man took the cabinet, Harry the chair. When they had deposited the pieces in Harry's room, the man reached in his pocket and came up with a business card. "If you want to work for money, son - gimme a call." The man looked at the door, turned back to Harry. "The offer goes to the person, not the house. - Same with the money ... Good night."

"Thank you, sir ... Good night."

Some minutes later, Harry walked downstairs for supper, reached the table, sat down.

Uncle Vernon breathed heavily. "You've lost your right to sit with us ... Leave the room!"

"Fine with me." Harry stood up, pointed his wand toward the table. "*Accio cibum.*"

The plates of uncle Vernon and of Dudley flew through the room into his hands.

Upstairs, Harry celebrated the first meal at his new table. It was great, although not coming close to the lunch. And of course too much by far. He deposited the leftovers in Dudley's room.

Next morning, Harry came downstairs, sat down for breakfast.

Silence.

A moment later, Aunt Petunia came with his breakfast - almost normal, only more than ever before.

Finished, Harry asked, "So what are my orders for today?"

A voice behind the newspaper answered, "Your aunt will tell you - after breakfast."

The *War of Just One Day* was over.

* * *

Now Harry sat in his room, reading a large volume about politics in the wizarding world, with the focus on riots, rebellions, and revolutions. It was homework, though only up to a point. In contrast to recent years, Harry's interest was awake. He wanted to learn how wizards had managed to cope with enemies in the past centuries. Unfortunately, he found nothing comparable to Lord Voldemort.

A rush came through the open window.

For a moment, Harry expected a day bird, attracted by the light from his wand. Then a large shadow obscured the lights from the streets. The wings folded. An owl sat on the windowframe.

Harry extracted the letter from the capsule at the left foot. He invited the owl, which obviously expected to return with an answering letter, to some refreshment.

Hedwig, as he recognized with relief, was glad about the company more than annoyed by Harry offering her own food.

He opened the letter.

Dear Harry,
I have to talk with you.
Expect me at Wednesday around
7 p.m., at the end of your street.
I'll wear my (un)usual dress
Your godfather

Harry scribbled "Okay. Harry" on a parchment, put it into the capsule, and sent the owl off.

A letter from Sirius Black - written so that it could fall into the wrong hands without telling much. Wednesday was tomorrow. Sirius would await him in his dog shape, making sure nobody else would see a large black dock that wasn't expected in Privet Drive.

Unable to read further, Harry closed the book and speculated wildly about what Sirius would tell him. It took a long time until he fell asleep.

* * *

Wednesday evening, Harry strolled down Privet Drive. Earlier that day, he had checked the location to figure out where Sirius would wait. There was a corner with bushes high enough to provide cover for a dog even as large as his godfather. And this was exactly where he found him.

The dog gave no sign, nor did Harry.

They walked past the last building, reached a spot under trees. Checking around, Harry saw they were alone. When he turned back, Sirius stood there.

They hugged each other.

"Harry," said Sirius, "it's good to see you ... How is life with the Dursleys?"

"Better than ever. I found a few arguments to convince them that it's better for all of us if they stop treating me like a retarded slave."

"Really? ... Like what, for example?"

Harry pointed at his pocket. "Like my wand, for example. I told them not to hold their breath until some wizard cop came running to stop my unlawful magic ... As it turned out, I didn't need much of it."

Sirius' laugh was short and bitter. "So the mess in the Ministry of Magic is at least good for that, if nothing else."

"What's up, Sirius? Why are you here?"

"To give you a present." Sirius reached in his pocket, came up with something. "Here - it comes from a good old friend."

What Harry saw was a heavy medal on a chain, made to wear around the neck. It looked like gold. He glanced up. "A present? For me? ... Why? Is it from ..."

Sirius' hand was on Harry's mouth. "Yes."

His godfather's voice, not loud before, was barely audible. "It's an invitation, and this is your travelling ticket, if you know what I mean. Use it ten o'clock straight - to meet where we can speak safely."

Harry was staring, at the medal, at Sirius, and back. If he had understood correctly, he was expected in two hours' time in Hogwarts. But this was impossible - portkeys didn't work in the school area.

Sirius' next words answered the unspoken question. "How is your homework? Although that's not the issue right now ... By the way, do you like walking around lakes?"

It took Harry several seconds, then he understood - the portkey would send him to the place where the Hogwarts Express arrived, outside the protective zone that prevented apparition, portkeys, and other techniques from working.

"Yes," he said, "I do ... Lakes and train stations."

"Good. It's a pleasure talking with an open mind."

Sirius fixed the chain with the medal around Harry's neck. "Put it under your shirt - when it's time, rub it on both sides with your fingers ... Now you should leave. We can continue our conversation later."

"Can you give me a hint what's this all about?"

"No, I can't." Sirius looked deadly serious. "I promised to deliver the invitation and the ticket, nothing else ... Now go, Harry."

Harry walked back toward the Dursley house. This time he would have to wait only two hours before the pending question might be answered.

02 - Homework at Hogwarts

Harry waited in his room for the clock to turn ten. To the outside, nothing looked unusual, as he was found all evenings in his room. Unusual were two things. First, Harry had locked the door, using a wood wedge prepared earlier, as a replacement for a door key that had disappeared two years ago.

And he wore his wizard dress.

The bell of the near church chimed ten.

He grabbed the medal dangling above the robe. Before he even could rub it, the transit was taking place.

A short moment of disorientation, a sharp thrill from the memory of his last portkey travel, then it was over. He stood almost exactly at the spot where he would have descended from the Hogwarts Express.

A figure some yards away - Sirius Black.

His godfather came closer. "Hello, Harry, so we meet again."

"Hi, Sirius. This is more exciting by the minute - can we talk now?"

"Talking, yes. At normal level, too - except we might save our breath to walk up. But if you expect me to tell you more, you're wrong ... Some people are waiting for you."

"Can you tell me at least who they are?"

"Yes I could, but - " Sirius showed a short smile. "Why spoil the surprise? Actually, it wouldn't be too difficult guessing most of them, since this is Hogwarts. Only one might come in as a surprise - well, maybe two."

"Thanks a lot, Sirius. That's just what I need, a few more riddles on such an uneventful evening."

"That's the spirit, Harry ... Save it, because you'll need it." Sirius wasn't smiling any longer.

They walked toward the school buildings.

It was an odd sensation, familiar and strange at the same time. The wrong season, the wrong time of day, all the students missing, and still - it was the path to the place where Harry felt more at home than anywhere else.

Sirius broke the silence. "I can tell you about one person, and this one isn't around - don't expect to find Hagrid up there. He's off with some business."

"And of course - you won't be able to tell me about the nature of this business, although you're well aware ... Am I right?"

"To the point. But don't worry - you'll hear about that in a few minutes."

They entered the stairs to the Entrance Hall.

A figure rose from the seats - Minerva McGonagall, Headmistress of Gryffindor, Harry's house.

She looked as happy as a cat in a swimming pool. "Welcome, Mr. Potter ... Let's go upstairs, the meeting is held in Professor Dumbledore's office." Not waiting for Harry's greeting, she turned and marched forward.

No doubt - her anger was close to the boiling point.

Harry's mind was racing. An angry McGonagall ... It could mean anything, from very good to very bad - looking from his own point of view.

Coming upstairs, murmuring could be heard through the door. McGonagall knocked and, without waiting for a reply, opened.

Harry followed, looked around.

Albus Dumbledore sat in the middle, smiling at him, but barely so. To one side sat Professor Snape, looking like the survivor of a car accident. To the other side sat R.J. Lupin, ex-professor and werewolf. He also smiled, even more so when Harry, seeing him, couldn't resist a wide, happy grin.

The last person in the room was Madame Pomfrey, sitting at the corner of the table, her expression indicating that the next victims of the same car accident might be due soon.

Dumbledore said, "Welcome to this meeting, Mr. Potter, and thank you for your following this invitation at such short notice. You know all people in this room, so we can make the preliminaries as short as possible."

Harry murmured a greeting.

Snape nodded, looking tired and hurt, lacking the hostility Harry would have expected.

Lupin continued to smile.

"Harry," went Dumbledore on, "I'm using your first name to indicate that now comes the unofficial part, although it is more serious than any school meeting could be. This round is a strategic committee dealing with our enemy - Voldemort and his companions." The Headmaster paused a moment, then said, "Before we go into detail, I have to fulfill a promise I gave Mrs. McGonagall."

Harry's Headmistress was sitting straight, pale in the face, lips tight.

"In the course of this meeting, Harry, I am going to involve you in activities that include a high personal risk. In doing so, I am going to violate almost every principle held by this school and by myself - with two remarkable exceptions ... Therefore, if you want to step out, if you *need* to step out, be it now or any time afterwards, say 'Stop' ... Harry - is this understood?"

"Yes ... I mean, yes, Professor."

"Do you want to stop right now?"

"No, Professor ... But I'd like to know about the two exceptions."

A short smile. "I knew you would ask. The first principle that'll hold - I'm going to use the person who's suited best for the task."

Harry beamed. A second later, his eyes widened in astonishment.

Slightly but unmistakably, Snape had nodded!

"The second principle I'm not violating is that the person - without denying the personal risk involved - is up to the task."

Now it was Lupin who nodded.

Recognizing it, Harry's mind was ready to take conclusions.

"There's a third reason ... It's not a principle, rather an axiome - we have no other choice, and this is why even Mrs. McGonagall has agreed to invite you, Harry."

Surely enough, it was McGonagall's turn to nod.

"Now you're probably full of questions, Harry, so it's time to answer them ... We have gathered information about an attack planned by the Dark Forces. Their plan is as devilish as we could have expected ... You should hear it from the one who found out - and who had to pay for it."

Dumbledore turned to his right. "Severus?"

Snape's eyes met Harry's. For the first time, as long as Harry could remember, this look felt from peer to peer.

Snape's first words gave Harry the second shock of this evening. "The plan I figured out is so cruel in itself - there's no need to emphasize any detail ... Mr. Potter, what Voldemort plans is this - at the end of the summer vacation, when all students return with the Hogwarts Express, they are going to attack the train ... Their goal is to take all students as hostages - gaining sufficient pressure on the wizarding world to win the battle right away."

Harry stared, unable to speak, to think about what he'd heard.

Snape waited a few seconds, then continued, "For obvious reasons, students are useful as hostages only if their parents are wizards - if at least one of them is a wizard. Students with Muggles parents on both sides are useless in their opinion ... So the planning is to - to kill them at the spot, using their deaths as a brutal warning to all wizard parents."

Harry's stomach contracted painfully. Killing Muggles-born students - that meant Hermione! This thought broke the stunning shock, slowly but steadily, a burning rage was building in him.

"And this is the aspect, Mr. Potter, which brought you into our counter-planning."

Dumbledore's voice. "Are you going to say 'Stop', Harry?"

He twisted. "No I won't ... They're planning to kill Hermione! These bastards ..."

"You're right, Harry, still - watch your language." A short smile was smoothing Dumbledore's words. "We need cool minds, since there is a chance ... Our advantage is, we know all about - thanks to Professor Snape who just barely survived his task ... Furthermore, in addition to Miss Granger, there are just three more Muggles-born students for whom the planned attack is more dangerous than for the others ... Or four - depending on how to count."

Harry hadn't understood.

"Just counting students with Muggles parents, there are four. But counting students whose parents cannot be blackmailed using their children as hostages, there are five. The fifth ..."

"... is me," finished Harry. "Yes, of course. But it doesn't matter ... I'm not going to say 'Stop', if this was the question."

Dumbledore nodded. "Yes, this is nothing particularly new to you, Harry ... Also, we have reason to believe the odds are better than the last time. Why - and what might be your part in our plan, should be explained by the one who came up with the idea."

Dumbledore turned to his other side. "Remus?"

Lupin's slumpy figure came forward. He put his hands on the table.

"Before explaining the role planned for you, Harry, let me summarize the strategic facts. They are important when considering our chances ... The attacking forces will certainly include some wizards, but mainly there'll be Giants and Dementors."

This came as no surprise. Harry knew - the Dark Forces had conquered the wizard prison of Azkaban, had freed all prisoners, and had taken the Dementors with them ... Giants as allies of the Dark Forces - that was new, although he remembered Dumbledore predicting exactly this manoeuvre a few months ago.

"Our forces also include Giants ... Thanks to Mr. Dumbledore's quick reaction, and thanks to the activities of Hagrid and Madame Maxime, we could win a fraction of their tribe for our side ... A smaller fraction than the others, I have to admit - but very determined."

A few remarks, overheard not so long ago, not decipherable then, suddenly became clear to Harry.

"Without going into details of our battle plan, we see good chances to defeat them ... The crucial part is to protect the students who cannot qualify as hostages - if you'll pardon the expression ... You see, Harry - if there were considerably more than four, it would be impossible. - Further, there is a second factor to our benefit ..."

"Why would it be so different if there were eight or ten, or more?"

"Part of our strategy is, we do *not* publish our information. What's left of order and spirit in the wizarding world would collapse immediately ... It's essential to publish this with the headline 'Defeat of the Dark Forces' ... So we cannot put a squadron of combat wizards into the train. Now, if we had to protect more than what fits into one compartment, our own forces won't be sufficient - I mean the forces that can be put into the train without raising suspicion."

"Which is me?" Suddenly, Harry's mouth felt dry.

"Which is you, plus somebody you'll appreciate very much." Seeing Harry's glance, Lupin added, "No, not me ... Yes, I'll be in the train, but hidden ... You'll travel with a pet animal."

Harry's head jerked around.

Sirius Black nodded. "Yes, Harry - you and me."

"Luckily," continued Lupin, "even the dark wizards aren't able to kill as cold-blooded as this situation would require - with a well-known exception, of course, but - for some unknown reason, Voldemort will not be leading the attack. No, they will send Dementors for the dirty job ... And now, it should sound quite familiar to you, Harry."

He felt relieved and, at the same time, frightened. "You mean, I have to sit with them, and when the Dementors arrive, all I have to do is to conjure up a Patronus galloping around who will chase them away?"

"That's it, in your own, remarkable words ... And listen, Harry - this is your task, no matter what happens around. You won't leave from their side, whether Dementors arrive or not ... None of the other students is at risk for their life."

"Yes, I see."

Harry was thinking ahead. "Professor Lupin, I - erm, I do not routinely conjure up a Patronus. So ..."

"... you might benefit from more training. Certainly so - even if I remember one of the most brilliant Patronuses I ever saw ... Harry, unless you say 'Stop', you'll spend an awful lot of time with me as your trainer, until the Hogwarts Express will be on its way."

A wide grin was the reaction. Working with Lupin - what an appealing thought, especially since it probably meant he would stay in Hogwarts.

Dumbledore interrupted his speculations. "Ladies and Gentlemen, I gather - our meeting has reached its goal. With respect to the bedtime of our youngest combatant, and since I'd like to have a few words alone with Harry, let us come to an end ... Thank you for your cooperation in a desperate fight, for your tolerance," a nod toward McGonagall, "and for your spirit in the days to come ... Good night."

* * *

The others were gone. Sirius had explained he would await Harry downstairs, then he too had left. Now Dumbledore asked, "How do you feel, Harry?"

"To be honest, some pressure in the stomach ... Partly, it's the task I'm supposed to do, but what's bothering more is their planning to kill Hermione ... By the way, who are the other three?"

"The youngest is a first-grader, Damon Harker ... Then there's a second-grader by the name of Rupert Tyrrell ... The third Muggles-born student balances out the statistics because she's a girl ... She might even raise your spirit as much as Miss Granger does."

As much as Hermione? Who might that ...

"Her name is Cho Chang."

"Oh."

Dumbledore showed a faint smile. "Yes - by coincidence ... You're still not saying 'Stop', Harry?"

A suspicious thought crossed Harry's mind. "Why do you ask now, Professor?"

"Because your task is difficult enough even without emotional stress." Dumbledore's face kept bare of any expression.

Harry blushed. "I don't know what you mean, but the answer is the same as before - I'm not going to say 'Stop'."

"Thank you, Harry ... I know your qualities as a fighter, and I know there was always a lot of emotion involved. When the moment comes, you're able to muster a clear mind and a high morale. That helps me living with the thought of sending you against those creatures ... You know, there would be two people who could never forgive me if we failed - one is myself, the other is Mrs. McGonagall."

The little joke broke the tension.

Harry asked, "Training with Mr. Lupin - does that mean I'll stay here in Hogwarts?"

"No, Harry - you will use the portkey to travel back and forth ... Your sessions will take place between eight and ten each evening."

"But why - why do I have to stay with the Dursleys?"

"One reason is - any unusual change right now is the last thing we need. So far, the other side has no idea that we know the complete planning ... That reminds me, Harry - until you enter the train, the people you met this evening are the only ones to know what's going on. Once on the train, I leave it to your judgment whom to gather for help in the arrangements. But not before. Is this understood?"

"Yes, Professor Dumbledore ... And the other reasons?"

Dumbledore smiled. "I have reason not to talk about the other reasons, Harry. Let me tell you so much - this place provides better protection than you would expect ... And besides - I have a strong feeling your situation there has improved quite recently."

Harry blushed again. "Did Sirius talk with you?"

"No he didn't ... We talked of course, but only technical matters."

Harry still looked questioning, but Dumbledore wouldn't say more.

He found Sirius downstairs.

Walking back to the railway platform, Sirius gave him some more details. His godfather would be on the train in his dog shape, officially as a pet animal for Hagrid, who had asked Harry to take the dog to Hogwarts.

The thought of Sirius at his side was comforting. In contrast, the thought of explaining all this to Cho Chang was enough to keep Harry sleepless for a long while, lying in his bed at Privet Drive.

03 - Silver and Gold

It was Thursday, a week and a day after the remarkable meeting in Dumbledore's office. Harry was working with Lupin like every evening since then. Using a Boggart which, toward Harry, appeared as a Dementor, Lupin forced him to conjure up Patronuses.

His teacher did so in all variations possible, with or without warning, in a training room or unexpectedly in a corridor, by light and in the dark. It was stressful work, Harry had developed a deficiency of sleep.

A moment ago, Lupin had managed to trigger the Boggart again. Expecting the meanwhile familiar shape, Harry registered with surprise the first significant change in days - what appeared in front of him was mostly unclear, but for sure it was no Dementor.

Reflexively, he raised his arm to do his part, only Lupin was quicker. Pointing his wand toward the amorphous shape, the teacher called, "*Riddiculus!*"

The shape burst up and disappeared.

Harry stared at the spot, turned to his trainer. "What was that?"

"I don't know ... Definitely not a Dementor." Lupin looked expectantly. "You know what this means?"

"Not exactly ... Maybe I know too well - it's just a Boggart, and the morphing doesn't work any longer."

"No, the morphing does *always* work ... Harry - it means, a Dementor is no longer what you fear more than anything else."

"Really?" Harry felt perplexed. "Then - what do I fear most? ... What shape was this?"

"Good question." After a thoughtful pause, Lupin said, "And the most fascinating aspect for me - it didn't look like Voldemort ... Although I haven't seen him in his new body."

"No, it didn't." Harry tried to find a name for his fears, without success.

Lupin said, "Maybe it's ... Remember what I told you years ago? You fear the fright - so this might be the Boggart's best guess how to shape the fright."

"Could be." Searching for a something better, Harry found the words to outline his feelings. "You know - today, my own definition would be something like, I fear the power of the Dark Forces, or more precisely, their evil will and what they have in mind for other people like Hermione."

Only in his mind, he added, ... *and for Cho.*

Lupin studied Harry for some time. Eventually, he rose. "Whatever it was, Harry - we need a Dementor as your opponent ... Come with me."

Harry frowned. What did Lupin have in mind? He followed his teacher - out of the room, through the corridor, down a seemingly endless number of staircases. Finally, they reached a dungeon totally unknown to him.

Lupin whispered something to a small picture of an ugly-looking creature, sitting on a three-legged dog.

The door opened.

Entering the dark room, Lupin hissed, "*Lumos.*"

Waiting at the door, Harry watched as the teacher used the light from his wand to reach a spot at the wall and to light some torches. However, even with their light, the end of the large dungeon kept hidden in darkness.

Lupin waited for Harry to come closer, then pointed. "Over there is a Dementor ... It's captured and right now in a stupefied state. I will activate it - and you, Harry, will chase it back into its cell ... Ready?"

"Wait a second!" Harry felt a rush of horror. "You mean - there's a real one?"

"Yes. It's no fake."

"How did you catch it? ... How did you stupefy it?"

In the wavering torchlight, Lupin's face showed a smile of clenched teeth. "It wasn't my work alone. There's no need unsettling you with the details, but trust my word, it was a tricky job ... Sufficient to say - if your Patronus fails, I'm right at your side ... Okay?"

"Okay." Despite the cold down here, Harry felt sweat on his temples.

When Lupin moved to the darker part, Harry couldn't see nor hear what his trainer was doing, until he came back with quick steps, to place himself at Harry's side.

A moment passed.

All senses on alert, Harry could hear slow steps. Even before the large, cloaked figure appeared in the dim light, he felt the frightening cold, the unmistakable hallmark of a Dementor.

Thoughts whirled through his mind. Was it true? Had he overcome the freezing panic which previously took him when confronted with Dementors?

Examining his inner self, he still recognized horror, but only as the natural recoiling of a warm body from this inhuman being. What he felt in addition was the growing rage, the same he'd felt when hearing that Hermione should be killed.

This rage, growing with every step of the approaching Dementor, seemed more than compensation for the unearthly cold.

Next moment, another thought shot through his mind. So far, he'd used his airfight with the Hungarian Horntail as the happiest memory to conjure up a Patronus. Through all the training, however, an idea had been nesting in his mind.

The happiest moment in his life - these were the few seconds when his parents had spoken with him, during his wizard duel with Voldemort. Except that the memory altogether was anything than happy, so he had rejected the temptation to try.

But this was the opportunity, the real test - if he failed, Lupin would save them both.

The Dementor was ten yards away.

Raising his wand, Harry concentrated on the picture of his parents under the golden arc of the fighting wands. *"EXPECTO PATRONUM!"*

A spur emitted from his wand, quickly forming into a shape.

Harry felt triumph, immediately followed by desperation - the shape wasn't silvery, didn't form a stag! Its colour was like dark, spotted gold.

Still - the shape completed, moved toward the Dementor. And with this closing in, Harry's desperation faded, making room for a sense of wonder. There was no doubt - the Patronus formed a Centaur!

And more - as he felt his confidence grow, he could watch how the dark spots faded, how the golden shimmer increased.

With its last steps moving like an attacking Centaur, the Patronus reached the Dementor. At the same instant, a high-pitched sound pierced into Harry's ears, a sound barely within the audible range.

It came from the Dementor, held for some endless seconds, stopped abruptly. The Dementor seemed to shrink.

It took Harry a moment to realize - the cloaked figure had collapsed, was lying on the ground, motionless. The cold feeling gone.

The Centaur danced away, turned, bent, and faded into nothing.

Carefully, Lupin moved forward, his wand ready. He leaned over the formless lump on the ground, then knelt, examining closely.

Coming up, he put his wand off, returned to a speechless Harry. "I'm ready to believe it, except I'll need a few more minutes ... Harry, how did you do it?"

"I don't know ... I did the same as always ..."

"No, can't be - something must have been different."

"The only - well, I used another memory."

The teacher's impatience seemed hardly under control. "Please - can you tell me what it was?"

After a moment's hesitation, Harry explained to Lupin what he had thought and which scene he had imagined.

Lupin's eyes were burning in the torchlight. "Harry, do you know what you just did?"

"I conjured up a Patronus - except it was golden rather than silvery ... And it was a Centaur, not the stag as before."

"The Golden Patronus ..." Lupin's voice was in awe. "So it's true."

"What is true? ... And why has this been a Centaur?"

"Of all books about the Patronus spell, there is just one that mentions a golden one. And until now, most wizards considered this a fairytale, an exaggeration of the author, or just a metaphor." Lupin told Harry about the history of the Patronus spell, and how this topic had always suffered, from unreliable sources as much as from the lack of sufficient material.

As Harry learned, the systematic usage of Dementors was fairly new in the wizard history. Obviously, most wizards in power throughout the centuries had shared Dumbledore's opinion, that Dementors were a weapon that hurt more than it helped.

When Lupin finished, Harry was already impatient. "That's all very interesting, but it doesn't answer my questions. What made me do it, and why a Centaur?"

"I have no answer I can prove, all I can offer is a speculation ... Want to hear it?"

"You bet."

"I see three factors playing a role." The teacher counted with his fingers. "The first isn't really new, but it appears in a new context. Harry - the love of your mother has protected you the first time, and it has reinforced you again. Don't ask me how, but for me there's no doubt."

"Hmm ... Well, okay. And the second?"

"Your happiest moment in life is embedded in your worst memory. But still, you didn't hesitate to use it in the first encounter with a real Dementor - I mean here in our training ... This book I mentioned contains a few lines I couldn't make sense of, all the time - until you told me what you did."

"You mean - it's this combination what makes the Patronus so powerful?"

"Yes ... Mind you - the Dementor is knocked out, maybe even dead ... I don't think we can use him ever again."

"Oh. I'm sorry. What ..."

Lupin started to laugh, continued so, unable to stop.

After the first moment of uncertainty, Harry joined with a giggle. The tension was broken. It took a while until both of them were calming down.

"Harry," gasped Lupin, "that's a good one ... In case you don't know yet - your Patronus training is over. It's the old story about the pupil surpassing his master."

"You mean you cannot teach me any more?"

"That's not what I mean ... I still have a few tricks to show - we'll use the days ahead for some of them. But I cannot conjure up a Golden Patronus, so this part is over."

Harry grinned. "Fine with me. It wasn't exactly boring, but I'm looking forward to new challenges."

But one question wasn't answered yet. "Professor Lupin, what does it mean that this Patronus was a Centaur?"

"It means, this was your own Patronus ... Until before, you still followed the sample of your father, who considered a stag as the ultimate form of grace and power. Obviously, your own opinion gives that credit to Centaurs."

That made sense. A Centaur ... The Centaur Firenze had saved him in the Forbidden Forest, overcoming the prejudice of his own species. Harry felt very satisfied with the choice of his sub-conscious.

"Let's finish for today," said Lupin. "You have things to think about, and I have a wasted Dementor to deposit ... I expect you tomorrow at the usual time. By then, I'll have an idea what to teach you next."

Harry followed his trainer upstairs, until the corridors looked familiar enough. Then he said, "Professor, I want to thank you. I don't think the student has surpassed the teacher. I mean, I wouldn't know how to catch a Dementor."

"True, Harry - you just knock them down ... Good night!"

* * *

When arriving for his training the next day, Harry learned that the Dementor was alive but catatonic, and that Lupin didn't expect it to awake ever again. It didn't bother Harry.

His teacher had mixed feelings. "I would have liked one more try - just to make sure this wasn't your only Golden Patronus in store. Only I have no other Dementor. And, to be honest - I've got some feeling the next one wouldn't even survive."

Startled, Harry said, "Professor, I don't feel too good about me killing Dementors. I mean ... I have no pity, but ..."

"I'm sorry, Harry."

Lupin's face was rueful. "Please forgive my thoughtless remark. I know, you don't want to move around as a killing machine. But before we discuss this further, as today's main topic,

remember this - a Dementor isn't human, and it cannot scale its attacking power. So it cannot surrender either ... A Patronus - your Patronus - fights only as hard as necessary. So if the opponent cannot bend, can only break, it will be broken."

Harry was silent for some time, chewing on that. Then he asked, "Can we discuss this a little more?"

"Certainly." Lupin smiled. "It puts us right into today's lesson. Harry, what do you know about fighting?"

Harry swallowed the quick reply that had come up, remembering just in time that Lupin wouldn't ask him a stupid question. Thinking harder, he saw his assumption confirmed - beneath the surface, this question held some trapdoors.

So his first answer was chosen carefully. "Fighting needs two opponents." After another moment, he added, "And it needs something to fight with."

Lupin had waited silently. Now he nodded, apparently satisfied by the answer. His next question sounded as simple as the first. "Opponents and weapons. Is this enough?"

"No. They must have a reason to fight." Harry felt as if his answers were building a dam against the rising flood of Lupin's questions, except that soon he would be out of supply.

"Something else?" Lupin's face was expressionless.

"Hmm - yes, of course. The opponents must have the intention to fight. Otherwise, either they would live in peace, or one would chase the other."

"Very good so far ... Now they fight." Lupin paused, as though giving the two imaginary opponents time.

His next question came like a shot. "Who's going to win?"

"The stronger one ... Er - no, the better one."

"Really?"

Lupin's face had lost the blank stare. It looked as if he had cornered his prey. "Why didn't Voldemort win against you?"

"Because ..." After a moment, Harry continued, "One reason is, I had some protection, but I know that's not what you want to hear ..."

Checking his teacher's face for confirmation, he saw only raised eyebrows, making clear that Lupin had his own opinion about what he wanted to hear.

Only he didn't hint at it, and so Harry, somewhat helplessly, finished, "... I have some feeling of what I could say, but I can't put it into words."

Quite unexpectedly, Lupin beamed. "Excellent, Harry ... I'm here to put it into words. Listen to me, and be prepared for a little monologue."

After these questions, that was just fine with him. Harry relaxed, although the teacher had his full attention.

"Muggles," began Lupin, "fight with knives or guns. Wizards fight with wands and spells. Sometimes, both sides just use their fists ... But common to all of them is the big mistake of thinking that the better weapon or the higher skill is enough to win the fight ... And again and again, this expectation is proven wrong."

Harry nodded.

"Generally speaking, a Muggle would feel much more powerless than any wizard. He has no magic to solve his problems. So it's no surprise that it were Muggles who developed the philosophy of combat to its highest grades. This mental art has many forms and many names; let's summarize it to one name - Zen."

Told Harry nothing. "What is Zen?"

"Zen is the art to explore your inner self, to activate your inner resources. This can result in a power more forceful than the outside tool, whether sword, gun, or wand ... Harry, considering your survival, it's obvious that you're a natural talent in the art of Zen. My job is just this, to make you aware of it and to show you how to train."

Harry quickly reviewed some events in his mind, checking whether Lupin's words rang a bell. "I cannot say you're right or wrong, anyway it feels like right."

"Exactly, because - Zen isn't knowledge ... It is feeling and understanding."

For Harry, this seemed all quite vague, he wouldn't mind a better handle to it.

"There's more," continued Lupin. "It's not enough to explore yourself. You also have to explore the inner self of your opponent ... This is Voldemort's most serious weakness, and that's why all his attacks toward you failed."

"But I had help ..."

"Yes - only that's just the point. Look, when he tried to kill you as a baby, he simply didn't expect a counter force strong enough to backfire his spell. And some weeks ago, he failed again, this time because he didn't take into account the nature of the two wands."

Feeling barely wiser, Harry asked, "Is Zen then some kind of espionage?"

"Yes and no." Lupin had started moving back and forth. "Collecting all information is like doing the homework, but that's just a basic prerequisite ... You must feel out the spirit of your enemy. Only that way, you can feel his weak spot. And this is where you must hit."

"Sounds simple - somehow." Harry blushed about his banal words.

"The principle is simple, yes. Holding to it in the heat of the fight, in the possession of the seemingly irresistible power - that's the difficult part ... Call it discipline."

"Yes, I see."

A moment later, however, after reconsidering some events, Harry felt again confused. "But some of my fights were won only by breaking all discipline. How ..."

"No, No!" Lupin calmed himself. "You broke rules, you broke agreements, but you never broke the only discipline that matters - following the advice you gathered by feeling yourself and your opponent."

Harry's mind was at filled with the memory how he violated the time rule when he and Hermione saved Sirius Black, just because it felt like the only thing right. And suddenly he understood. "Yes, Professor - that fits."

"It's needless to say this to you, Harry, so just for the sake of thoroughness - there is no *carte blanche* to do what you want just because you feel like it."

Harry laughed. "No, I wouldn't think so. I know what you mean."

"There is something else ... I like to call it the first axiome of fight. I don't need to teach it to you, because you already keep to it. But I want to speak it out."

The handles, missed so badly only minutes ago, were gaining shape. Harry waited eagerly for Lupin's next words.

"Before you fight, Harry, find out whether you're ready to fight. Part of this is to know the scale - is it a fight for some advantage, or is it a fight for life and death ... Once you have decided to fight, do it to the end! In its shortest form, it means - fight to win!"

Harry frowned. "But isn't this the obvious goal?"

"From the outside, yes." Lupin snorted. "But how often can you see people stopping in midfight, because they are tired, because they feel pity, or whatever. That's how they reinforce their opponent, and that's how they lose."

"And afterwards?"

"That brings us back to the starting point ... You didn't like the effect of your fight against the Dementor. That's why you're *not* a wizard of the Dark Forces. To feel sick about a being you killed is a very human reaction - after the fight is over. Only then."

Harry felt a stunning surprise. "That's why the Sorting Hat put me into Gryffindor."

Lupin smiled. "Yes, Harry. Let me come to the end. If your fight was right, and if the result was the only way to win, the sickness afterwards will fade. You'll feel a sadness that this was inevitable, but you still can look into the mirror."

Had his teacher killed already? Harry would have liked to know, thought better than asking that. Then another question occurred to him. "I didn't let Wormtail be killed. And then it was him who ... Was this stopping a fight before the end?"

Lupin took his time to answer. "You have stopped Sirius and myself, and we accepted it because only you had the right to decide. That means, you have ended our fight, and certainly

before the end as we'd planned ... But you didn't stop your own fight - simply because it hadn't even begun."

That didn't help him much. "Professor Dumbledore said it was for some reason - but all I see is that Wormtail brought Voldemort back to life."

"To prove my own theory first - you weren't ready to fight, so you didn't. That is, condemning a man to his death is of course a form of fighting. The result of your decision may be worse than expected, but this is fate ... To prove Dumbledore's point," now Lupin was grinning, "all you have to do is to open your eyes."

"Sorry," came the confused reply, "the nickel doesn't drop."

"What's a nickel?"

"Never mind - I mean, I don't see what you mean."

Lupin looked wonderingly. "Our ultimate goal is to destroy Voldemort. Do you agree?"

Harry nodded.

"Which probably means to kill him. Do you still agree?"

"Yes, I do."

"Then you'll certainly agree - it's very helpful to have a body incorporated by Voldemort. How else would we find and destroy him?"

Harry stared. "I didn't look at it this way."

"That's because you were involved so deeply and so personally. Now let's talk about specific training."

For the few minutes left of the evening lesson, they discussed plans for the next days. On arrival, Harry had expected that Lupin would teach him other spells that could be used in combat situations. But as it turned out, his schedule would be filled with mental training more than anything else.

And - despite all the handles Lupin had provided, it was still terribly difficult to grab the idea his teacher called Zen.

* * *

Some days afterwards, when returning into his room, a letter from Ron was awaiting Harry - initially in the shape of an owl sitting outside his window.

Ron invited him to finish the summer vacation with the Weasleys, as was already the habit.

It took Harry little thought to realize - he'd never manage to pass these days without spilling a wrong word. He didn't need his new knowledge for the only possible decision. With suffering heart, he wrote:

Dear Ron,
thank you for your invitation, but this time I cannot accept it, although it is very hard to say No. I am very busy here with a special kind of homework that will take me until the end of the vacation.
I am really looking forward to explain all of it to you (and to some others), but this has to wait until we will meet in the Hogwarts Express. Please give my thanks and my greetings to all people in your family. I certainly would like coming back to your offer next year.
Your very busy
Harry

Somehow, this felt like a very realistic example of what Lupin had meant when talking about 'stopping in midfight'. Harry wasn't going to stop in midfight, couldn't help but feeling miserable either.

Two days afterwards, another letter arrived from Ron.

Dear Harry,
I cannot believe it. If it were not for your relatives, I would think you were working with Hermione at some crazy project. Be prepared to stand an examination lock, stock, and barrel.
Ron

Harry grinned. Boy, were his friends in for a surprise.

However - thinking about this surprise quickly sobered him up.

04 - The Hogwarts Express Accident

In the past years, the shopping tours for a new school year had been done with the help of the Weasleys, and together with them. This time, Harry was left alone in his task, and at first, it seemed very difficult.

He decided to ask Uncle Vernon for just one journey.

This took him to Gringotts, where his first action was a visit to his vault, getting some money. This done, he asked for Muggles money, in exchange of a few galleons.

The bank clerk - very politely - asked for which purpose Harry might need Muggles money.

"For a cab," was the answer.

He had to explain what a cab was.

When the clerk finally understood, he asked - still very politely - why Harry wouldn't use the Knight Bus.

Since then, the shopping chores hadn't been difficult any longer.

What was an unspectacular method for guiding a large black dog through the streets and onto the train? Sirius had found the answer.

A man would await Harry just before the train. This man would give him the leash with the dog at the other end; then, he would guide him to a reserved compartment. Adjacent to that, a second compartment would be locked, showing the sign *Out of Order*.

Except it wasn't, and Harry had a key.

This way, Harry would find enough room for his supporters - Ron, Hermione, the twins - as well as for his *protégées*. Thinking of Cho as a protégée was really a weird feeling.

He reached King's Cross, found a good spot to wait - close to the passage toward the platform nine and three-quarters. In a few minutes, he was about to meet his friends, and this would mark the end of a difficult period in which Lupin had been the only one to talk with.

A group of figures appeared in the station hall, outstanding by their red hair.

Harry's heart jumped - the Weasleys. Watching them, he saw Hermione was with the group. This would make things simpler.

They saw him, closed in, Ron two steps ahead. "Harry, you dirtbag! ... How are you?"

"Hi, Ron - awfully glad to meet you ... Hello, Mrs. Weasley."

The next moments were filled with greetings and huggings, before a look to the clock told Harry it was time.

"Let's go ... There's somebody waiting for me."

"Really?" Ron looked surprised, then grinned. "Does this somebody happen to be ..."

Just barely, Harry managed to cut his friend short. "Wait and see ... I have to take something for Hagrid."

"No dragon, I hope." This was Hermione.

They passed through the hidden entrance, both Ron and Hermione eager to see Hagrid's delivery - if only for their peace of mind.

Exactly where he'd expected him, Harry saw a man standing with a dog at his side, the dog's shape and colour not leaving any doubt if, by some crazy accident, these two weren't the right ones.

Coming closer, he registered the moment when the man recognized him - one of the few occasions at which a lightning-shaped scar had proved a benefit.

The man passed him the leash, pointed to a compartment behind, and left, without exchanging a single word.

Ron had reached Harry with dog, said, "Of course, another pet for Hagrid, because for anyone smaller, this beast would ..." Ron stopped in mid-sentence, examined the dog more closely, turned to Harry with big eyes. "But that's ..."

"That's the dog for Hagrid!" Harry had accentuated every word sharply, now looked hard into Ron's face, relaxing when he saw his friend had caught the message.

Hermione had caught it too. She kept silent, which perhaps was a discipline as heroic as Harry's own when declining the Weasley offer, only her eyes were bright with surprise.

Her desire to listen was easily matched by Harry's impatience to tell. He said, "We have a compartment with a special dog allowance ... Come in."

Of course, when entering, his friends registered the locked compartment next door at once, looked at him questioningly, then hurried forward at realizing that they'd learn more only behind closed doors.

In the open compartment, Harry made the dog jump onto the seat next to the window, sat down at its side, feeling himself suddenly dwarfed. He turned around. "Ron - please tell Fred and George to join us as soon as we've left the station ... No - don't ask me now, I'll explain everything to all of you."

Ron opened his mouth, closed it, nodded, left.

Hermione fondled the dog, bent closer, whispered, "Hi, Sirius."

The dog's answer was a wagging tail and a quick slap with the tongue.

About to comment on that, Harry heard the door opening, turned quickly to send off any unwelcome traveller.

Unwelcome, oh yes ... Draco Malfoy, flanked by Crabbe and Goyle.

"Harry Potter ..." Draco's eyes were glittering. "I still owe you one - for the last time." Glancing over Harry's shoulder, he added, "And you too, Mudblood. This will be a long and eventful journey."

A deep growl from the corner made Harry turn aside. The dog was baring his teeth, tensing his muscles, ready to jump ...

"Your pet won't help you," hissed Malfoy, already retreating. The three figures hurried away from the open door.

Moments later, Ron was back. "I met the unholy trinity. They were looking so happy."

If Harry had needed a final confirmation, Ron's observation gave it - at least Draco Malfoy knew what was going to happen. Suddenly, an evil but so far rather abstract plot had gained unpleasant reality.

A whistle was blowing, then the train started to move.

Outside, Mrs. Weasley waved a last time, and moments later, they were alone.

Harry exhaled deeply, felt like stones falling off his back. Maybe there was a nightmare waiting ahead, but at least he was with his friends.

Ron bent forward, impatience and expectation in his face. "Okay, Harry - spit it out ... What's up? - What is Sirius doing here? - What have you done the last weeks?"

Harry grinned, grew serious again. "In a minute, Fred and George will be here, then I have to tell it only once ... But listen - until Sirius shows himself, this dog is just a dog for Hagrid, even for the twins ... All right?"

Before Ron could answer, the door opened, this time for welcome guests. Fred and George entered the compartment.

"Talking about the devil," said Ron. "Er - sorry, devils, I mean."

His brothers wasted no time paying attention to that. "Harry, big sponsor," said Fred, and George added, "You've called us?" They sat down.

"What I have to say first - every word of what's going to follow is true ... Remember Lupin?"

Nodding.

"He's on the train ... Once you know as much as I do, I'll need you, Ron, to look for him."

Then he told them the full story, starting with his visit to Hogwarts, and ending with his training lessons, leaving out only the details of the real Dementor and the Golden Patronus.

He finished, "I promised Dumbledore not to talk to anyone, until the train is under way ... That's why I didn't dare following your invitation. I guess I'd have spilled the secret within minutes."

Fred and George exchanged glances, for once silent.

Hermione was the first to recover. "What are we supposed to do, Harry?"

"Well, we have to gather Cho and the two boys ... I've got pictures of them, and there's a letter from Dumbledore for each of the three - you know, in case they won't move to our orders."

"Leave the boys to us," said George, "and let Hermione get Cho ... I can't help thinking she might need that letter."

Harry nodded. "Yeah, that's what I had in mind."

Hermione's comment was a smile - a short one, Harry could watch how the full impact of his story was wiping it off.

That reminded him. "Wait - before you go, there's something else ... Draco knows about the plan." He informed the Weasley brothers about the short encounter, instantly followed by Ron describing what he'd seen passing the three figures outside.

"Ron," said Harry, "go find Lupin and tell him." He pointed toward the head of the train. "The last compartment before the freight wagon will be locked. Knock twice, then wait a second, then once, and finally twice more - that's the code ... Ask Lupin what we should do about Draco."

"I'd have an idea," replied Ron, his glance passing the dog in the corner. "But you're right. I'll ask."

As the others rose, Harry added, "Oh, I almost forgot - I've got a key for the compartment next door, the one that's signed as out of order ... Fred, George, bring those boys in there and stay with them until I'll join you."

He was alone with the dog, had a few minutes to prepare his rhetorics for the talk ahead, which seemed quite a task of its own - somehow, the thought of explaining the situation to Cho was more frightening than an encounter with some Dementors.

This would have been an excellent opportunity to bite nails, except he wasn't prone to it.

Days before, when meeting Dumbledore again, the Headmaster had suggested to inform the two boys only as much as required to keep them together. This was one reason why he wanted to separate between them and Cho - there was no doubt, he had to tell her the full truth.

And even if he might have found another reason inside him - this official one was enough, wasn't it?

* * *

Deep in his thoughts, Harry registered the knocking only when the door was opening already. Looking up, he saw Hermione coming in.

Followed by Cho Chang.

Followed by another girl??

Before he could present something better than a baffled stare, Cho was talking. "Yeah, exactly what I thought ... Hi, Harry."

"Hi, Cho."

With some effort, he turned to Hermione. "Why didn't you bring her alone?"

Under different circumstances, it might have been fun watching how somebody was outperforming Hermione as easily as Cho did, spilling words. "This is my friend Almyra ... Almyra and I are as inseparable as you thr ..." Cho stopped herself, looked astonished. "Where's your red-haired friend?"

"You mean Ron ... He'll be back in a minute." Slowly recovering, Harry made an attempt to say hello to the other girl.

Only Cho was quicker. "Yes of course. I just thought you had transformed him into that dog, except this one's black."

"What??" Harry couldn't believe his ears. Had she really said, "This one's Black?"

"This dog is too black - if it would be Ron, it had to be red, hadn't it?" A short giggle escaped Cho's throat.

Suddenly, Harry knew the reason for her rapid-fire talking - she was at least as nervous as he himself. It eased him sufficiently to steady his voice, "Hi, Almyra ... I'm Harry - please sit down."

He hadn't planned any additional word, which was just appropriate since Cho fired her next shot. Looking at Hermione, she said, "Okay then, so what's your story?"

"My story?" Hermione made big eyes. "What do you mean?"

Cho seized in her pocket, came up with a parchment, opened it. "This is the letter from Dumbledore - just the one I got from you, remember? It says - " she scanned the writing, "... the holder of this letter will explain the matter to you, and so on, and so on ... So please explain!"

Hermione's head tilted toward Harry. "He's the one with the story ... I'm just the messenger."

"Must be a new role for you." Cho turned away from Hermione, missing a furious look, looked at Harry. "Okay, Master of Ceremonies - tell us the story."

The last exchange had given Harry time enough to regain his balance. He said, "Please, Cho - I'll have trouble enough telling you what's up, even without ..." He didn't dare finishing the sentence, found help from an unexpected side.

"What he means," said Almyra to Cho, "is that your wisecracking doesn't improve things very much. So please - shut up and let him explain."

To Harry's great astonishment, Cho stopped talking and just sat there, looking at him.

Almyra said, "Must be a hell of a story."

"Unfortunately," agreed Harry, "it is." It earned him the undivided attention of the two girls.

"Remember how the train was stopped two years ago, when they were looking for this escaped prisoner?"

His audience nodded, while Harry forced himself not to look at the dog.

"Something similar will happen today, except it's much worse ... The train will be stopped by the Dark Forces, and what they have in mind is not a single prisoner, quite the opposite ... They plan to take the students as hostages."

He explained how the captured students should be used to blackmail the parents and, at the same time, to discredit Dumbledore and Hogwarts from their reputation as a center force against Voldemort. He told them that the plan, although desperate, was to defeat the attack and to publish the event as a victory.

Cho's comment was the quickest. "I can see why they didn't go public before ... If the attackers win, there's nothing lost because the Dark Forces could have captured one student after the other at home. But if we come through, all students are much safer in Hogwarts."

She looked at Harry. "But what's so important for us being here?"

"I didn't tell the full story yet ... You know, a hostage is just good to put pressure onto somebody else. What the Dark Forces want is to take over control of the wizarding world. So they can use only students to pressure other wizards." Harry paused, searching for words.

Almyra's eyes went big. "Hermione, what kind of parents do you have?"

Hermione nodded. "Yes - you've got the point."

It took Cho some more seconds to understand. Slowly, she said, "Our parents are no wizards. Blackmailing them would only be about money - Muggles money. That's useless."

Her head came around toward Harry. "And your parents are dead ... Those bastards are going to kill us, right?"

"That's their plan - this is why the Muggles-born students need special protection ... It's you, Hermione, and two younger boys - Fred and George are collecting them right now ... We know that the Dark Forces are going to use Dementors for - er, for this part of the plan."

Cho nodded. "Putting us together makes the protection easier ... So the only question left - where's our bodyguard?"

"Somewhere in the train is Mr. Lupin," replied Harry, feeling satisfied by the expression of pleasure in the girls' faces. "By the way, that's where Ron is heading ... Lupin will be one of those who gather our own troupes as soon as the train has stopped, and the place of the attack is known. But ... "

Cho interrupted him. "Oh, I see - then Lupin will come and rescue us ... I really hope he'll be fast enough."

"No ..." Harry bit his lips. "Lupin will be too busy fighting with the others. But he was the one who had the idea for a permanent bodyguard, and Dumbledore agreed ... Even McGonagall agreed."

Hearing the name of the Gryffindor Headmistress, Cho's eyes widened in surprise. "Harry, don't tell me it's ..."

"Yes, it's me." Harry watched Cho's face.

"You?"

"Yes."

"Against Dementors??"

"Yes ... I've been working with Lupin every single day for the last three weeks, to hone my skill on what he taught me two years ago."

Hermione caught in. "Cho, I was together with Harry when he chased away a bunch of Dementors. Ever heard of the *Patronus* spell?"

Cho shook her head.

Almyra said, "I've read about it ... It's not even part of the teaching at Hogwarts." She turned to Harry. "You can do a Patronus?"

"I did one after the other - until last week. Then Lupin declared the training finished, and we worked at something else."

Cho was staring at him. "Why was it finished last week?"

"We had used a Boggart because, toward me, it appeared as a Dementor."

This information, as he became aware, wasn't suited to improve the trust in him, so he continued quickly, "Then Lupin presented a real Dementor. But it was just good for one more try ... Anyway, Lupin was satisfied with it."

"What happened to the Dementor?" It was Almyra who asked.

"It went catatonic."

Stunned silence filled the compartment.

Hermione looked as if she would like to cross-examine Harry about the details.

Once more, Cho was quicker. "And what's this dog doing here?"

"It's for Hagrid ... I promised him to take care of it, so there was no need for him travelling to Diagon Alley."

"Yeah, certainly so." Cho's tone made clear what she thought of the answer.

The door opened.

Ron came in. "Hi, everybody ... Harry, can I speak?"

Harry nodded.

"I've found Lupin ... Actually, there's a very nice cat sitting with him. It has such an interesting pattern in the face, looks like glasses - if you get my bearing."

The others nodded, smiled with pleasure. What Ron had described was the animal shape of Professor McGonagall.

Cho sent another thoughtful look into the corner where the dog was lying.

Ron continued, "Lupin says we should avoid any contact - probably Draco's supposed to give some signal or whatever ... Only if they come to mess with us, we are free to give them a lesson."

Seeing the blank look in the girls' faces, Harry hurried to explain that the other side also had agents among the students.

Ron had still another message from Lupin. "Then he asked me to tell you something ... I don't know what it means, but his words were, tell Harry, the Golden Centaur is always alone."

Harry nodded; understanding perfectly - Lupin's reminder told him he would be able to conjure only one Patronus at a time. He remembered Dumbledore's warning not to interfere in the outside battle while leaving the students with him unprotected.

His thoughts were interrupted by Cho's next remark. "It's strange," she said. "I'm sitting here, hearing that soon some creature is coming to kill me, and listening to you - telling us a bunch of half-lies. And still - I feel as if this is really the safest place in the train."

"You bet," grinned Ron.

Harry said, "Thank you for this, erm, compliment. But I didn't lie to you."

"No - sorry, I used the wrong term ... What I meant was, you told us just enough of the truth to keep us here."

"But I told you all about the plan ... The only thing missing - I had no opportunity yet, the attackers will be Dementors and Giants. But our troops also include Giants - Hagrid was the one that won them."

"How reassuring, to know Giants will take part in the fight." Cho was counting with her fingers. "Half-truth number one, this story about the dog is crap ... I'm pretty sure it's some kind of second bodyguard, except I don't see how. But okay."

She raised the next finger. "Number two, your training with Lupin. I listened carefully, but somehow I missed the part where the story begins. I guess you didn't want to bother us with boring details from the past. And it ended quite abruptly with a catatonic Dementor."

She turned to her friend. "This end feels a little loose, don't you agree, Al?"

The other girl nodded. "The book I read, there was nothing about this effect from a Patronus. It only said this spell could be used to protect against Dementors."

Cho's third finger came up. "And just when I think all right, mind your own business, Ron comes back from Lupin with a mystic message about Centaurs ... Mr. Potter, would you damn please explain this to us?" Looking at Hermione, she added, "It's as new to us as to your friends, I can see it."

Harry still hesitated, not knowing exactly why he had trouble talking about his new skill.

Hermione said, "Harry, we are the planned victims. It's better for us to know what to expect ... Don't you agree?"

He sighed. "Yes - of course ... What Lupin's message means is, you can conjure only one Patronus at a time. As Dumbledore told me before, I'm not supposed to fight against Dementors outside while you are at risk."

"Oh."

Suddenly, the others were reminded that a dangerous encounter would be taking place soon.

"About the Centaur ... You must know, a Patronus takes the form of what the wizard considers the essence of grace and power. Until recently, my Patronus had the shape of a stag. Lupin told me this was my father's preference for transformation."

At the mentioning of his father, the others tried to look anywhere but into his face - except for Almyra.

"When Lupin confronted me with the real Dementor, I changed something in my technique - I mean the memory I used ... One effect was, the shape that came up was a Centaur. Obviously, as Lupin told me, that's my own choice."

Hermione was beaming. "Harry, that's super. I guess mine would be a Unicorn, but I wouldn't disagree with you."

"And this Centaur was golden?" The question came from Almyra.

"Yes ... Until before, the Patronus was always silvery, and its effect was to chase the Dementors away. But the new one was golden, and it turned the Dementor catatonic ... I'll never forget the sound it made before it collapsed."

Harry didn't want to tell them how unusual a Golden Patronus was.

"And which mem ..." Almyra stopped herself. "Sorry, that's really none of my business."

Harry saw Cho looking thoughtfully at Almyra. It was clear, she would examine her friend closely about the literature on the Patronus issue - provided they survived the day.

A knock at the door interrupted the lasting silence.

It was Fred. "Hi there ... Harry, I know it's much more fun to talk with the girls, but I think now it's our turn. Those boys are waiting for you. So, if you'd just take this dog with you into the next compartment, George and I could raise the spirit here."

Harry's reply was half a laugh, half a giggle. He looked at the dog who jumped up immediately. They went into the next compartment.

George did the honneurs. "Boys, this is the famous Harry Potter - together with his pet. Harry, meet Rupert Tyrrell, who is very pleased to meet you," George pointed to a sand-haired boy who was watching Harry with shining eyes, "and Damon Harker, for whom everyting is new and very exciting."

The younger boy reminded Harry of himself on his first journey to Hogwarts.

George stood up. "Now I'll let you alone. The ladies are waiting for my appearance."

* * *

After the discussion with Cho and Almyra, the task of telling these two boys a carefully edited truth seemed like kid's play to Harry, something to recover with before the events started.

As a first step, it turned out, he had to stop them from addressing him with *Sir*. Then he asked them what the twins had explained already, completed this by telling them about the planned attack and about a *possible* risk for those students without a wizard in the family.

To his horror, the careful censorship was a total waste - both boys had seen too much Muggles TV.

"Yeah," said Damon Harker casually, "they want to kill us, like in these movies. But you're our bodyguard."

"You must know," said Rupert Tyrrell to the other boy, "last year Harry has won the Tri-Wizard's Tournament. And the others were much older."

He continued to inform the newcomer about Hogwarts, its rules and rites. Naturally, the Sorting Hat was a central issue. Rupert Tyrrell was Ravenclaw, and poor Damon couldn't decide whether to prefer the house of his new friend Rupert, or that of his new hero Harry.

The coming attack didn't bother them, and Harry was grateful for it.

He decided to deepen the track. "The Sorting Hat will take the decision for you," he told Damon. "Although - you know, when I was sorted, the Hat first thought I would fit into Slytherin."

"Really?" Rupert, the second-grader, seemed genuinely horrified.

"Yes," nodded Harry. "he said, I would do fine there. But I didn't want to do fine there, so he put me into Gryffindor."

Rupert was relieved, while the younger boy was caught by another confusion. "But then, if I'm offered a choice, I still don't know what to do."

"It's pretty unlikely," said Harry. "As far as I know, my case is special. I inherited some evil powers from my encounters with the Dark Forces, that's why the Sorting Hat saw more than one option ... Actually, that's what qualifies me as your bodyguard."

The two boys nodded without any question. Obviously, this explanation matched perfectly their experience from Muggles TV.

When the witch with the sweets trolley came along, Harry announced that he'd been ordered to treat the boys with everything they wanted, expressing the hope they would want everything.

There was no opposition, probably again thanks to TV education.

Outside stood another customer - George, presenting some money, grinning. "Harry, don't worry about the proper treatment of the ladies ... Remember, we met the end of the rainbow."

Back in the compartment, Harry stored a large pile of sweets on a free seat.

The next half hour was filled with tasting and eating. Rupert explained the various types to Damon, while Harry fed the dog and himself. Sirius had a clear preference for Chocoballs.

Every now and then, laughter could be heard from the other compartment. Then the boys fell silent. After some more minutes. Harry realized they had fallen asleep. It gave him the opportunity to check with the others.

Opening the door, he found Hermione outside.

"Everything okay?" she asked.

"Yes. They are sleeping. I wouldn't mind if they slept through the event. What are you doing here outside?"

"Making sure the wrong people don't approach unnoticed ... We take turns; one shift is half an hour."

Harry nodded appreciatively.

Hermione's voice dropped to a low volume. "Harry, I read the material about the Patronus spell too. There is just one book mentioning something like a Golden Patronus, and it's considered unreliable."

Harry was amazed. "I should have known ... Well, even Lupin was quite surprised. He thinks it must be the very special nature of the memory, or at least this must be a major factor."

Hermione watched him. The question was only in her face.

After a moment, Harry continued, "You know, the memory I used was that of my parents, when I met them during my fight with Voldemort. Lupin says, the happiest memory embedded in the worst experience - that's what makes it so powerful."

Hermione's hand was at his shoulder. "Harry, you won't believe how much I appreciate the thought of a catatonic Dementor - right now."

"Yeah - you won't believe how much I agree."

The train shuttered, jolted, slowed down.

One step took Harry to the door of the first compartment. He opened, sensing that his grip was firm but sweaty, seeing all eyes resting on him.

"It begins ... Cho, please come over into the next compartment. The two boys are asleep - at least they were a minute ago. Ron, Fred, George - can you place yourself as watchposts at both sides?"

Everybody rose.

Almyra said, "I'll join Ron. That makes two at both sides." She touched Cho's shoulder and left.

Harry went back into the other compartment, followed by Cho and Hermione. Their faces were tense, mask-like.

The younger boy was still asleep, but Rupert Tyrrell came awake, sleepiness being replaced by fright.

The two girls sat side by side.

With one jump, the dog had leapt up from the seat, had reached the door. It was sitting there, motionless except for the head which turned both sides to watch the floor.

Harry stood at the window, waiting.

* * *

The train rattled to a halt in a passage that looked like a narrow valley. At Harry's side, a zone of about thirty yards ran along the track where the ground was flat, with grass and a few bushes. It was bordered by a deep forest that steeped up a mountain.

Looking to the other side, Harry saw a similar picture, only the open range was even narrower.

It couldn't have been designed better for the enemy. This was another place than two years before. There was still daylight, in contrast to the last stop which had taken place after nightfall. Of course, the Dark Forces wouldn't want any student to escape.

Harry didn't know which side would benefit more from the daylight, at any rate, he was grateful for it.

The first voices of excited students could be heard along the corridor.

He kept watching through the window. Not seeing much in this limited viewing angle, he opened the window and peeked out.

Behind him, he heard a muffled shriek. Somebody, probably Rupert, didn't like the direct exposure to those waiting outside. The cool evening air rushed into the compartment. Harry heard sounds of yawning in his back - apparently, the sleeping Damon was coming awake.

Then he saw the first movements.

Close to the head of the train, a few human figures appeared. They approached the next wagon, looked up to the windows. It looked as if they were talking with the students, although Harry couldn't hear anything.

And impatient "Ssshht" and a wave of his hand made the compartment fall into silence.

Some students climbed down the staircases and jumped to the ground. One of them shouted something and turned toward the group of men. Was it ... Yes - Draco Malfoy, his two satellites close behind.

"Of course," hissed Harry. He turned inside. "Draco is welcoming some wizards."

He turned again, watching the scene. A movement in the corner of his eyes made him look closer toward the forest.

Some trees were moving.

With a sharp contraction of his stomach, Harry recognized - these were no trees but figures. Giants.

They stopped at the borderline of the trees. He saw long pieces of wood in their hands. Compared to the figures, they looked like matchsticks. One end seemed thinner than the other.

The scene with the wizards hadn't changed much. It looked quite as if they were ordering the students to leave the train, with Draco and his bodyguards serving as the good example.

As clever as the idea was, it didn't work. The older students had no intention to follow any example given by these three, and the younger students were waiting for the older ones to lead. Not even the Slytherins seemed inclined to follow.

A new group appeared under the trees, small compared to the Giants but huge against the wizards.

Harry heard himself snarl. Dementors.

They moved toward the first wagons, in a fair distance from their own. The number of Dementors in the plain was growing and growing.

Since the train's stopping, not more than three minutes had passed.

At the far end of the tree line, some uproar took his attention. Harry heard shouting that sounded like husky voices through a loudspeaker - Giants' voices. Then rapid banging of wood on wood drowned the voices.

Moments later, a new group of Giants appeared from the direction of the noise, armed with the same type of wood weapons. Keeping a steady step, they moved along the tree line.

Harry watched how they reached the next Giant, swung their weapons, knocked him down, and moved further. As small as their number was, compared to the total of Giants along the trees, they fought as a group.

He clenched his fists - another point for their side. Then he saw a smaller figure moving along the group. Recognizing it, he wheeled around. "Hagrid's there - with our Giants. They're trashing the others, one after the other."

The wizards were moving toward Hagrid and his Giants.

Before they could reach the middle of the plain, the large door of the freight wagon flew open, banging in its track like a cannon shot.

Green and blue spurts flashed through the air like lightnings, hitting the wizards outside. Only two were still upright after the first wave.

Harry saw a figure jumping from the wagon, a stooped shape running toward the Dementors. It stopped, a blazing light shot up. Condensed to the biggest wolf Harry could imagine, silvery and brilliant.

The wolf raced toward the Dementors and started to circle along the group, pushing them away from the train.

Harry felt like dancing up and down. He turned inside. "Lupin's Patronus is chasing the Dementors. Our own wizards have knocked most of the others."

The two boys gaped. Hermione and Cho were sitting with all senses listening to the battle sounds, right hands close to their wands.

Harry scanned the battle scene again.

So far, it looked good. However, the Giants' fight no longer resembled an afternoon walk. The line along the trees had dissolved, large figures were hurrying toward the cluster, which made

only little progress. Harry wondered if he would be involved at all in the fighting. Checking for Lupin's Patronus, his heart sank.

"Oh my God," he moaned.

The big, silvery wolf was racing in a frenzy. Wherever it attacked, the Dementors retreated, only their group was too large. The wolf concentrated on the train side, protecting the Hogwarts wizards and preventing the Dementors from entering the train. But the Dementors only had to spread their group to a long line, then, some of them would reach their victims.

Harry's mind raced. He had to help Lupin, or his Patronus, but how?

Dumbledore's words and Lupin's warning rang in his ears. If he sent a Patronus now, one Dementor escaping into the train was enough to finish them off.

Lupin's last lessons came to his mind. "What is your goal?" had been one of them, "Which are your ways?" had been another. Harry closed his eyes, straining himself to gain a moment of meditation.

Discipline in the heat of the fight ... Think clearly ... He wasn't to leave his group ... He had to have his only Patronus with them ... He had to help Lupin ... Yes of course!!

He dashed to the door. "Fred! George!" To the other side. "Ron! Almyra!" He wheeled around. "Get up! We must reach Lupin!"

The boys rose hesitantly.

Hermione had started to ask, "But ..." without ever finishing the question. Cho had gripped her and pulled her out of the compartment.

Harry bent to the dog. "Watch our path!"

They reached the exit, jumped down into the grass.

With all of them outside, Harry explained, "There are too many Dementors for Lupin's Patronus alone. He needs mine too, but we must stay close for our own protection ... Have your wands ready. Stay away from the Giants - we must reach the spot behind Hagrid's group ... C'mon!"

They hurried along the train, Harry in front, Ron at his side, then the girls, the younger boys. Fred and George guarding their back. The dog was moving in front of them, head and body in rapid motion from side to side.

Thirty yards was frightfully close to the Giants' line.

They reached the height where the bunch of Giants were fighting. Luck - none of the Dementors had made a move to attack Giants, they were still pressing toward the train and the wizards. Just passing the fighting spot - that was all that separated them from a safer place.

Harry turned. "Look ... Over there, then we're safe."

"Harry, watch out!" It was Hermione, eyes wide open toward the train.

Harry spun around.

Close to the train stood Draco Malfoy, pale skin, hate twisting in his face. He had his wand already pointing toward Harry.

Harry started to point his own wand, knowing he'd be too late. Draco had inhaled and opened his mouth to shout his spell. Harry knew what it would be, the Killing Curse. The moment span to eternity.

"Avada kiasouuuuhhh!"

Draco's voice was yelling at top pitch. A black shadow hung at his arm, two strong jaws clenched around his wrist. In the echo of the shriek, Harry remembered the sharp, splintering noise he had heard.

Two figures at both sides of Draco were in stasis, not knowing where to focus their attention, the dog over Draco or Harry's group. Crabbe and Goyle at their usual performance.

"Get over!" To the dog, Harry shouted, "C'mon!"

They darted through the open spot ... passing a Hagrid who didn't pay attention ... some more yards ... stopped. Fred and George arriving.

"Watch our back!" Harry turned, sucked air, closed his eyes ... His parents appeared, the shining arc ...

"EXPECTO PATRONUM!"

At the last syllable, his eyes open again ...

A cloud emanating from his wand, golden and magnificent. It bent, waved, closed.

The Centaur galloped toward the line of Dementors. It reached the first.

The cloaked figure jolted as if hit by an electric blast, issuing a shrill whimper.

The Centaur raced down the line, turned, came back, never leaving far from Harry's group.

One Dementor escaped the front, approaching them.

It hadn't come closer than six yards when the Centaur was there. The horse body seemed to jump right through the creature.

The high-pitched shriek started, muffled, ebbed abruptly. The Centaur was already hammering down the other side when the Dementor had collapsed in the grass.

Harry checked around.

The two boys stood agape, their looks following the Centaur's every move. Hermione's head switched from the scene in front to the fighting in their back, eyes shining. Cho and Almyra watched with fascination, only less open-mouthed than the boys. Harry registered how Ron, at his side, kept murmuring, "Oh my, oh my ..."

Fred and George had assumed a Janus stance, their heads in opposite directions. As Harry was looking, they changed positions, so the other could watch the Centaur.

The dog - Sirius - was patrolling the side where they had arrived, watchful for any sign of Draco and his companions.

The line of Dementors faded. Pressed between two Patronuses, they retreated the only path left - into the forest.

* * *

Minutes later, the plain was free of Dementors. Lupin's dog and the Centaur circled along the tree line, entered the forest, never to come back.

The wizards - their own wizards - moved closer.

Harry waved to Lupin, who raised his arm without stopping in his march toward the Giants' group. Harry saw other men, unknown to him, in their midst a furious-looking McGonagall. Without glancing aside, she moved in Hagrid's direction.

When the hostile Giants saw what was approaching them, they stopped, turned, and hurried to escape into the forest. Those closest to Hagrid's group weren't lucky. Within seconds, they had been knocked to the ground.

The wizards stopped, checking around. The grass and the entrance to the forest were full with motionless figures.

The battle was over.

Lupin reached their group. He quickly examined each student, asking, "Everybody okay?" relaxing when a chorus answered "Yes".

Toward Harry, he said, "That was close. Without ... How did you know?"

"I saw how the line was growing longer and longer. Then I remembered about *Ways and Goals*. Then I knew - we had to come over."

"Yes - the only solution, and you've found it. Harry ..." Lupin shook his head, mastering his voice again. "Let's talk later."

To the group, he said, "All right, back into the train. It'll move soon. What's left to do here isn't students' business."

Trotting back, Harry tried to catch Hagrid's look, then felt it more important to check their path. He didn't really expect to be confronted by Draco again, yet Lupin's axiome was in his mind - he had to body-guard four students until they arrived safely in Hogwarts.

They had settled again in their compartments. The whistle had blown, and the train had gained speed, leaving some figures upright and many more lying on the ground.

The doors of the two compartments were open, a coming and going between them. The dog had placed himself in the corridor.

Harry went to him, knelt, slung his arms around, and buried his face in the fur. "Thank you," he murmured, his eyes burning, "you've saved me again."

A purring sound came from the dog. Harry felt a tongue in his face.

Coming up, Harry saw Cho glancing.

"Hagrid's dog, huh? ... I bet." She said it with a smile, not expecting an answer.

He sensed Almyra studying him, felt too exhausted to muster any embarrassment.

She asked, "Can I do something for you?"

He barely avoided the slip of his tongue. "Yes ... Has Si - has this dog left some Chocoballs?"

The dog's guard turned out unnecessary. Nothing more happened until Hogwarts.

Only later that evening, when all students were to meet for the dinner in the Great Hall, Harry would see three empty seats - Draco, Crabbe, and Goyle had preferred to let the train move without them.

05 - The Fortress

When the train reached Hogwarts, excited groups of students filled the platform, talking animatedly, before finally walking toward the school buildings.

"Firs'-years, over there!"

The well-known voice made Harry wheel around. Hagrid!

Tired as he was, it took him a moment to reconstruct the way how Hagrid, whom he had seen last in the plain, could arrive earlier than the train. The teachers and Hagrid had used apparition - or portkeys - to reach Hogwarts in time before the train was due. The scene, so perfectly normal, was somehow disorienting after the long journey.

"I moved this path every day during the last three weeks," said Harry to Ron and Hermione at his side. He pointed to the ground. "Here's my portkey spot."

Ron grinned. "If you ever miss the Dursleys, you can make a jump visit."

The twins had joined their friend Lee Jordan to spread the news of their adventure. Rupert Tyrrell had done the same with his own group, after guiding young Damon to Hagrid. The dog had disappeared into the dark.

Coming closer to the school, Harry saw a figure waiting at the entrance. It was Professor McGonagall, looking strangely normal after the scene at the train track.

A voice from behind, known yet unfamiliar, called, "Harry!"

Turning, he saw Almyra, Cho at her side.

Almyra said, "We want to thank you for the protection - you and your friends ... You were great."

Harry blushed. "There's no need ... Actually, we did it together. It was as if we had trained - you know, as a group."

Almyra looked pleased.

Cho said, "Yeah - sitting in cover and then running wild because the stupid Dementors won't come."

When Harry didn't respond, she tried to smile, failed, shook her head. "Sorry, that wasn't a good one. Needs some ..." She cleared her throat, said, "I mean - thank you," and hurried away.

Hermione watched her leaving. "That big mouth of hers ... at least she has the right friend to get it shut." Seeing Harry's face, she added, "But she's up to it. Tough girl ... Imagine, Harry, it had been Parvati Patil."

Ron went almost hysteric in his giggles.

Having reached the building, they parted to deposit their luggage, then met again in the Great Hall.

The Sorting Ceremony was due first, as usual. After each exclamation from the Sorting Hat, the new student was greeted with wild applause from the assigned house's table, while the others booed and whistled.

The Slytherins had a hard time. Every assignment to their own house raised a yelling concerto. Harry felt pity with those poor newcomers who moved, head down, to their table.

Damon Harker was selected for Ravenclaw, showed a happy grin on his way back. His applause was the loudest because at the Gryffindor table first a small group and then, after some surprised looks, the entire table was applauding too.

When the ceremony was over, Albus Dumbledore stood up.

"Welcome in Hogwarts," he began, "after a long and eventful journey. I have quite a lot of things to announce, but as I'm sure to have a more patient audience *after* dinner, there is just one item I want to address before we eat."

Laughter and applause.

"I could notice a somewhat unbalanced enthusiasm during our Sorting Ceremony. It gives me reason to make one point very clear."

Dumbledore looked around. "Hogwarts with *all four* of its houses is one unbreakable community, with due respect to a fair competition between them. This is particularly true," the Headmaster's voice turned sharp, "for the Slytherin house."

Silence was lying over the hall.

"Especially now - after three seats at their table are left empty and will stay that way - although we don't expect these students back ... I'll address this issue in more detail later, but for now, let's eat!"

Roaring applause erupted from the Slytherin table, after some hesitation followed from the other tables.

Then, everybody busied himself with food and drinks.

Harry didn't feel very hungry, while he kept emptying one glass after the other, taking his time to watch the teachers' table.

Hagrid was missing. But Harry saw Grubbly-Plank, the witch who had substituted Hagrid once before. Snape looked better than the past weeks. Lupin, although not showing bruises, looked like a wreck. His appearance was very much how Harry felt himself. Doing a Patronus seemed to suck an awful lot of energy.

Dumbledore was up again.

"I'm not going to cut you short on your food supply, so - as an exception from the rule, and because I'll need some time, feel free to chew on while I'm speaking."

Again laughter; some glasses were raised.

"Although I do this on the risk of seeing the bites stuck in your throat." Dumbledore's smile faded. "I'm only half joking. But we are in dire need of some fun."

He summarized the situation with Voldemort and the Dark Forces, then came to the events of the day. "We need to trust each other, so I'm telling you what really happened today. And, as bad as the truth may sound, it's still better than the wild rumours which no doubt would spread around ... All students we want to be here have arrived safely and unhurt, and this is already a great victory. Now I'll tell you why."

Eating had stopped completely. The hall was silent. Dumbledore had the audience every teacher would dream of.

The Headmaster's face showed determination. "What happened today on the train was the attempt of the Dark Forces to capture all students, for being held as hostages against their parents, against us, and against every other wizard not willing to bend to their evil threats ... We knew about this plan. We were prepared, and our allied forces - wizards, students, and Giants, made them fail miserably."

Dumbledore paused, letting the full impact of his words take place.

"For some students without wizards among their parents, the risk was even higher. We had reason to believe they were to be killed rather than captured. But we were prepared for this too, and all of them have arrived unharmed."

Heads were turning.

Harry's gaze was locked at Dumbledore.

"The only injuries were suffered by three students who had taken the party of the Dark Forces, obviously under the influence of their parents, which are notorious for their support of Voldemort. I'm talking about the students Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle. They were hurt while trying to kill one of us. However, they did us a last big favour - they missed the train."

Excited murmurs were spreading all over the tables. Harry felt glances in his direction from many sides.

Dumbledore raised his voice. "As I said before, their seats remain empty, and this shall be the sign to remind us of two things, whenever we'll meet here. First - the Dark Forces have been defeated while exposing those among our round who were on their side ... Second - the house of Slytherin is on our side without any exception!"

The hall nearly trembled under the stamping of feet, hammering of fists, and shouting from the students.

Dumbledore beamed toward the Slytherin table, waiting until the roar ebbed away.

"The fight against the Dark Forces has only just begun. Yet more than ever before, Hogwarts and its people are a center force against them. This house is a fortress, which will grow stronger every day. The situation will affect our daily life to some degree, however, we will be up to our reputation as the place Voldemort cannot break down."

Another storm of agreement broke and ebbed.

"Our victory today was the work of men and women, boys and girls, who didn't hesitate to take their place in our counter-force - in spite of the highest personal risk. I would like to praise them by name, but they asked me to drop this part - pointing out that we all together are the troops that stand against the enemy."

Dumbledore raised his arm, cutting short another wave of applause. "As most of you could watch today, we had allies. Giants. Those Giants who fought at our side were won over by Hagrid and Madame Maxime from Beauxbatons. Both of them are absent - that's why I mentioned their names as the only ones ... Our Giants had casualties. Those warriors who died, they died for us. Let us stand up and remember them."

Students and teachers rose.

Dumbledore took a parchment and slowly called five names.

- "Tarketh the Fox."
- "Wagir Two Fingers."
- "Ermenroth the Sad."
- "Hunold from the Woods."
- "Geldag with the Scar."

After a few seconds of silence, Dumbledore's bent head came up again, and the Headmaster motioned the audience to sit down.

A smile appeared in his face. "So much for the serious part. Let me come to more enjoyable things now ... In the course of the recent activities, Hogwarts has joined with Beauxbatons to form a union of mutual trust and defence. One result is that we have several links installed, using portkeys. So people can move back and forth between the schools, without taking more effort than climbing some staircases. Students will be able to make visits, provided - " Dumbledore grinned, "they speak French."

Harry turned to Ron. "Know someone who's fluent in French?"

"Yeah," groaned Ron, "although it won't help us much. Percy ... He said it's mandatory for a political career."

They stopped, listening to Dumbledore's words.

"... one person from each side. I've been told they are called *Liaison Officers*. Our own representative in Beauxbatons is an ex-student who finished school only recently. His name should be well known - it's Oliver Wood."

The Gryffindor table emitted a new wave of applause. Dumbledore waited patiently.

"As it turns out, our Liaison Officer from Beauxbatons is also an ex-student who just finished school and is not unknown to us. I have the great pleasure to welcome ...

A figure appeared ...

"... Miss Fleur Delacour!"

The slim figure with the long, silvery hair marched toward Dumbledore. The Headmaster shook her hand, then guided her to a seat at the teachers' table.

She smiled, said something impossible to hear.

The applause in the hall was deafening, even originating almost exclusively from the male students.

Having gained attention again, Dumbledore continued with the news about the teachers. As Harry had guessed already, Hagrid was detached as the link with the Giants, so Professor Grubbly-Plank would be the teacher for Care of Magical Creatures.

Then Lupin was announced as a temporary substitute for Defence against the Dark Arts, until the planned teacher would arrive.

Dumbledore surprised Harry and the other students with his next statement. "As most people here already know, Professor Lupin is a werewolf. He uses an advanced potion to keep his illness under control. I say this in public - not only with his full agreement, but also to make one thing very clear."

The Headmaster's voice went sharp again. "This is no time to hold prejudices against races and natures, like Giants or werewolves. Today we could see what really counts."

Many faces, especially under the newcomers, still showed shock from the Headmaster's announcement. Only slowly, the applause rose, triggered especially from two groups - one at the Gryffindor table, the other at the Ravenclaw table.

Lupin looked tired but pleased.

As Dumbledore announced then, the term *fortress* had to be taken more literally than expected. Students were not supposed to walk outside the school buildings, at least not without special assignment. Their own Giants would reside in a camp outside the school area, near Hogsmeade.

Ron made a face. "Visits in Hogsmeade will be difficult ... What a mess."

"So we'll have time for our O.W.L.s," replied Hermione. To Harry, she added, "I hope you don't have plans with your Invisibility Cloak."

Harry grinned. "No - at least none I could announce already."

Ron chuckled, while Hermione rolled her eyes in desperation. Dumbledore's next announcement made them forget about Hogsmeade.

"The Giants are not our only guarding troops - and not the only non-human race to support us. Within the next days, a group of dragons will be positioned in a camp near the Forbidden Forest. Several wizards with experience in dragon handling will take residence in that camp or here in our school, depending on the situation."

"That's why," called Ron.

Seeing the blank looks of Harry and Hermione, he explained, "Charlie is one of them - must be ... He made some remarks the other day and was grinning like crazy when I didn't understand a word. Drove me nuts."

Dragons - well, okay. Harry was waiting more impatiently for a statement from Dumbledore about the annual Quidditch tournament at Hogwarts. He didn't really expect it to take place, not under the given circumstances. This would be the second year in a row without Quidditch. He felt a painful loss, even if it would solve the problem of the missing replacement for Oliver Wood.

When the announcement came, Harry nodded sorrowfully, but next moment, the Headmaster's words made his heart jump.

"... doesn't mean your broomsticks could rot away. Quite the opposite. We will build something like a *Flying Squadron*, for exploration and messenger services. This squadron will consist of volunteers from all four Quidditch teams in Hogwarts."

Dumbledore smiled as many arms went into the air - seven from each of the four tables, as it seemed. After a second of bafflement, Harry became aware that Fred's both arms were up, no doubt representing the soon-to-be-selected successor of Oliver Wood.

"To nobody's surprise," said Dumbledore, "it looks as if the teams would volunteer completely. Professor Hooch will be in charge of organizing the details."

Harry turned to the twins and the other members of his team. "We need a new goalkeeper, even if he'll never have to hold a Quaffle."

"True," nodded Angelina Johnson, one of the Chasers. "Imagine the other houses come with seven players and Gryffindor had only six. Unbearable."

Ron was watching the discussion, hope in his eyes. But as so often, the disappointment came from his own family.

Fred called, "I want to nominate Lee Jordan for this position ... Any objections?"

Nobody spoke.

"Who does agree?"

Five arms went up immediately.

Looking at his friend, Harry shrugged, "Sorry, Ron," and raised the sixth arm.

"Unanimously accepted!" shouted Fred, shaking the hand of a beaming Lee Jordan.

Dumbledore spoke again. "Let me finish with the last announcement. As I said earlier, we need all enjoyment we can gather in these difficult times. For this reason, and to celebrate our union with Beauxbatons, we will continue last year's good habit by holding two dance balls ... The first will take place here in Hogwarts before Christmas - the second will be held in Beauxbatons around Easter."

Grinning, he finished, "Messieurs'dames, je vous souhaite une bonne nuit. A demain."

Most faces looked baffled, only Fleur and some others applauded enthusiastically.

"What a day," grumbled Ron, "first I miss the chance to join the Quidditch team, and now this ... Dance balls - disaster strikes in pairs."

Hermione looked maliciously. "Hey, Ron - get yourself somebody to teach you French and dancing at once."

After a moment, she added. "And while on the subject, teaching some manners won't hurt, either."

She was rewarded with a furious look from Ron.

Harry didn't feel like grinning. His stomach twisted at the memory of last year's ball. He wasn't going to give the same bad performance one more time, and he knew already whom he would ask, this time soon enough.

The thought did nothing to improve his digestion, but recently he had learned a lot about *Ways* and *Goals*. After all, Hermione's remark wasn't entirely stupid. Harry was prudent enough not to speak it out aloud - for more reasons than Ron's bad mood.

The Great Hall emptied rapidly.

Harry felt tired to death. He went to his dormitory, barely awake to hear the new password for the Fat Lady.

He fell asleep immediately.

06 - The Spy

The new school year claimed its tribute immediately after the breakfast next morning, and Harry had trouble getting accustomed. He knew why, although it didn't help.

For weeks, he had worked single-mindedly toward one goal. The only important part of every day had taken place here in Hogwarts, only - it had been just the location. The same corridors he'd been walking earlier, constantly aware that a Boggart-made Dementor could attack him any time, now were flooded with daylight, students hurrying, chatting, laughing.

He felt hollow, unable to concentrate on the issues at hand.

Breakfast didn't help either. When he came down to this seat, shouts and hoorays along the Gryffindor table awarded him. He refused to entertain the audience with details of the previous day, however, Fred and George took over this role happily.

Unfortunately, their report lacked details of the background. So it was impossible to avoid some questions toward himself.

"Harry, is it true that Lupin had a real Dementor?"

He nodded, chewing.

"How did he catch it?"

Harry shook his head. "Dunno, he didn't tell me."

The other students were excited, as eager to listen to somebody's speculations as to his short answers.

"Harry, is it true that Malfoy tried the Killing Curse on you?"

He grimaced. "Yes, but he never finished it."

A short silence, then the next question. "What dog was this?"

He grinned. "Ask Hagrid."

Good advice, really, with Hagrid out of reach. So the guesswork about the dog ran to extremes, though nothing came close to the truth.

Asked, Ron and Hermione pointed out they had seen the dog first on the train platform in King's Cross.

After a while, the discussion concentrated on the question how life would be in Hogwarts, with Giants and dragons close by.

Harry would have liked to speak with Damon Harker, to congratulate him to his selection, also with Rupert Tyrrell. He still felt some responsibility for them - if only to smoothe the

transit into a normal day at Hogwarts. He suspected they had the same trouble accomodating as he himself.

He would have been ready to accept the awe-struck glances from their comrades, but a major barrier blocked his way - they sat at the Ravenclaw table, although not close to Cho and Almyra.

Quite cautiously, he had watched the two girls enduring a similar storm of questions. As far as he'd been able to follow, their answers had been as dismissive as his own. It gave him much comfort.

* * *

Their first class was with Professor McGonagall. But rather than practicing some Transfiguration spell, the topic were O.W.L.s.

As Harry learned, the students would have time until the end of January before they had to sign for the selected numbers and topics of their O.W.L.s. With special permission, the signments could be altered or enhanced until the end of February, however, there was no known case in which the permission had been denied.

The minimum was two O.W.L.s, there was no upper limit. Every student had the right to sign for a topic outside the scope of Hogwarts' education program.

Hearing this, Harry thought immediately of his Patronus spell, but then realized it would of course be counted as Defence against the Dark Arts.

The exams would take place at the end of the year, about the same time as, in other years, the normal exams. A student could cancel a signment until four weeks in advance, at the cost of an entry on his certificate which was reputed worse than a failed O.W.L. Inofficially, such entries were called *O.W.P.*, which stood for *Obviously Wet Pants*.

An O.W.L. exam was harder than a normal one, the questions would only deal with the selected topic but wouldn't stop just because a detail hadn't been told in class. In other words, the students were forced to take initiative. The library would become more important than the dinner table.

After class, Ron said to Hermione, "I take it you know already which O.W.L.s to choose."

It was a weak attempt to pay her back for yesterday's remark, and it failed entirely.

"The faculties, yes," came the prompt reply, "but some topics are still open."

Harry asked her, "How many?"

"Seven," was the flat answer.

"Yuk," gasped Ron.

So Hermione was determined to match the school record of seven O.W.L.s, completed successfully.

Once a student had signed for eight, aiming higher than he could master. He had been lucky. Around April, realizing he would never be able to do it, he had begged for mercy. As a penalty, his charge had been reduced not to six, as he wanted, but to five. This was still a good result but nothing spectacular.

Harry felt sure about two O.W.L.s, the bare minimum. One would be about flying broomsticks, with Quidditch involved while not the main topic. The other would be about Dementors and the Patronus spell.

He had been playing with the idea to sign also for the topic Transportation in general, although this might be risky with his little experience in chimney travelling. But then, he felt like an expert customer of the Knight Bus.

"I think I'll do four," said Ron, "but don't ask me which." Hermione's answer had sobered him up thoroughly. "The only one I know for sure is Quidditch."

Harry nodded. Although Ron never had been a member in a team, there was little doubt - he could beat him in Quidditch history, theory, and tactics any time. He, Harry, was just a Seeker.

They walked to the Entrance Hall. Next on their schedule was Care for Magical Creatures, and they had been told to meet Professor Grubbly-Plank there. It would be a triple class, something unprecedented.

They were discussing it, especially since it was scheduled for Gryffindors alone.

"Maybe we do an excursion into the Forbidden Forest," mused Ron, "although that witch didn't strike me as the adventurous type."

"Never," replied Hermione. "Remember what Dumbledore said about outside activities? I could imagine something that would be held inside and might need a triple just for starters."

She paused, waiting to be prompted.

Harry did her the favour. "And what would this be?"

"A laboratory, to work with viruses and bacteria ... I mean, after all, there should be quite some magical mono-cellulars."

Ron laughed, giving Hermione the thumbs for a good joke. The little row of the day before was obviously forgiven.

Harry smiled too, yet carefully so. This might be just the joke you would expect from the daughter of two dentists, sure, but - what if it was true?

He didn't believe in an excursion into the Forbidden Forest either, not now while the guarding dragons hadn't arrived yet, and probably less so with them around. But then, he had no idea what awaited them in the next two and a half hours.

They reached the hall.

Professor Grubbly-Plank was already waiting for them. Fortunately, they hadn't been the last students.

After some more minutes, Neville Longbottom came hurrying, panting.

Without any remark, their teacher walked to a staircase close to the one leading to Dumbledore's office.

They followed, looking expectantly. This was unknown territory for all of them.

Three staircases higher, Grubbly-Plank opened a door and waved them in.

At first, the room looked like a small theater. A stage at one side, with some devices Harry couldn't identify. They didn't look like headlights, and not like cameras either.

Moreover, something was wrong with the seats.

They were arranged in descending rows like in an amphitheater, but they didn't group around the stage. Instead, they formed a full circle, focusing on a small platform down in the middle. A huge sphere sat on a socket, its diameter certainly six feet wide. The surface shimmered in a light grey, giving the impression of transparency without showing more than the reflection of the lights at the ceiling.

"Oh no," groaned Ron, "crystal-gazing for magical beasts." He turned to Harry. "Big ones, I guess. Maybe it's about dragons."

Harry said nothing, staring around.

Hermione simply turned to the teacher and asked, "Professor, what is this?"

"A sceptor," came the answer, "and the most advanced model. It has cost a fortune."

With astonishment, the students saw a wolfish grin in her face.

"This is our newest acquisition. Dumbledore took the opportunity and plundered the Ministry budget while nobody was watching ... Get yourself around the sphere."

Hearing her mention the Headmaster in that casual style was like seeing the Fat Lady coming down the stairs.

They stepped down the aisles and grouped themselves around the sphere.

The seats were very comfortable, each of them with a desk plate and a small drawer. A smell of new furniture hung in the air, reminding Harry of his day in the moving business.

He checked the sphere closely. At short distance, it looked exactly as from above.

Before he could guess more, the light grey changed. The sphere went dark, then lighted up. A scene appeared, looking strangely familiar, like a déjà-vu.

A figure moved on the scene ... Grubbly-Plank! And the place where she stood was the stage.

Harry wheeled around. Yes, he could see her standing above. He turned back to the sphere, hearing sounds of surprise around him.

"Okay, all of you," said the figure in a mocking tone, "stop playing fishmouth and listen to me ... This is one function of the spector, it's just the most efficient method of talking to an audience in a circle. It prevents you from turning your little necks back and forth."

Surely enough, the immediate effect was quite the opposite. Everybody had to turn around and to compare the scene upstairs with the picture in the sphere.

The figure of Grubbly-Plank, about a feet high, made a 360-degree turn and continued to speak. "All of you can see me, and I can see all of you. Miss Brown, please shut up - thank you ... The main purpose of the spector is to present scenes. Like pictures, only in three dimensions and with sound ... To ease your mind, Mr. Weasley, these scenes are recorded events in the past. The sphere doesn't show the future."

Grubbly-Plank's voice became serious. "One of the reasons why Mr. Dumbledore had the spector installed is that we'll have to do in-door classes more than we would like ... But it comes in just handy, as our first topic this year will be something that's not exactly in the scope of Care of Magical Creatures ... Actually, it's not even a regular part of the Hogwarts schedule, but recent events have made it compulsory to squeeze the topic in ... The choice was between Professor Binns - I mean History, and myself. I voted for it, and my ghostly colleague had no objections ... I hope you don't, either."

The round agreed, some of the students grimacing at the thought of Professor Binn's extremely boring style.

To Ron, Harry whispered, "I wonder if Binns would appear in the sphere."

"He would, Mr. Potter." Grubbly-Plank's lips twisted. "Later, we'll check the equipment up here - you'll see, my view and sound of the audience is as clear as yours of the speaker."

She turned a bit, now the figure appeared toward Harry in half-profile.

"The spector can scale the scenes quite nicely. This is important because our topic is big in more than one sense. Now, who'd guess first?"

Of course, Hermione was quickest. "Giants," she said breathlessly.

"Very good, Miss Granger," replied the figure, "but then, you might have had an advantage ... Anyway, five points for Gryffindor."

Hermione flushed.

"Before we address the history of Giants and their difficult relationships with the wizarding world, let me show you a little bit about everyday's life among Giants."

The sphere darkened.

After a moment, it lighted up again, showing a very small town from above, located on a plain in a forest. The invisible camera zoomed in, presenting the details of cottages along dirty streets. A door opened, and a figure walked around the cottage to some stables.

Everything looked like an ordinary rural scene - until some animals could be seen. These were cows, no question about that, only they looked like toys beneath the figure.

The teacher's voice came through the sphere. "Giants grow up to heights of about twenty feet. However, their height varies more than among humans. That is, of course in real feet but also in percent. The maximum height difference among humans is about twenty-five percent, while one Giant can grow twice as high as another one."

"Why's that so?" asked somebody.

"Probably from mating with humans," was the dry answer. "You know two half-giants, Hagrid's one of them ... As big as he appears to us, you'd never confuse him with the smallest pure Giant."

The scene in the sphere disappeared, was replaced by a slowly turning earth globe. Giant-figure symbols marked areas around the world, obviously to indicate the locations where Giant tribes could be found. After a full turn, the globe flattened and morphed into a relief-map of Great Britain, showing the same symbols at a smaller scale.

Harry checked to find a mark that would locate Hogwarts, but found none.

"Giants live around the world, in the same regions as the human race. This was certainly one reason for the troubled relations between us and them."

Grubbly-Plank continued to explain how the history between Giants and wizards was full of mistrust, disputes, fights, followed by negotiations and contracts that were broken soon. She pointed out that most violations of the settled agreements had been committed by humans, not by Giants.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the wizarding world had come to the conclusion that Giants could not be trusted at all, that they were inferior, and that they should be kept isolated.

"Are they inferior?" It was Neville Longbottom who asked.

"I may be able to give you an answer if you tell me what's inferior."

The figure of Grubbly-Plank reappeared in the sphere. "They have no magical power, or extremely little, however enough to tend their environments surprisingly well - what they plant or raise grows too rich to be explained with fertile grounds ... But Giants are highly resistant against magical power - that's another reason why the wizarding world mistrusts them. Basically, any spell works against Giants like against Muggles or wizards, but a single wizard just isn't enough. For example, to stupefy a Giant, you'd need at least three of them, maybe four."

Murmuring ran through the round.

"The appearance of their towns and cottages might indicate a primitive lifestyle - but be warned ... For example, Giants have a very complex language, so much so that very few wizards were able to master it ... Actually, Mr. Dumbledore is one of them."

The students nodded, they wouldn't have expected less from their Headmaster.

"On the other side," said the teacher's figure, "there was never a Giant met or captured who wasn't fluent in our own language."

"What about weapons?" asked Harry, remembering the scene on the railroad track.

"I've been told you could answer this question as good as I could, Mr. Potter," said the figure. "They use long pieces of wood, called Quarterstuffs. Again, it sounds very primitive, but watch out ... I'll show you two scenes. The first is the recording of a Giant's tournament. Tournaments play the same role in their world as Quidditch in ours."

The sphere turned dark and back to light.

A plain ground came up, a grass field surrounded by trees. Many spectators were watching the scene in the middle where two warriors stood motionless, each of them holding a Quarterstaff. They bowed, brought the pieces of wood into guarding position, and started to move.

It was like a dance, much more graceful than what Harry had seen the day before. One of them made an exit, the other stepped back, only to attack the next moment against his opponent who paraded in retreat. The Quarterstuffs had one sharp, thin end and a thick one that was used like a club. Both ends were equally dangerous, they reminded Harry of the Hungarian Horntail which also could strike at both ends.

The dance of the two figures continued for two minutes, then both attacked at the same time.

They clashed, the Quarterstuffs whirled through the air. One figure was hit by the clubby end, stumbled, fell to the ground. The other one stopped, retreated, waiting.

After a few seconds, the figure on the ground came halfway up, obviously having trouble. It was helped by the other. Both took their Quarterstuffs and, side by side, bowed to the audience.

As silent as the presentation was, Harry's mind added the roaring applause while watching the waving and stomping in the circle.

The figure of Grubbly-Plank manifested again. "A Quarterstaff duel is over when one fighter is knocked down, as you could watch - or when hurt by the sharp end so that blood can be seen ... The worst that could happen to a fighter is winning by injuring his opponent seriously, or even fatally. He would never again be invited to a tournament ... Consider this while thinking about inferiority."

The figure faded again, replaced by a scene of a similar plain between trees, this time populated by a small group of Giants and another group of humans - wizards, as indicated by the wands in their hands.

"What you'll see now is not a real fighting," said the teacher's voice from the off. "It's a play with volunteers ... Watch out."

Harry counted six Giants and six wizards. At an inaudible signal, both groups started to fight.

The wizards raised their wands which emitted sparks and spurs of red and blue. The Giants ducked, darted, and sprinted toward their opponents. As much as the wizards had coordinated themselves to target their spells on the same Giants, it was no help.

Two Giants froze and fell, but within seconds the others had reached the group of wizards. A few quick blows with the Quarterstaffs, and the fight was over.

The scene held long enough to show the first wizard get up again, then it faded.

"Imagine how yesterday's battle would have turned out without our own Giants," said the resurfacing figure, "and imagine how a combination of Giants and wizards could be in combat ... All right, let's have a ten minutes break, then we'll continue."

The lights in the room, dimmed before, brightened up.

Harry looked up like awaking from a trance. The faces of Ron and Hermione showed similar emotions.

"Wow," said Ron, "that's quite a bit. I wouldn't have expected that from her." His head pointed upward to their teacher.

"Well," answered Hermione, "she looked quite competent the last time ... Anyway, I don't think Hagrid could do it as well. So it just fits nicely that he's so busy with the real Giants."

"Maybe not from his point of view," Harry was thinking loudly.

"What do you mean?" Ron looked blank, Hermione hadn't understood either.

"Remember what Dumbledore said? In a few days, a bunch of dragons will be here. You know what this means? Hagrid will have a hard time not to weasel around them all day long."

Ron laughed. "You might be right. But who knows, his new friends might offer some other attractions."

"Whatever that means," giggled Hermione, "it certainly doesn't include some nice young Giant ladies. And besides ..." Her voice trailed off, but they had caught the message.

"Poor Hagrid," grinned Ron, "now that Beauxbatons is so close. Torn between three places."

The break was over.

Grubbly-Plank invited them to the stage and explained the devices. For each column of seats, there was something equivalent to the sphere, only flat. The displays were grouped along the wall which ran in a half circle around the stage. It allowed the actor to communicate with the audience.

Then the students were ordered back to their seats.

"Now I want one of you to come up here and summarize what we've learned today, while the others will be watching through the sphere," said the teacher and added, "Me included."

Hermione's hand shot upward but, miraculously, was only second. "Mr. Longbottom, please come up."

Sounds of surprise in the round, silenced by the picture of Neville and Professor Grubbly-Plank on the stage.

The witch gave some explanation, then walked down to a place at the sphere.

Neville began slowly, had to clear his throat several times, but then presented a five minutes's summary of their lesson.

He came down, blushing deeply when the round banged their tables in applause.

"Excellent, Mr. Longbottom. - This was almost as if somebody had found his passion, what'd you think? ... Five points for Gryffindor."

Another round of banging. Neville did obviously better in fair distance from everybody, like on a stage.

"This spector," said Grubbly-Plank, "has still another feature. Now's the time to use it ... What I have in mind is this," and she explained that the system could project memory images of the speaker, together with his voice.

"Yesterday, you have seen Giants in real combat. I'd like one of you to report what he saw - with us others watching the pictures along with the words." She added, "You've seen something I never had the chance to see ... What about you, Mr. Potter?"

Harry shrank back. "No, no ... I didn't see much - I mean, my concentration was on the Dementors ... Hermione has seen more of them."

Hermione shot him a glance, then turned to the witch. "Is this a mind-reader?"

"No, not at all - there's no need to worry about that ... What it does is to illustrate what the speaker is talking about. Unless you speak it out aloud, a picture or a thought won't appear ... Ready to give it a try?"

Ready was definitely the wrong term, but nobody was going to challenge Hermione unrewarded. Slowly, she stood up and walked to the stage.

"I'll start at how we leave the train. Before that, I didn't see much."

Fascinated, Harry watched the scene from Hermione's perspective, seeing himself how his stooped body moved through the grass.

Suddenly, he realized that Grubbly-Plank had been right about the mechanism - Hermione had skipped Malfoy's attack.

The group of fighting Giants appeared in full size, with Hermione's words underlining the horrible pictures. The wizards appeared in the scene, the other Giants escaped, and the scene faded.

"Miss Granger, I thank you very much. I owe you one personally for this report, but aside from that, ten points for Gryffindor."

Hermione came down, still with a strange look on her face.

They received their homework for the next class, then triple Care was over.

Harry felt agitated, even welcoming the paperwork they had been ordered. He had the distinct feeling he'd found his third O.W.L. - Giants. It would leave Care of Magical Creatures free for another one.

* * *

Coming into the Great Hall for lunch, Harry saw Damon Harker already sitting at the Ravenclaw table, while the older students still were missing. He took the opportunity to deliver what he felt necessary as the last bit of his responsibility.

"Hey, Damon ... Congratulations. So you're Ravenclaw."

"Oohh - Harry." A beaming face, turning to his classmates. "That's Harry Potter."

The others watched, staring.

"How's Hogwarts? New wonders every minute, I guess?" His own words sounded ridiculously patronizing in Harry's ears, but none of the boys seemed to bother.

"Yes, really. Imagine what we had this morning ..."

Harry listened to Damon's chatter, remembering his own first day in Hogwarts. Looking up, he saw older students approach the table.

"Sorry, Damon - time for my own lunch ... See you around." He waved, leaving an excited group of first-year's behind.

Before he could round the corner toward the Gryffindor table, a hand touched his arm.

"Oh 'arry!"

He turned.

"I've 'eard it all. I'm so proud of you!" Fleur Delacour stood in front of him. She gripped his shoulders and kissed him on both cheeks. "And those I was asked to give you from Giselle." Two more kisses. Fleur's face was flushed with joy.

He felt dizzy, the remnants of her Veela nature were overwhelming in her excitement. His cheeks started to burn and he felt like turning purple, with many students watching the scene.

"Hi, Fleur. I ... I'm glad you're here."

With a shaky voice, he managed some more pleasantries before he could move on. Not daring to look around, he found his place.

Ron was in admiration, while Hermione's lips were tighter than usual.

"Gee, Harry," said Ron, "why didn't you tell Fleur you weren't alone. I would like the same welcome."

"Maybe so," hissed Hermione, "but please leave me out."

"Yeah, certainly," replied Ron. "We'll save this part until a certain Quidditch player is around, er, what's his name ..."

"Shut up!" Hermione's voice was more pleading than furious.

The exchange had given Harry time to recover. He started to load his plate, suddenly ravenous.

They talked about the morning, about the specter, about the Giants. Harry told them about his plan to do an O.W.L. on this topic.

Hermione's fork dropped to the table. "Really? ... Oh Harry, that's super. I had the same idea. Let's do it together!"

"Is this allowed? Sounds to me like copying."

"No, it's not ... It has to be signed officially, and the examination will be even more thorough. But it's still less work than for somebody alone."

Harry couldn't remember these details in McGonagall's explanations, still had no doubt Hermione's description was correct to the point.

"Erm - is there still room for one more?"

They turned to Ron.

"I had the same idea."

"Brilliant," called Harry.

Hermione added, "It'll be like this Flamel research - remember?"

Harry had a warm feeling in his stomach, from the food as much as from the prospect of working together with his friends. The next minutes were filled with suggestions what each of them would do and how they would build up the most profound study about Giants.

* * *

History was next after lunch. Harry fell asleep quickly, to be awakened by a push in the ribs from Hermione.

"Harry, this involves Giants."

He steadied himself, listening sleepily to Professor Binn's droning. It was unbelievable how bloodlessly the story was told, in contrast to what they had heard this morning. When he recognized how much the same attributes applied to the teacher, Harry just managed to suppress a fit of laughter. It helped him to stay awake.

Potions was the last class before supper, Gryffindors and Slytherins together.

The two groups met in an atmosphere which was awkward at first. They all remembered Dumbledore's words, except nobody knew how to do the first step.

Then a Slytherin came over and said, "Hello, Harry, I wanted to tell you ... er, we're awfully glad you weren't hurt."

Harry said, "Thank you ... You know what? Me too."

Laughter and giggles, the ice was broken. Groups started to talk, interrupted by an entering Snape.

"Good afternoon. Everybody's socializing? How good of you."

The Gryffindors froze in mid-sentence, while the Slytherins just laughed, "Hi, Professor, you look better every day."

It was true, Snape had recovered almost completely. Harry had been wondering why it took so long, with a Madame Pomfrey around who once had cured himself from missing arm bones in just one day. But then, he didn't know exactly what had happened to Snape, or how dark spells could damage the health of a body.

He watched Snape, who hadn't smiled on the greetings of his students but seemed pleased nonetheless.

"This year's program," announced Snape, "deals with hallucinogenic potions in the widest sense. Their range spans from a simple pain killer, over psychedelic drugs, to potions controlled by law like Veritaserum. We will ..."

A Slytherin girl's hand was up.

"Yes?"

"Professor, what's psycho ... er, what was the term?"

"Psychedelic. It's a Muggles' term." Snape looked at Hermione. "Miss Granger, I hope you can answer the question?"

Hermione stared, then collected herself. "Er - yes ... Psychedelic is a shortening and contracting of the two words *psychic* and *Delight*. It means exactly what these words express, planting feelings of delight in a mind by chemicals, whether swallowed, smoked, or injected."

"Perfect. You didn't disappoint me, except now I'm forced to give five points to Gryffindor."

Now Hermione was gaping, although in good company with many other Gryffindors.

Again, the Slytherins laughed, making the thumbs-up sign.

Snape continued, not showing any emotion. "As I was going to say, we will start with a mixture that takes the fright from somebody's mind, blocks panic, and reactivates intellectual capabilities in dangerous situations ... It's by far not the simplest one, and you have to be aware of the risk. While it doesn't hurt you physiologically and isn't addictive either, you must keep in mind that fright is a survival technique of the human body - so this potion could only be recommended in desperate situations ... Once we are ready, we will ask for a volunteer who doesn't show the strongest nerves naturally ... Mr. Longbottom, I would consider you the best candidate to prove the effect. As the potion will not be finished today, you'll have time to decide whether you'd find it suitable to volunteer."

Neville had twisted automatically at the mentioning of his name. When Snape finished, he still sat there, waiting for the menacing side remark. It didn't come.

Instead, Snape went to the blackboard and started to write.

The recipe for the fright-killer was indeed very complex. They had to scribble a lot, and Snape invested much time in describing how the various ingredients worked together.

Normally, such a lesson would have been boring and stressful, but today Harry couldn't stop wondering. This was a different Snape. Still no joyful person, was he no doubt friendlier than ever before.

Every now and then, another remark gave testimony of an extremely dry humour, most often targeting the traditional competition between Slytherins and Gryffindors. Always close to sarcasm, lacked his comments the burning acid that had been so characteristic of him.

And - he didn't favour Slytherins, or if so, he did it openly, with remarks like, "Please, Mr. Hewlett, make sure this point goes to Slytherin."

When the class was over, Harry stored his parchments and started to move.

"Mr. Potter!"

He looked up.

Snape was looking into his face, expressionless. "Could I have a word with you? ... In my office, please."

"Yes, Professor Snape."

Harry didn't know what to expect. He hadn't talked with Snape since the meeting in Dumbledore's office. He waited till the other students had left, then followed Snape.

In Snape's office, he sat down at a table, opposite the teacher.

"Mr Potter, I have to explain a few things ... I invited you alone while knowing - and expecting - that you'll discuss our conversation with your friends, in particular with Miss Granger. This is fine with me."

Harry listened, having trouble not to stare open-mouthed. He nodded.

"You know - I was a member of the Dark Forces. This was true until Jam - until your parents were killed ... It's no secret that your father and myself were - well, enemies. But his killing didn't satisfy me - quite the opposite ... What it did instead was breaking my conviction, as well as any spell Voldemort had over me."

Harry swallowed.

Snape spoke in a flat, monotonous voice. "Your survival - I mean, Voldemort's defeat - deprived me of any chance to prove the change of my mind. Lots of wizards were running around, claiming their innocence and how Voldemort had misled them with tricks and spells ... I saw only one solution - I went to Dumbledore, explained my situation, and offered to be interrogated under Veritaserum, plus any other method he might come up with."

"Did he ..." Harry couldn't complete the question.

"Yes, indeed. He stripped me naked - so to speak. In this process, I learned a lot about my own motivations ... I don't want to go into much detail, but at the end, Dumbledore knew I was serious, and I knew I had to do some sacrifice ... It was Dumbledore who showed me the way."

Harry knew what Snape would say next.

"I started to be an undercover agent, reporting only to Dumbledore. For this purpose, I had to be my old self, hateful, prejudiced, Muggles-hating, and so on ... It worked well. There were all these students who talked with their parents about my behaviour in Hogwarts, with Malfoy and his two dumb asses leading the crowd. I was trusted by the other Death-Eaters, and I gathered information ... This went on until I heard about the attack plan. I was lucky, since my not following Voldemort's summons at the evening of his reappearance had already marked an end. Anyway, it blew my cover ... To get some important details about the attack, I had to do a last job in my role as Death-Eater. As you have seen that evening, my luck had almost run out ... But I'm alive."

Harry had guessed most of this unraveling since the evening in Dumbledore's office, when he had learned that it was Snape who'd found out the plan. Snape's next words came unexpected.

"In the course of my undercover career, I had to hate you, Harry Potter, I had to despise mudblood, and I had to place every insult I could find ... For this, I apologize deeply. Toward you and - at a better opportunity - toward Miss Granger ... I hope you can accept it."

"No. Yes." Harry was choking. "I mean yes, I accept it, but no, there is no need. Not any longer, not since ..." He managed to look Snape into the eyes. "And you saved my life."

"Well - Miss Granger was even more successful on that evening, if you remember correctly. It was risky for me, but I had no choice. So I was more than happy when she knocked me down, by accidentally knocking down the true culprit as well."

"Why did you ..." Again, Harry didn't finish the question, but Snape had understood.

"What I wish most intensely is to destroy Voldemort forever ... I don't see a way yet, all I know is that you, Mr. Potter, have a major role in it. That forced me to take that risk then, and it may force me to take another risk in the future."

Seeing Harry's look, Snape explained, "Don't get me wrong, Mr. Potter, we won't be friends any time soon, but you'll have my support when it's needed."

Harry still didn't know what to say.

Snape added, "Thinking about yesterday, you also have my respect."

"I don't think it was as dangerous as your own task," answered Harry. "I wasn't even hurt."

Snape shrugged.

His next words released the tension. "Mr. Potter, we really shouldn't exchange compliments. Nobody would believe us."

Harry giggled, almost missing how Snape's lips twisted. It gave him the courage to ask the question that lasted in his mind. "Professor Snape, what about Sirius Black and Mr. Lupin?"

"Well." Snape paused. "You are entitled to an answer, except I don't want to give it."

He paused again.

"Let me tell you so much - we won't be friends any time soon either, but Sirius and I have managed to cooperate, doing better every day."

"And Mr. Lupin?" insisted Harry.

Snape grimaced. "I was brewing his potion, I'm still doing it, and I never intended to poison him - remember, Mr. Potter?"

After a second, he continued, "Our controversies date back a long time ... In addition, it's certainly no secret that I always wanted the position of the Defence against the Dark Arts teacher. Unfortunately, this werewolf is as good as I am, maybe even better - unless," this time almost a grin, "it's full moon ... But what's worse, I'm by far the best potions wizard - short of Mr. Dumbledore."

Snape rose, making clear the conversation was over.

Harry stood up and walked to the door.

"Mr. Potter?"

He turned.

"You know - I still have trouble no longer being a spy, just a teacher. So I wouldn't mind if Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger are the only ones with whom to discuss our conversation."

"Yes, Professor Snape. I had the same thought."

Harry left. For a moment, he had wanted to add, 'Besides, nobody else would believe me,' but he still felt too unsure about how Snape would respond to his own medicine.

He had no reason to spoil it. No longer.

07 - Training and Lessons

Giants were still the subject in Care of Magical Creatures when Hermione came over Harry and Ron like an eagle out of the sun.

It was after breakfast on Saturday morning. They were idling around, and Harry was musing about the Flying Squadron Dumbledore had mentioned. He could think about this on and on - it had to do with flying, also had to do with some would-be squadron members ... One, in particular.

Along came Hermione, aching under a huge pile of books. She dropped it on the table, sending clouds of dust. "Here we go," she panted.

"Hermione, for Heaven's sake," cried Ron, "what's on your mind?"

"Giants, what else?" She looked sternly. "We have a project together - remember?"

"All too well," groaned Ron, "but we haven't even finished the basics in class!"

Hermione rolled her eyes in exasperation. "Right, and that's the best time to start ... What do you think will happen once it's over? We're not the only ones for whom that looks like a great idea ... I've scanned almost the entire library, and that's the result - I'm six hours work ahead of you!"

She grinned mischievously. "The others will be in for a bad surprise when looking for literature. But the early bird ... you know."

"Tweet, tweet," chirped Ron.

It made Hermione furious. "Listen, you lazybag, I'm planning ahead for seven O.W.L.s. It's a tight schedule, and I'm done with time-turners. So I have to know what's my part, yours, and -" she turned to Harry, "yours! ... Do we have a deal, yes or no?"

"Yes," hurried Harry to agree, "we have." More to calm her down, he asked, "Do you know what else you'll do?"

Hermione glared at him. "You're just not ready to put your nose into these books, so you think you might put them into my business ... Bad luck, Harry Potter. I'll tell you, might nobody say I hadn't a minute for my friends."

She raised a fist to count with her fingers. "One - Muggles Studies, special topic Medical Science ... Two - Arithmancy, about magical numbers ... Three - History, the Goblins Rebellion ... Four - Herbology, Medical Plants ... Five - Transfiguration, probably Levitation and its Role in the Muggles World."

Her second fist came up.

"Six - Potions, don't know yet what in particular ... Seven - Giants - and you two better tell me quickly what's my contribution ... All right??"

Two arms reached timidly for the pile of books.

Harry took a large volume, examined it. *A Land of Giants*, by Alastair Thumbling. The author had lived with Giants for some months and then had written a book about it. Of course, it dated back to the last century.

"Oh, that's colossal," called Ron.

Harry giggled, watching his friend duck under Hermione's blow.

"Ouch! Hey, I'm doing serious work!"

Even Hermione had to laugh.

"Here's my first contribution." Ron showed the book in his hands.

Harry read *Weapons against Wands. A survey of Giants' Tactics and Techniques in Combat*, by Sylvester O'Gruffy.

He sighed inwardly - Ron had caught the part he'd had in mind for himself.

They established a first schedule. Harry would take Lifestyle and Culture. Ron would take Military, Weapons, and Sports. Hermione would take Origin and History.

The seventh and last section - Wizard Politics toward Giants in the Twentieth Century - remained open. It was no question, this couldn't be part of Hermione's schedule about History; it had to be split again once the other sections were done.

Hermione looked more satisfied. "That's better. Now, where's our first milestone?"

"Huh?" Ron looked blank. "We're not going to travel, are we?"

Hermione sighed. "Poor me, what did I wrong to deserve this team?"

She explained the basics of project management, with *milestones* as the landmarks where progress was reviewed and sub-topics were closed. In the Muggles world, project management was a science of its own.

Ron listened with fascination, then turned to Harry. "Well, she's really got us by the b ... books, I mean. Seems as if we have to do some work, and in time ... But this management stuff sounds awfully cool. I've never heard something similar from my father."

"The Ministry," sneezed Hermione, "what they're doing is called *Management by Disaster*. Your father," she turned to Ron, "would probably be the first to agree."

"True - but don't tell Percy ... He still believes in Santa Claus."

They agreed to come together once a month officially and to deliver their results to the other team members. Each of them was supposed to have a paper ready which would provide a summary. Hermione would be the one to collect all papers.

Harry had an idea. "We might ask Grubbly-Plank whether we can use that spector. This technique beats reading by far."

Hermione, the only one who hadn't seen this type of presentation, had mixed feelings.

But Ron agreed immediately. "Good thinking, Harry - except that you're aiming too low. Use your connections with Dumbledore to get it."

Harry agreed with Ron only as far as aiming too low wouldn't help much. But he had no intention to use his *connection* with Dumbledore for gaining an advantage over other students. It felt too much like nepotism, he would rather suffer before following Malfoy's example who had bought himself into the Slytherin Quidditch team.

What he did instead was to contact McGonagall and to ask how they could get access to the spector.

"Of course - the newest toy in town, and you three want to play with it."

Harry stressed the aspect of efficient team management, hitting the right nerve.

McGonagall promised to ask Dumbledore and, if possible, to organize something like spector time for O.W.L. students and above. To Harry's dismay though not unexpectedly, she would announce it in public, giving the same chances to all students.

The next day, Harry almost forgot about Giants and spectors. The dragons had arrived!

It was Ron who brought the news. "I met Charlie. They have four dragons, the same as for last year's tournament."

Ron knew all the details and was happy to explain.

The dragons had been placed at the border of the Forbidden Forest, in an array of nests as close together as advisable for non-hatching females. The team which had brought them, four wizards, had shrunk to two residents, Charlie one of them.

With the dragons in place, Harry had only one thought - the Flying Squadron. So madly missed he the feeling of freedom and weightlessness, up in the air on his Firebolt.

* * *

It still took a full week until the Flying Squad had its first meeting. Dumbledore had scheduled the initialization for Saturday after lunch. He would introduce the squad members to their duty, and Madam Hooch would order the details.

The week was filled with work. Harry expected - hoped - the Flying Squad would require a lot of time, so he used the days to establish the basics of his Giants Lifestyle excerpt.

After several pages, it became obvious the author was extremely prejudiced. It took Harry additional effort to extract the information from the pathetic concoction, his knowledge of the Muggles world and especially his experience with prejudice proved most helpful.

Finally, the Saturday of the Flying Squadron had arrived.

Harry wandered to the Quidditch stadium, his Firebolt over the shoulder. It felt strange walking alone, more so arriving and not seeing any visitors around. But Dumbledore had made it very clear this was *not* an entertainment, rather a paramilitary service.

Reaching the pitch, Harry saw the four teams - forming a rectangle in exactly the same order as used from the tables in the Great Hall. He was among the last to arrive, his other teammates were complete, with Lee Jordan, the new goalkeeper, looking like a young boy at Christmas.

Glancing over, Harry saw the Ravenclaw team with Cho. She was busy looking somewhere else.

Madam Hooch arrived at the place. "Team captains, please come to me!"

The Gryffindor team members looked with consternation at each other. They had forgotten to elect a new captain!

"Lee," said George, "you're so good at talking - want be be our captain?"

"That's ridiculous," answered Lee, "I've never played a match with you. The other captains would laugh at me. And besides ..."

Looking around, Harry saw - their three Chasers Angelina, Alicia, and Katie didn't like the idea of Lee as their captain either. Especially Angelina Johnson looked annoyed.

Everybody knew the twins didn't want the position.

George turned toward him, but Harry had made a quick decision. "I vote for Angelina," he said loudly. "A girl captain is due, and we as the cup holder have an obligation."

Quoting Fred, he asked, "Any objections?"

Surprised looks, followed by appreciative grins. Nobody spoke.

"Who does agree?"

Six arms went up, only Angelina didn't know whether it was appropriate to vote for herself.

"Angelina," said Katie, "if you don't agree, you'll never make it captain ... Get that arm up!"

Angelina obeyed, rewarded with applause.

Katie pointed to Madam Hooch. "Okay, cap'n, move your ass."

Accompanied by laughter, Angelina strolled over.

The other teams had watched the scene. Harry became aware that Cho had been a witness to his public statement. He quickly dropped to the grass, hiding behind the other two Chasers who patted his shoulder.

Katie said, "Harry, you're Heaven's present for us girls," loud enough to make the others around laugh.

Harry, feeling his cheeks turn pink, didn't know where to look.

Fortunately, Dumbledore arrived at the scene.

"Madam Hooch," the Headmaster started, "my dear students - I won't steal much of your time as you certainly can't await to fly."

Nods and laughters.

"So I declare the Flying Squadron of Hogwarts as founded. But ..." an interrupt of applause, "before I leave you alone, there's something important."

The place was silent.

"First, I want to thank all of you for your volunteering, and I want to point out that you can resign any time."

Heads were shaking, somebody shouted "Never!"

Dumbledore didn't smile. "Second, your purpose is to watch, to explore, and to inform ... If you ever come across something unusual on your patrol, we expect you to come back like a cat with a burning tail. We do *not* expect," Dumbledore's voice grew hard, "some foolish bravado ... Is this understood?"

Nods and "Yes"s.

For a split second, Harry felt Dumbledore's eyes meet his own.

"Don't forget it. That's all I have to say ... Good luck."

Dumbledore left.

Madam Hooch explained how the Flying Squadron would work. The basic rule was, two players formed a twin team - the unit of patrol. If something would happen to one of them, the other had to return for help, rather than trying to help his teammate alone and to fall into the same trap.

For this reason, the two players wouldn't fly side by side but in a distance of at least fifty yards. Madam Hooch left no doubt that purposeful violations of this rule would result in the immediate dismissal of the culprits.

A complete standard route formed a triangle. From Hogwarts to the Giants' camp near Hogsmeade was the first edge. From there to the dragons' camp. After passing all four nests, the last edge went across the Forbidden Forest back to Hogwarts.

Four teams of seven players made fourteen twin patrols. To improve the squadron spirit and to overcome the traditional competition between the teams, Madam Hooch announced a special pattern.

Each player should join with the counterpart from another house, Beater with Beater, Chaser with Chaser, and so forth. Once a month, the pairing of houses would be set like in the good old days of Quidditch matches.

Madam Hooch then asked the four captains to draw tickets that would set the initial constellation.

Adrian Pucey, captain of the Slytherin team since Marcus Flint had finished school, was the first. He seized into a cauldron and extracted a rolled parchment.

Opening it, he showed it around, A large '2' was painted on it.

Hufflepuff was next. It was an awkward moment for Harry to watch their new captain. Then he remembered - Cedric Diggory, even if still alive, would have finished school.

The parchment that came up showed a '1'.

"They make it thrilling," said Alicia.

The next number would show it all.

Angelina Johnson went to the cauldron. Her arm came up. She unfolded the parchment, looked at it, and stepped to Adrian Pucey. It was a '2'.

Even as the other pairing was obvious, Davies, the Ravenclaw captain, took the last parchment and met his Hufflepuff colleague.

Harry didn't know which feeling was stronger, his disappointment that it would take at least one month before he would form a team with Cho, or his relief still having time.

Looking over, he saw her head quickly turn away. Then she rose and walked toward the Hufflepuff seeker.

He took his Firebolt to march over to the Slytherin team. Suddenly he realized that, until recently, Draco Malfoy would have been his teammate. The thought made him shudder.

A figure came into view. "Harry Potter?"

He looked up, nodded.

"I hope the question didn't sound stupid, but I didn't know what else to say ... Hi - I'm Robert Daunty, your teammate for this month."

"Yes of course." Harry remembered. "We played against each other. You were the Slytherin seeker before ..."

"Right. And now I'm the Slytherin seeker after - and that's all I want to say about this bad episode." Daunty smiled grimly.

Harry nodded, grinning. "That's just fine with me ... Nice to meet you again, Robert."

They shook hands. "Call me Bob, otherwise I wouldn't know whom you're talking with."

Walking together to join the group around Madam Hooch, Bob shot a glance to him. "At the risk of breaking my own rule, Harry - I owe you one."

"What for?" Harry expected something about his last encounter with Malfoy.

"Two, actually. I rarely felt as good as watching you beat my predecessor."

Harry laughed. "Save it, er, Bob ... I felt pretty much the same."

Chatting, they reached Madame Hooch, who was discussing details of the next hours with the captains.

Every twin team should fly the full route once, but the Quidditch teacher was the only one who knew the landmarks. Finally, they agreed to run double patrols for this day, one team that knew the route from its first turn, and a second one that was instructed where to fly.

Madame Hooch guided the first team.

* * *

A single patrol took about twenty minutes, so more than four hours would pass before the last team could take off.

Madam Hooch had prepared a duty roster which listed six flights per day, two before and after each meal from breakfast, over lunch, to supper. That was, each twin team was scheduled every third day. The teams used the waiting time to sign themselves in the list, those who came last found only breakfast schedules left open.

Waiting for their double patrol, Harry had time to think. It was like a major clean-up in his mind, the first since the new school year had started.

Watching the teams depart and return, he reviewed the conversation with Hermione and Ron during breakfast, and how Hermione had described techniques of project planning. With their regular classes, the O.W.L.s, the Flying Squad, and some more personal items together, Harry had so many things to keep track of that he felt in need of a reordering.

Lupin's lessons about *Ways* and *Goals* resurfaced in his memory. He could see many parallels between Zen and project management.

He decided to write down a personal list of goals for this year, as soon as he would be back in his room. Or maybe not all of them, perhaps only those which were harmless when read by someone else.

There were some personal goals, referring to dance balls and to a certain girl who just had departed for her double patrol. This part seemed better off when kept only in his mind.

He exercised a mental project list for this goal. It looked pretty simple:

- Join the ball together with Cho

Obviously, it wasn't that simple. Was a list a list if containing just one entry? Worse, it didn't give him any hint how to reach that goal.

Thinking harder, he remembered Hermione's milestones. The second list looked slightly better.

- Invite Cho to the ball
- Meet her at the evening
- Enjoy the ball

It still didn't look right. In his mind, Harry dropped the second entry, meeting her was fairly obvious - once things had developed that far.

Checking the first entry, he remembered how he had tried once. It wasn't too pleasant a memory.

Suddenly, it struck him there were several conditions important enough to be listed as milestones. The new list felt as if he had grasped the first bit of project planning:

- Invite Cho soon enough to be the first
- Make sure she accepts
- Have fun - do better than the last time

A pity he couldn't ask Hermione about the proper scaling in this plan. But his 'public' list of goals would contain enough material to fine-tune the technique.

He was trying to imagine himself inviting Cho when Bob's and his turn was due.

The flight was wonderful. Harry enjoyed the cool breeze drying the sweat in his face. He felt sure - the patrol duties would be the times to clear his mind and to think about strategies.

The landmarks were simple, it was nearly impossible to get lost in such a small area. Their second turn proved it.

Less simple was flying in formation with fifty or hundred yards distance. The different broomsticks made it difficult to stay in sync, even Bob's Nimbus Two-Thousand and One, whose performance came closest to Harry's Firebolt, had trouble following.

As they found out, the broomstick with more power was best placed in the trailing position.

Passing the Giants' camp, Harry tried to detect Hagrid, eager to wave at him, but no luck. Same with Charlie at the dragons' nests, probably they had got bored from all the students passing by.

* * *

Back in the school building, Harry started to write the list he had planned. But mysteriously, his mind refused to deal with matters as mundane as O.W.L.s. Instead, it always returned to the three items in the mental list.

He had no idea how to do the first step toward these goals. Once during their lessons, Lupin had quoted some old Zen master. *If your path is clouded, you may want to wait until the fog lifts. But this may never happen. A determined man walks the steps he can overlook, he will be rewarded by another piece lying open then.*

All right, he was determined - where were the steps he could oversee?

Hermione had said this morning, "Break the tasks down in subtasks." This should unravel the visible steps.

Harry checked item number one, inviting Cho soon enough.

One thing was clear - soon enough meant as soon as possible. But certainly not right now?? He decided the first time with Gryffindor and Ravenclaw together would be soon enough.

As for the invitation itself, he found nothing that could be broken down. He - simply - had - to - say - the - words.

In his mind, Harry erased the word *simply*, then went to the second item.

Making sure she would accept was a mission impossible. How about 'improving the chances she would accept'? Was it an improvement that Cedric was no longer around? Harry's mind refused to answer that question.

He quickly went to the third item.

Have fun could be checked off immediately. Joining the ball with Cho might be more excitement than fun, but for any discrepancy the blame would be on his side.

Doing better than the last time, this should be an easy candidate for breaking down. Ball manners. Well, he wouldn't start a discussion with Ron while Cho sat at his side. Dancing.

Dancing??

He knew about dancing as much as the year before. Dances should be performed on broomsticks in the air, this would solve his problem. He didn't expect a majority for this solution. Even then, he didn't expect Cho to agree. She could dance.

Harry remembered Hermione's remark from the first evening, the one that had irritated Ron so much. She was right, except that he, Harry, would go just for dance lessons, not for French.

But where, or by whom?

His head jerked up. There was a solution!

Thinking about it, his mouth went dry. If only he could muster the courage to take it. Fleur Delacour.

* * *

Sunday came up, presenting magnificent weather. Harry regretted bitterly that he and Bob had been too late on the squad list to sign for today. When he had told his friends about the Flying Squad the previous evening, Ron had listened enviously, while Hermione hadn't looked too happy.

"I don't like it too much," she had said, "students being used like - like soldiers. I almost can't believe this is Dumbledore's idea."

Harry had shrugged. "He has to make do with what he has," had been his answer, "it's a small risk compared to some others, and we are all volunteers." He had remembered Dumbledore's words about using those being suited best for the job.

"And what if the Dark Forces catch one after the other?" Hermione had asked angrily.

Ron had said, "They won't do that, the first captured student would end the squad, and the political damage would be worse than ever."

This was a reference to the public echo after the *Daily Prophet* had reported the Hogwarts Express accident. The news had upset lots of wizards who, until before, hadn't cared much about the Dark Forces, raising a level of engagement which was unprecedented. According to recent news, people talking derogatorily about *mixed blood* were likely to encounter unpleasant hexes. Currently, the Dark Forces did the best they could, they were lying low.

After breakfast, Harry took his book, his parchments, and positioned himself in a strategic position for catching Fleur alone. In the meantime, he was working on Giants' lifestyle.

He didn't make much progress; neither was his mind on the subject nor did it help him looking up so often.

Shortly before lunch, he saw Cho and the Hufflepuff seeker reach the exit, broomsticks in their hands and talking animatedly.

Groaning inwardly, he let his eyes fall to the open page, not being able to read a word.

After lunch, Harry knew - his approach had failed completely. He had to visit Fleur directly, only he didn't know how. When he saw the teachers leave their seats, he sped to a place where he would meet Lupin.

"Harry - you look troubled on such a lovely day." Lupin himself looked healthy, it was the time around new moon.

"Professor Lupin, I'd like to ask you a question."

Lupin studied Harry's face again. "Then let's go to my office."

Harry followed him.

Lupin closed the door. "Sit down, Harry ... Want some tea?"

"No, thanks." Harry swallowed.

"Let me guess ... May it have to do with your O.W.L.s?"

"No - er, I mean, yes."

Harry was offered the opportunity to wrap his question into something less suspicious, and he took it quickly. "Professor Lupin, I was planning to do an O.W.L. about Defence against the Dark Arts."

The teacher smiled. "Naturally so - and now let me guess again what might be the topic ... Hmmm, difficult ...", a dramatic pause, "but may it have to do with a very unusual charm?"

Harry grinned. "Yes."

"What else." Lupin went serious. "Harry, this is a self-runner. We simply owe it to you, and besides - you have invested already most of your summer vacation."

"That was the best vacation I ever had," admitted Harry, blushing.

Lupin was genuinely pleased. "Thank you, Harry. If there was ever a doubt, recent conversations with Professor Snape have confirmed you are not trying to - er, cajole me."

Harry blushed deeper.

Lupin winked. "By the way, I never worried about my health - that is, aside from the - er, obvious ... But then, I had the advantage of past experience."

He paused, looking absent-mindedly. "Anyway, to come back to your question, what you should do is to review the literature about the Patronus spell. It isn't much, really ... In the exam, you should be prepared to conjure up a Patronus."

He stopped. "Oh - I forgot, the Boggart doesn't work any longer, and I don't think we will have a Dementor at hand." Then his eyes lighted. "I know what to do. Either you do a Patronus against some fake, or we'll show the catatonic Dementor, and I'll give testimony about its ill fate."

He smiled. "This way or the other, Harry, it will be your easiest exam ever, with a result you might find hard to beat."

"Good." Harry tried to sound casually. "Professor Lupin, er - do you know Fleur Delacour?"

"The Beauxbatons Liaison Officer?" Lupin was wondering. "Not really. Why do you ask?"

"I was trying to talk with her ... Do you know where I would find her?"

Lupin laughed. "As the name indicates, Harry - a Liaison Officer has an office. Hers is not far away from that of Mr. Filch."

After being instructed how to find it, Harry left.

He was lucky. Filch was nowhere seen. Still unsure whether he was targeting the right room, Harry saw a piece of parchment fixed with spellotape at the door.

On tour in Beauxbatons. Will be back after supper. F.D.

Harry went to his dormitory and began to work seriously. Now that he knew how to contact Fleur privately, he made good progress. After his talk with Lupin, it felt as if working on his second O.W.L.

* * *

Meeting the others at supper, he reported the conversation, skipping the last part as well as the remark about Snape.

Hermione was pleased to hear Harry's second O.W.L. settled.

Ron sighed. "I wish I had something like that ... I have my third topic - it will be dragons, meaning Care of Magical Creatures. I spoke with Charlie - he'll help me as good as he can."

"Super," said Harry. "Ron, you're one ahead of me."

"The heck I am," muttered Ron. "Maybe in counting. But it will be a hell of work."

"Break it down," suggested Hermione. "If you specialize on something like 'Domestication of Dragons and their Purposeful Usage', you can see where it ends."

Ron looked up, a grin spreading his face. "Hermione, you're an angel!"

"I'll quote you the next time." Toward Harry, she added. "You're my witness."

"What?" Harry held his hands around the ears. "I didn't hear you."

He quickly brought his head out of Hermione's reach.

Then they discussed their joint project, telling each other interesting details.

Grubbly-Plank had finished the subject, and Hermione was right - many students were interested in Giants as an O.W.L. topic; Madam Pince, the librarian, had reminded Hermione of a time limit for borrowed books.

Harry waited until the evening had settled. Then he went upstairs to Fleur's office. He had thought of his Invisibility Cloak, but had dismissed the idea. After all, this was nothing forbidden, nobody except himself knew how unusual the request was. He knocked at the door.

"Come in!"

He opened the door.

Fleur was sitting at a desk. "Harry! What a pleasant surprise!"

She stood up. "I'm just back from my parents. I had to tell Giselle all about your adventure. She was quite frightened."

Harry imagined a small figure. Next year, Giselle would enter wizard school, however Beauxbatons, thank God. He could use a second Ginny syndrome like a second scar in the face.

Fleur motioned him to an armchair. "A glass of wine? I just stacked up my supply."

"No, thanks. Alcohol is the last thing I need right now."

"Oh." Fleur poured herself a glass. "Is it that difficult?"

"Maybe not." Harry swallowed. "Fleur, er - I'd like to ask you a favour."

She looked surprised. "But certainly, 'arry. What can I do for you?"

"Can you ... I thought ... I want to learn dancing."

It was out.

Fleur's eyes went bright. "Really? ... But yes, of course - the balls. And you ... 'arry, that's a wonderful idea. I'm flattered you're asking me."

Harry suppressed a reply about her as the only one that had come to his mind. Actually, he could have asked Hermione, except that this idea was simply absurd.

Fleur nodded, thinking. "I don't see a problem, 'arry ... We'll need a room, some music ... Perhaps even in Beauxbatons." She smiled. "I like the idea better every second - it will be fun, and the others will marvel at us."

Harry was horrified. "For Heaven's sake, Fleur!"

He explained that he wouldn't be able to stand any publicity, at least not as long as he would be busy getting rid of his basic clumsiness.

"You're not clumsy," protested Fleur.

Next moment, she frowned. "You mean, doing it secretly, tiptoeing the floors in the evening, like lovers?"

Harry flushed. "I didn't imagine it like that. And besides ..." He couldn't finish his thought.

Fleur laughed joyfully. "You mean nobody would think that way about you and me?"

Harry nodded, unable to speak.

"Maybe not 'ere in Hogwarts," giggled Fleur, "although ..."

Then another thought struck her mind. "'arry," her voice was enticing, "who is the lucky one?"

Harry didn't see a way of denying the answer. Moreover, talking with Fleur about these things seemed quite natural, different from anything, or anyone, he had experienced before. Maybe it

was her Veela nature which made it so simple, but there were probably other reasons. It was a relief to say it out loud.

"Her name is Cho Chang."

The name didn't tell Fleur anything.

"The Ravenclaw seeker."

Still no clue.

"Remember the other girl in the lake - the one with Cedric?"

"Oh, 'er." Fleur smiled warmly. "You 'ave a fine taste, 'arry."

Then she recalled the full picture. "And Cedric is dead, while it just so happens that you were with 'im when 'e died, and you're alive ..." She finished, "No, I don't see a problem either."

"Then you're the only one," replied Harry. He had twisted inwardly listening how Fleur had thought loudly about the events, so casually and naturally.

Fleur examined his face. "You may have to learn some more about women, 'arry. That friend of yours ... Anyway, learning to dance is a good beginning, and I'll be a good teacher."

"That's what I thought." Harry was breathing easier.

They agreed to do the lessons in a room Harry had to provide.

He remembered the room where he had found the Mirror of Erised, for all he knew, it was still unused and in a fair distance from normal traffic.

Fleur would have known excellent places in Beauxbatons, but they dropped the idea quickly. The portkey links between the two schools were well guarded, it was impossible to use them unnoticed. Even if, somebody checked them every day to see who had used them. Harry learned from Fleur that a portkey could be instructed to show its recent users like a wand could be instructed to show the recent spells.

Then there was the issue of music.

"I could sing for us," suggested Fleur, but dismissed the thought. She promised to come up with the wizard equivalent of a walkman which would answer the question how to avoid too much noise; only the two dancers would hear the music.

They would meet as often as possible until Harry had mastered the basics, after that, once a week or once a fortnight had to do. Both Fleur and Harry expected to have less time soon.

* * *

In their first lesson, Fleur taught him Slow Waltz. "It's all about rhythm, with the steps quite simple," said Fleur. "So if you're such a good broomstick flyer, 'arry, you shouldn't have trouble with it."

Unfortunately, he had.

True, the steps were simple, but the closeness of the bodies, or maybe just the thought of it, made Harry dance like a piece of wood.

After a while, Fleur said, "I know what to do."

When the next dance started, Harry felt his embarrassment drown in some feeling of dizziness and bravado. With the music fading, it stopped.

Looking up, he saw Fleur smile teasingly. "I used a little Veela charm to flex your knees, 'arry."

From then on, Harry advanced rapidly.

* * *

They were in one of the next lessons. They just had finished a Cha-Cha-Cha when suddenly applause rose from a corner.

Harry froze.

Fleur looked up, surprised. "Who's that?"

With some effort, Harry turned, not daring to think who it might be.

Moaning Myrtle - showing the ghostly equivalent of purple cheeks.

"Moaning Myrtle! What are you doing here?"

"Watching you dance ... It's so nice - I really hope you don't mind."

"Well - er, really, Myrtle." Harry didn't like the idea much.

Before he could argue more, Fleur clapped her hands. "But yes, that's what we need. 'arry, you have to learn how to dance in front of people - um, yes, people."

Anxious to avoid a tantrum from Myrtle, Harry introduced the two girls to each other. "Fleur, this is Myrtle - a former student of Gryffindor. She was killed by a Basilisk."

He had the presence of mind to skip the detail where it had taken place, in the girls' bathroom. Myrtle seemed grateful for that.

"Myrtle, this is Fleur Delacour - our Liaison Officer with the Beauxbatons school. You may remember her from the lake."

He had to tell Fleur how he had met Myrtle at that occasion.

"All right, Myrtle," he agreed finally, "as long as you don't bring Nearly Headless Nick around, it's fine with me."

Myrtle, in an embarrassed tone, assured she didn't fancy the idea, and so it was settled.

There was no need to inform Myrtle about their appointments, the ghost girl found them invariably. Maybe she checked the room every evening.

Her presence offered one big advantage - more than once, Myrtle warned them off when Filch was passing by, anticipating the mean caretaker long before Fleur or Harry could hear him.

In reverse, Fleur offered her to dance with Harry.

Myrtle found this idea very exciting, and they tried, only it didn't work well with the modern dances. The next time, Fleur brought Boccerini's *Menuet in A-Flat Major* and showed the two dancers how to perform the old figures.

Myrtle was delighted.

* * *

Harry was on his way back from a dance lesson when a figure stepped in his path.

"Hi, Harry ... Nice to meet you here." It was Ron.

Harry jumped. "Ron, please - be quiet. There's no need for ..."

"Playing hide and seek, Harry? ... What's so secret about it?"

Ron mimicked as if shouting along the floor, but kept his voice low. "Where do you come from?"

"Erm - actually, that's really none of your business."

"Maybe not." Ron's voice held some undertone of threat. "But then I might ask the question again while Hermione's listening. Imagine, me somewhere in the hall, say, at the Ravenclaw table, and I call, Hermione, you know what, and she, What, and me ..."

Harry stared. "You'd do that?"

"Don't ask, Harry - just tell me where you come from."

Ron sounded seriously pissed off. Harry remembered, Ron hadn't really forgiven him voting for Lee Jordan as the new Quidditch teammate.

He gnashed his teeth. "All right, Ron Weasley, I'll tell you. Because I guess you might do it, and then I'd have to kill you on the spot, and I don't want to do that ... But if you ever tell further, I'll kill you then, and I won't feel regret ... Got me?"

Ron just grinned. "Yeah, gotcha ... Now?"

"I'm taking dance lessons - with Fleur ... We just finished one."

Ron's face showed disbelief, followed by understanding, followed by rage. He had trouble keeping his voice low.

"You dirty son of a ... You didn't tell me. I *knew* it was something like that. Keep all the fun to yourself, huh?"

Harry's temper was rising too. "You didn't ask me. Actually, it was an advice for you that brought up the idea."

Ron looked uncomprehending. "Advice for me?"

"Remember the first evening here? Hermione said something like getting somebody to teach you dancing ... Well, she was right."

Ron was baffled.

Much calmer, he said, "Okay, she was right. As so often ... And you just did it." His voice turned excited. "That's gooooood, Harry. When do we meet next?"

"You mean ..."

Ron nodded. "You bet."

"Then be prepared for somebody else. Although she won't dance with us."

"Who is it??"

"Moaning Myrtle."

Within seconds, Ron was in tears while straining to suppress a laughter.

At the next appointment, Harry opened the door to the training room, Ron at his feet.

Fleur was in conversation with Myrtle.

"Hi, Fleur, hi, Myrtle ... I've brought somebody with me - he had an offer I couldn't deny."

He stepped aside, giving Ron the opportunity to say hello.

"allo, Ron," said Fleur, not too enthusiastic. "What did 'arry mean with an offer 'e couldn't deny?"

"Well - I met him on the floor, and I had to blackmail him a little ... At the end, we agreed I might benefit from some dancing too."

"So what makes you think I'd agree as well?"

"Oh ... Hmm - er, I hoped Harry's reasons might extend to you."

"Mr. Weasley," snapped Fleur, "I know how to fight fire with fire ... Before you think about going public, consider this - I would come over to you, and I would use a little Veela power, making you look as ridiculous as you've never been before."

Ron wasn't impressed. "Yes, you could do that - but what for? You know, I'm doing it myself all the time ... Somebody told me to learn some manners, so I'm here."

Still irritated, Fleur said, "So be it ... But be warned, my dear Ron. A Veela doesn't take blackmailing well. And she can direct that charm to a specific person, that's exactly the idea. If I really ever power up toward you, they will tear you off me and sign a very unpleasant complaint immediately ... 'ave I been clear enough?"

Ron's face had paled a little. "Yes."

"On the other hand," added Fleur in a voice suddenly alluring, "I might do better by getting friendly with the Weasley family."

Harry grinned, remembering how Fleur had looked at Bill Weasley.

Ron hadn't understood, he would have to tell him. Only - after the style of negotiations his friend had presented, Harry felt in no hurry to break the news.

* * *

As unbalanced as the three of them seemed, it worked out better than expected. Taking turns, Harry and Ron could use their breaks to watch the proper steps as well as the mistakes. It was much fun, and they enjoyed the shared experience.

They were on their way back to the Gryffindor tower, chatting softly about how they would show off at the ball, when Harry had a case of déjà-vu, in contrast to Ron.

"Good evening, you two."

It was Hermione. "Still busy so late?"

"Oh, hallo, Hermione." Almost as a chorus.

"Where do you come from? - Don't tell me from working, I checked the hall, the library, everywhere."

"Hogwarts is bigger than meets the eye," teased Ron.

It was the worst he could have found.

"You stupid fool," hissed Hermione, "if that's your only answer, fine with me. I'm going to quit our agreement. Some people just can't see reason."

"Please ..." started Harry.

Too late - Ron's temper was boiling up. "Listen, you wisemouth - we're just doing what you've told us. Remember?"

In a mimicking voice, he chirped, "Get yourself somebody to teach you French, and dancing, and manners."

In his own voice again, "Except that it's just dancing and manners, but the teacher is French. So much for seeing reason."

Hermione stopped. "What do you mean?"

"We're taking dance lessons from Fleur," said Harry.

It made Hermione truly speechless. Opening and closing her mouth, she turned and hurried upstairs. Ron and Harry watched her disappear, waiting long enough before following.

Next morning, during breakfast, the climate was well below freezing point.

"Do we still have a project?" asked Ron after a while.

"Yes," was the answer, the only comment they got from Hermione for the day.

08 - Invitations

The air between Hermione and the other two was still cool when they met for their first milestone. Before the meeting, Harry had warned Ron.

"For once, keep that big mouth of yours tight. If your remarks are the reason for the next crash, you might find yourself suddenly working alone."

"Blackmailing is addictive, isn't it?" had been Ron's reply. But he had agreed.

They talked formally and politely, with lots of "Could you" and "Please" and "Thank you". Nonetheless, and to everybody's surprise, the milestone was a full success.

Harry as well as Ron had worked like crazy to get their papers finished, and to be ready for a presentation. The hope for using the spector had turned out vain, it was unclear whether access wouldn't be allowed or if McGonagall had just forgotten. After the ice period had started, Harry hadn't felt like discussing the issue with Hermione, so he hadn't pressed it with McGonagall either.

As a consequence, they performed the review in the traditional way - using the hall, more than once being forced to get rid of some spectator. Until the end, Hermione's tight lips had relaxed a bit.

"We are on schedule," she stated, "all of us ... Good."

Harry felt tense. This was exactly the situation in which Ron used to give some stupid remark, and it would blow the project into pieces.

It didn't come.

After a moment, he realized - Hermione too had waited for it.

"There's just a minor problem," Hermione finally continued, "we need a meeting room ... The library's out of question because we cannot speak there, and this place here has too many ears for my taste."

"Well," said Ron, "I had an idea. But ..." He didn't finish.

"What's the problem?" asked Hermione. "Lost your speech?"

"No, quite the opposite, I'm saving most of it currently."

Ron controlled himself. "There's a room that would suit us, but I'm not sure whether I should suggest it ... You might find it has the wrong connotation."

"What are you talking ab ..." Hermione stopped herself - she had caught the meaning.

For a moment, she seemed not to know how to look. It was followed by some twisting around her lips.

To his regret, Harry saw her steadying again.

"Might this room be used for different purposes in the evening?"

"About once a week, yes."

The frequency of their dance lessons had dropped to that level and was likely to sink still lower, Fleur was more and more involved in evening meetings.

Harry admired how Ron had sent the message to Hermione, who had taken pains not to meet them in the evenings.

"I see." Sending messages was addictive too.

They were waiting for Hermione's next words.

"Okay. I shouldn't overreact about such subordinate details, as long as they are of no consequence."

Harry suppressed a grin. They were still walking on thin ice, the pressure Hermione had put onto herself, with a schedule of seven O.W.L.s, was doing no good to her temper. He recalled her edginess for the most part of a year when she had done a similar tour de force two years ago.

Ron was about to say something, then thought better of it.

Hermione took her parchments and left.

Harry waited until she was out of earshot, then said, "Well, better than nothing. That's as close to a nice word from her as we might come these days."

"Ohhh, we shouldn't overreact about such dumb-ordinate seatails, as long as ..."

Harry's howling laughter made it impossible for Ron to finish. They were lucky Hermione had left the hall already.

"Satisfied with my performance?" asked Ron.

"Yes," answered Harry, "I'm proud of you."

"After such high praise from both sides, I need fresh air," snorted Ron and left.

Harry sighed. Recently, his friend was as testy as a bear with a pimple on its back. He wondered why.

They all worked hard, but it had to be something else. Probably the Flying Squad. Harry avoided talking much about it, but there was no way stopping Fred and George, who liked to entertain half of the Gryffindors' table with their stories.

In an attempt of balancing out, Ron had talked with McGonagall to get a permission for visiting Charlie and the dragons' nests. She hadn't even laughed at him.

* * *

Early next morning, Harry had his last patrol with Bob. He still didn't know how the Gryffindors would be paired next, Hufflepuff or Ravenclaw.

During their flights, he and Bob had established a good companionship. Bob was a quiet guy, unlike everything Harry would have expected from a Slytherin.

At some point, Harry had said, "It's strange how I never noticed you all this time."

Bob had answered, "Not at all. You were more than busy paying attention to Draco, and it won't surprise you I didn't want to be found near him."

There was little doubt - Bob was interested in details about Harry's adventures, but he never asked directly. It had made Harry feel free to tell some story or another.

One day, they talked about the Tri-Wizard's Tournament, about the trial in the lake in particular, and Bob said, "I recall the teachers discussing about your points, how this guy, what's his name - yes, Karkaroff, tried to put you down ... Anyway, you got rewarded by that French girl. And now she's here all the time."

Harry stiffened for a moment, but there was no sign that Bob had been trying to indicate anything.

As if in apology for his suspicion, Harry asked, "Want to hear how it was down there?"

Just for a split second, there was a surprised look, dropped immediately. Bob's extreme self-control fit more to the Slytherin pattern.

Then Bob answered, carefully, "I'd feel privileged. But before you start, I want to offer you a deal. I show you some unknown territory, and you let me share that privilege with some friends of mine."

It took Harry a second or two before realizing - this was an invitation to the Slytherin tower.

He swallowed. "Yes, I'd like to meet those friends."

After a moment, he added, "Actually, I have a surprise in stock. I'll tell you also how come this territory isn't totally unknown to me."

That evening turned out remarkable. The first minutes feeling awkward, filled with small talk from both sides. Then Bob took the initiative by pointing out how Madam Hooch's decision was going to open new horizons for all of them. After these words, people speculated whether this had really been her own decision or one of Dumbledore's clever moves.

Then, Harry told them how he and Ron had once made a visit in their tower, using the Polyjuice Potion. The Slytherins listened with interest, but apparently the subject of Draco Malfoy was too sensitive to be discussed further.

Finally, Harry told the story of his deep water adventure, stressing how stupid he'd felt learning that there had been no risk for the underwater hostages. This time, his audience felt more relaxed, and the evening ended in comfortable chatter.

When he left, Bob said, "I'll bring you down the hall. I don't want to spoil the evening just because somebody's having a fit finding you here."

Seeing Harry's look, he added, "Some people still have trouble getting used to the new situation. Being in the Flying Squad is a big advantage."

Harry answered, "You're right. Some people in Gryffindor would risk a heart stroke finding me here."

* * *

The morning air was cold. Harry met Bob outside. Today, they would take the usual route in reverse, dragons' nests first, Giants' camp last.

Harry was in the lead. After their initial difficulties with the different broomsticks, they had learned to keep the formation. This was important because, at least in theory, the front man took the higher risk.

They had also learned that reality might be totally different and therefore the leader had to look back every now and then.

After an uneventful patrol, they arrived at Hogwarts, touched down, dismounted.

Bob said, "That's been our last flight, Harry ... It was a pleasure to team with you."

"Thank you, Bob ... You know, I've learned a lot from you."

"About flying? ... Certainly not."

Harry grinned, grew serious again. "No - about Slytherins."

Bob's eyes were sparkling for a very short moment.

"I've learned something more," added Harry, waiting.

"Which is?" Bob's face was expressionless.

"Never to play poker against you - I'd lose my last sickle."

Bob laughed. "You'd find yourself in company." He paused, then said, "I wonder what will be the next pairing."

The new assignments would be published this evening.

"Me too," said Harry thoughtfully, being reminded his chances to meet Cho were fifty-fifty.

An idea struck him. "Listen, what do you think about hearing it from our captain?"

"You mean ..."

"Yes - I still owe you an invitation ... This is the opportunity."

Bob started to grin. "Yeah, that sounds wonderful. I'd like to hear the comments of your teammates about mine."

Harry laughed. "Well, you know, I should warn you. The Weasley twins are really pitiless."

"That's okay ... They have to live up to their reputation."

They agreed to meet in the hall, then went inside to have breakfast.

Harry had intended to announce his guest immediately. However, reaching the table, he only saw sleepy, sullen faces. So he decided to wait until this sensitive news would find a friendlier atmosphere.

* * *

Their first class was Astronomy. Professor Sinistra had finished with planets and the solar system; the new subject were other stars.

She spoke about light years, rising protest when explaining a light year was a distance, not a period. Her statement about light speed being a limit which couldn't be surpassed launched another protest.

"And what about apparition?" asked a student. "You're travelling from here to there at the flick of an eye."

The teacher pointed out that no distance on earth was long enough to withhold the light even a tenth of a second.

"Imagine you could appear on the moon," she said, "it would take the wizard about one second."

There was a discussion, while Harry thought about his feelings when travelling with a portkey. Finally, they agreed to accept light years as a measure without going further into the depths of physics, especially since the new subject was focused on star constellations.

Professor Sinistra presented the diagram of a constellation, promising they would use the spector once the basics of astro navigation were settled.

Harry felt very pleased to hear this constallation was called Centaur, named after an ancient guy by the name of Chiron. But disappointment followed immediately - these stars weren't visible in the northern hemisphere.

He raised his arm. "Professor, what's the sense in presenting a constellation we cannot see?"

Sinistra pointed to the brightest star on top.

"This is the reason," she said, "Alpha Centauri. It's also called Proxima Centauri because this is the star closest to Earth ... About four light years."

Another arm came up. "What about the others?"

The answer baffled the class. They learned the other Centauri stars were up to six hundred light years away.

Ron's arm came up. "Professor, this constellation is nonsense. Those stars do not really belong together."

"An excellent observation, Mr. Weasley - five points for Gryffindor ... But still, this earth-bound perspective is the basis of star catalogues."

Then Sinistra explained how stars in a constellation were named with Greek letters like Alpha, Beta, Gamma, and so forth, in descending order of brightness.

After class, Ron said to Harry, "I still don't know what all this has to do with magic, but who cares. It's so neat, letters and numbers ... Much better than those crazy planet orbits of last year. I guess I've found my fourth O.W.L."

"Astronomy??" Harry didn't believe his ears.

"What's wrong with it? ... Hermione does Arithmancy about magic numbers - I'm doing Astronomy about non-magic numbers."

Harry felt a nasty sting in his stomach. He was trailing behind!

Hermione had announced seven O.W.L.s and had rattled off their titles. Ron had talked about four, now he had them together. He, Harry, didn't even know how many he would do, not to mention their titles.

Giants and Patronus were all he had, his tinkering with the idea of a Transportation O.W.L. had suffered a severe blow from that light speed stuff. He didn't want to be caught in a discussion about advanced physics, until before, the topic had looked so easy to survey.

With another sting, he remembered his intention to write a list of his goals - the ink on that list was still to dry.

The next class, Potions, did nothing to improve Harry's mood, however it wasn't Snape to blame.

After finishing with the fright killer, and after an extraordinary test with Neville Longbottom, who had stood his ground against a Snape playing his old self, the teacher had started another task for a brew which would make people feel happy.

Now he asked who felt ready to test.

Harry elbowed Ron. "Give it a try."

"Why me?"

"Because you sound totally out of sorts these days," was slipping Harry's mouth. It proved no good.

Ron burst up. "Mind your own business," he hissed. "That's what I need, a Veela-drunken hop-dancer telling me *Be happy*. Thanks ..."

Snape's voice interrupted him. "Mr. Weasley," said the teacher with amusement, "you sound so upset. That would make you a perfect candidate ... What do you think?"

"I'm not upset," yelled Ron, "and I'm not going to drink that stuff."

Some time earlier, his behaviour would have brought him a detention at the least. Today, Snape remained totally relaxed.

"What a pity." The teacher held up a small bottle. "This is the antidote - our candidate will be cured at the end of the test ... Ten points for the try - who's interested?"

Arms shot into the air, of course, Snape chose a Slytherin student.

Harry hadn't volunteered; he felt frightened at the image of him spilling out his inner-most secrets.

For the rest of the lesson, silence hung between him and Ron.

Hermione, who had followed their argument without saying anything, didn't break the silence either.

* * *

At lunch, Harry informed the Gryffindors that he had invited a Slytherin guest for the evening. He explained who it was, and what Bob would expect from the conversation.

After some reluctance, Angelina agreed, and Fred and George promised not to disappoint their guest. But the agreement wasn't general.

"Making new friends?" asked Ron with a cold voice. "Good luck - Slytherins is the proper place to look for, as the Sorting Hat told you long ago."

Hermione's eyes went wide at this remark.

Harry bit his lips. "Bob and me, that's a good companionship ... I'm very careful with the word 'friend' - and my friends are very careful with their words about other people, houses or races ... Usually."

Rod said nothing. He just dropped his fork and left.

Hermione looked at Harry. "I'm sorry," she said. "I don't think he really meant it."

"I know," said Harry miserably. "Its about Quidditch - I mean the Flying Squad. Since Lee has been elected instead of him, mentioning it is all that's needed to make him skyrocket."

Realizing this was the first conversation with Hermione since a while, he asked, "Will you join us?"

Hermione hesitated. "Why did you invite him?"

"I had been invited in the Slytherin tower."

It surprised her.

"This is my last opportunity to return the favour," explained Harry, "in this turn, I mean ... He's totally different from what I'd expected - that is, from a Slytherin." He told Hermione how he and Bob had met.

"Okay, Harry." She smiled. "Might nobody say I couldn't spend a Friday evening for my friends."

Harry was grateful. At present, two out of three seemed the best he could achieve.

* * *

The afternoon was a torture. History with Professor Binns stretched to one long fight against sleep, lost several times. Hermione had placed herself between Harry and Ron, alternately stabbing them in the back before their sleeping became obvious.

History was followed by Divination, forcing Harry and Ron to work as a team.

Professor Trelawney presented little pieces of wood, not much longer than matchsticks, called them 'I Ging', and could find no end about their origin and tradition. It was a Chinese system.

Harry would have been attracted more, with respect to a Chinese name that kept nesting in his mind, except that after Ron uttering, "Chinese - how interesting," he didn't dare to show any excitement.

The theory was followed by practical tests. One of them had to ask a question and to draw six pieces of wood, the other had to look up the resulting pattern in the book.

The descriptions used a strange symbolic language full of serpents, buffaloes, and dragons, but Ron as well as Harry suppressed the funny remarks coming to mind.

Professor Trelawney had warned them - the question had to be serious, otherwise the answer would be confusing. Needless to say, neither Harry nor Ron were ready to ask a serious question in such an atmosphere. It was a total waste.

Supper wasn't too enjoyable either. The most remarkable difference from lunch was that Ron excused himself before leaving soon.

The other students kept asking questions about the evening guest. When they heard that Harry had been invited already to the Slytherins, he had to answer more questions about that evening, the hall, and the conversation.

The Gryffindors seemed determined to present themselves at least as good as their former enemies. Suddenly, Harry looked forward to the evening with much more enthusiasm.

He met Bob in the Great Hall, guided him upstairs.

"Who wants to enter?" asked the Fat Lady.

Harry gave the password.

"In with you, my dear," she said, "and with this handsome young man." She was delighted when Bob replied with a slight bow, right arm crossing his chest.

They entered the Gryffindor Hall, found the others waiting for them.

"Hello folks," said Harry, "this is Bob ... Bob, meet our team - I guess you know all of them."

Angelina stood up. "Hi, Bob ... Welcome in the Gryffindor tower."

They shook hands, examining each other, obviously well pleased.

Bob made the round with the other girls, earning interested looks, even from Hermione.

Before he could come further, the Weasley twins had reached him.

"Bob," shouted Fred, "without knowing you too well, you're the most significant improvement the Slytherin team had in a long time."

George came forward. "Never mind, Bob - Fred doesn't mean this personally."

Bob laughed. "I've been forewarned. But Harry promised me you wouldn't shoot Bludgers at me."

George turned to Harry. "After all we've done for you? - Now wait for the next Quidditch match."

Fred added, with some disdain, "In the meantime, we might use Ron."

Harry twisted.

At Bob's questioning look, he explained, "Ron preferred not to join us - but this has nothing to do with Slytherin, he hasn't overcome yet that it's Lee who's inherited Oliver's job."

"Oh, I see ... Tell him, if there's anyone who can share his feelings, it's me."

The conversation turned to Quidditch, and teams, and how long it would take until Hogwarts would hold the next Quidditch tournament.

Fred took the opportunity to point to the Gryffindor trophy cabinet, in which the Quidditch cup had the most prominent place. "Don't worry, Bob," he said, "rest assured that all the while the cup is in worthy hands." Looking concerned, he added, "Far be it from me to rub salt into wounds ..."

George confirmed, "True. Usually that's my job. He's the one to cut the wounds."

Bob hit back. "You were just lucky ... Now you've met my teammates, and everybody can hear it's only nervousness that makes you talk that way."

The remark had the desired effect. The Gryffindors started to comment on their squad partners for the past month, entertaining Bob with a mix of exaggeration and understatement.

Angelina asked Bob, "And how was your time with our seeker?"

"I guess my visit here is the best answer to that question."

Looking toward the three girls, Bob added, "I'd team again with Harry any time, as long as we cannot play against each other, but I really should ask Madam Hooch whether Seekers wouldn't do better with Chasers."

The compliment was rewarded with applause from the male students and with pleased looks from the girls.

Katie said, "That's a very interesting idea, although maybe Harry wouldn't agree."

Harry did his best to join the laughter without going pink.

Angelina said, "That reminds me, time to find out about our next pairing," and left.

Harry listened to the speculations. He became aware - if it wasn't him who would fly with Cho, then it would be Bob.

Angelina came back, meeting expectant looks.

"Guests first," she said. "Bob, your next partner is as fresh in the job as Lee and you - It's Patrick."

Patrick O'Reilly was the Hufflepuff seeker.

"We team with Ravenclaw," announced Angelina to the others.

Harry inhaled deeply.

Tomorrow, he would meet Cho to talk about the schedule and to sign for the patrols. Then he would fly with her, and at one of these occasions, he had to invite her to the ball. The thought was no less than frightening.

Looking up, he saw Hermione watching.

She asked, "Satisfied with the draw?"

"Sure, why not?" Harry shrugged casually. "Anyway, a month from now Bob and I will swap the team partners."

"Yes," said Hermione, "of course. How could I forget?"

Bob rose to say good-bye. He explained he would like to check with his own team, thanked for the hospitality. then made the round again, collecting greetings for his teammates.

"Bob," said Fred, "it was a pleasure. Now that we know each other, I'd never be able to send a Bludger toward you."

Bob grinned, unbelieving.

"No, really," confirmed George, "we'll just use the club."

Chuckling, Harry and Bob went downstairs, shook hands.

"Harry - we'll be around. Thanks for a great evening ... Are those twins always like that?"

"No - although they don't need much preparation ... But they can complete each other without thinking."

"Yeah, I know - It's terrific in a match ... But still - " Bob grinned, "your Chasers are more impressive. Socially, I mean."

* * *

Harry was late for breakfast next morning. Entering the hall, he saw Ron and Hermione talking. Until he could reach the table, they had stopped.

Ron looked calmer, slightly conscious. Obviously, Hermione had told him about the previous evening.

Ron didn't speak, and Harry didn't feel like being the first. It wasn't pride so much as the thought of the conversation lying ahead. He was still eating when first Ron, then Hermione left the table.

"Good luck with your schedule," said Hermione, not waiting for Harry's answer.

Looking over to the Ravenclaw table, Harry saw Cho talking with that other girl, Almyra. He couldn't understand a word, they kept their voices low, but it looked like a dispute.

Finally, Almyra shook her head, stood up, and came to Harry's place. Watching her, he saw Cho was leaving the hall.

"Hi, Harry."

He gulped a bite. "Hello, Almyra."

"Cho asked me to tell you - she'll meet you in front of Madam Hooch's office."

"Sure, okay." Harry was bewildered. "Something wrong?"

"No," replied Almyra with some irritation, "she just didn't want to come over. Sometimes she's got a bee up ...", she interrupted herself. "Never mind."

Then she chuckled. "Please don't mention it to her, but she's still a bit embarrassed about her last remark."

Harry could remember the remark's every syllable. "Oh, that ... But I didn't mind, really."

"Maybe not." Almyra showed a quick grin. "But she did ... Anyway, don't tell her about this conversation. - Bye, Harry."

Harry no longer felt the patience to finish his breakfast. He quickly emptied his cup and went to Madam Hooch's office.

The door was open, squad members passing by.

And there was Cho - standing close to the door, looking at some parchment in her hand.

"Hi, Cho. Sorry being late."

"Hi, Harry."

She looked at him, then back at the parchment. "I've booked us for late flights as much as possible - breakfast isn't my time of day." Her face came up again. "I hope this is okay with you."

"Yeah, certainly." Harry cleared his throat. "I mean, same with me."

He tried desperately to find something more intelligible to say. "Do you enjoy the squad?"

"Short of Quidditch, yes."

Cho started to walk along the floor. Harry kept at her side, asking himself whether he was the only one wishing the floor might be twice that long.

"And you?" asked Cho after a moment. "Found any Dementors lately?"

Harry giggled. "No - Bob and I had a quiet time ... I wasn't even able to meet Hagrid in the Giants' camp."

Glancing at her, he saw a shade of displeasure at her face. Just in time, and only thanks to Almyra's remarks, he could imagine why - Cho seemed annoyed about her own question.

She tried another. "I heard you and Bob got along pretty well?"

"Yes ... He altered my opinion about Slytherins quite a bit - we even exchanged visits. It was fun."

"Really."

Startled, Harry noticed his remark held an implication that hadn't even crossed his mind. He hurried to wipe it off. "You know, with all these bad feelings between Gryffindor and Slytherin, and now that things have changed so much ... And we've got rid of the Malfoy gang ..." His voice trailed off.

"You mean - there's no need for us to do the same?"

His mind was working overtime. "Er - there aren't bad feelings between Ravenclaw and Gryffindor."

"No, not between the houses."

Harry looked in alarm, unable to respond.

"By the way," said Cho, "before I forget, our first patrol is tomorrow after supper ... Can we meet in the Entrance Hall?"

"Yes."

"Okay. See you. Bye."

"Bye."

Watching Cho leave, Harry felt a large chunk of desperation growing inside.

* * *

He had planned using the day for his O.W.L. work, but his black mood prevented him from gaining any useful output. Without much spirit, he scanned some books, unable to find anything that would catch his mind.

The thought of writing a list of goals was ridiculous, right now, it would be considerably shorter than before. With some effort, he tried to create an outline of what his third O.W.L. about flying broomsticks might contain, drifting off to an image of Cho and him, fifty yards apart in the air as well as on the ground.

During the meals, Harry tried to appear neutral, still had the nasty feeling he wasn't very successful.

Several times, Hermione looked at him as if she would like to ask a question.

He quickly looked at his dish then. He also avoided glancing over to the Ravenclaw table, and left as soon as possible.

Another dance lesson was scheduled for the evening, the first after the air had cooled between him and Ron. Coming to his dormitory, Harry found a note. Please excuse me toward Fleur. Ron At least one problem was solved.

He found Fleur waiting. Myrtle wasn't there yet.

Fleur looked up, her smile turning to surprise, then sympathy. "Harry, what's with you? Where's Ron?"

"Hi Fleur ... Ron won't come today. He asked me to excuse him."

"So it will be just the two of us, today."

"Yes." Harry grimaced. "Or maybe not even that. We might as well cancel it."

"Why??"

Fleur looked concerned, then she came over to him. He was dimly aware she was using her Veela power. "Tell me, 'arry, what 'appened to you?"

He related the conversation with Cho, beginning with the scene at the breakfast table and ending with the prospect of tomorrow's flight.

"There's no need for me to ask her for the ball," he ended, "I know the answer. It's no, or something worse."

Fleur took his hand. "You'll never find out, 'arry, unless you ask 'er ... If she says yes, you'll visit the ball with her."

Harry shook his head.

"If she says no, perhaps she means no, or perhaps she means yes."

Harry looked up. "Fleur, that's nonsense. Cho has no trouble expressing what she means."

Fleur laughed cheerfully. "But yes, I know - I used the meals to study her a little."

"What do you think?" In spite of his misery, Harry looked expectantly.

"She ...", Fleur paused, spoke again. "She's 'ertainly a determined girl. But she's 'till a girl ... If a girl says no, it can 'ave many meanings. The least you'll get is an answer - then you'll know more."

She gripped his shoulder. "Promise me that you'll ask 'er! Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow??"

"Yes, my friend." Fleur stood up. "I, your dance teacher, order you. 'ave you 'eard?"

Harry nodded.

"And now let's dance. Remember, I enjoy dancing."

* * *

Sunday was cool and windy. It hadn't rained for a while, the air would be filled with dust.

Harry spent most of the day in the library, checking for literature about Transportation. He didn't find much about chimney travelling, probably owing to the fact that most wizards considered it as obvious.

Apparition was represented better. Scanning around, Harry tried to find a book which discussed the controversy between apparition and light speed, without success. This could

mean the issue was not relevant and the dispute in Astronomy had been caused by simple lack of knowledge, or he didn't check the proper places.

Represented best were flying carpets, probably because this technique wasn't common here. Harry wrote a list of the books he had found, he would have to discuss the issue with McGonagall before investing time in something that might prove useless.

Lunch was a silent meal, as common these days, until Ron suddenly asked Harry, "How was yesterday's lesson?"

"Nothing unusual - and nothing new ... Actually, it was more conversation than dancing."

"A propos conversation. I'd like to talk with you after lunch. About ..."

"Sorry - I'm scheduled for a patrol in a few minutes ... Later at the evening would be okay."

Ron's lips tightened. "Maybe then."

Hermione said, "If you pass the Giants' camp, could you try to talk with Hagrid? ... We should visit that camp to get first-hand information for our Giants O.W.L."

"Sure," answered Harry, "except that it's difficult to meet him ... So far, I wasn't lucky."

As an afterthought, he added, "I wouldn't stay long. If a patrol isn't back in time and late for more than fifteen minutes, they would raise hell."

Hermione was grinning. "And you're not alone ... If you can find him, tell Hagrid to meet us here. We haven't talked since we've returned."

"Okay ... See you."

Harry went to catch his Firebolt. In the Entrance Hall, he looked around. Cho wasn't there yet.

He had time to prepare remarks, only to dismiss them immediately without exception. 'Hi Cho. Before we lift off, would you like to join the ball with me?' The answer would be enough to pull his Firebolt down to the ground. 'Cho, an idea crossed my mind. Why don't we go to the ball together?' They would never lift off, due to a bad case of helpless laughter. He saw no way to address the issue in any reasonable style.

Somebody blocked his view. It was Cho.

"Oh ... Hi, Cho."

"Hi. - Let's move."

She marched ahead. Harry followed.

They mounted their broomsticks and rose. Cho flew head, Harry tail. Her old Comet wasn't anywhere up to the Firebolt - Harry, used to balancing out against Bob's Nimbus Two-Thousand and One, had trouble adjusting. For a spectator, it would have looked as if he was

trying to approach her, then lose spirit and fall behind, only to try it again. Harry felt ridiculous.

Cho in front of him moved gracefully, correcting against the gusty wind with the slightest bend of her body. He admired her style, recalling the only match they had played against each other.

The Giants' camp appeared below, the first turning point.

Coming closer, Harry saw huge figures, then a smaller one. It had to be Hagrid.

He pushed the Firebolt, quickly closing the distance to Cho. Passing her, he shouted, "Wait a minute!", swerved down to examine the face. Yes, it was Hagrid, watching the two broomsticks.

Harry dodged to the ground, bolted, jumped off in a single fluid motion.

"Hagrid!!"

"Harry! Good ter see yeh!"

They hugged each other, Harry's ribs cracking dangerously.

Hagrid's face looked tired behind the broad smiling. "Whassa matter, Harry?" He looked up. "That yer podna? Nice li'l bird."

Cho had followed and stood some yards away, looking mad. She had heard Hagrid's remark.

Harry turned quickly. "We don't have time to talk now, Hagrid - but we have to talk. It's about Giants ... You know, we do an O.W.L. about them. All three of us together, Ron and Hermione and me ... Can we meet in Hogwarts?"

Hagrid looked pleased at the news, then nodded. "No sweat, Harry. I'll be roun' prob'ly nes' Saterdag. 'bout high time we'd have some tea togeth'r."

"Okay." Harry stabbed Hagrid a last time. "Watch your little bones. Bye!"

He moved to Cho. "Sorry - I forgot to mention it ... Shall we move again?"

Her voice was strangled. "Do you expect me to chirp good-bye?"

About to grin, Harry thought better of it. "Please - Hagrid's a friend, I don't have that many ... We haven't seen each other since - you know, on the train."

Cho mounted her broomstick, still furious. "Flutter up, partner. It's your turn to lead ... If it so happens my little wings can't follow, too bad."

With surprise, Harry realized - it was possible to be angry toward Cho. Perhaps her reaction at Hagrid's remark had worked that miracle.

Without a word, he mounted his broomstick and jumped up.

Once in the air, he held to the Firebolt using only his knees, spreading the arms to both sides. Playing lark, he flew half arcs to both sides, using the surplus power of his broomstick to keep the pace.

Now that the wind came from behind, his cape caught air when changing direction. Harry suspected he might look more like a scare crow at these moments, didn't care though.

At one point, it sounded as if the wind was carrying a giggle, yet he wasn't sure.

After a while, he steadied to a normal flight.

They reached the dragons' nests. The animals were lying curled up, preparing for the night, faint clouds of smoke emitting their nostrils.

Charlie wasn't there, the other wizard waved at them.

Harry waved back. Checking around, he saw Cho doing the same.

Passing the Forbidden Forest, Harry used every opening to push the Firebolt, dive down, bolt in mid-air, and return to patrol height. Such manoeuvres were his specialty, and the Firebolt the finest instrument to play with.

Of course, he was showing off, but then - wasn't it the purpose of the squad to check and explore?

Glancing backwards every now and then, he saw Cho was holding her course steady, too far behind to recognize her expression.

Hogwarts came into view.

Harry pushed the Firebolt, climbing up. With a side turn forward, he brought the broomstick into diving angle. Still pacing up, he rushed down and bolted at the stairs to the Entrance Hall, coming to a halt only inches above the ground. He dismounted.

Cho had arrived. She climbed from her Comet. "Did you have fun?"

"Yes," beamed Harry.

"Great."

Then she confessed, "I had, too - watching from behind."

Harry lurched for the opportunity. "Er - Cho, could we talk for a minute?"

She shook her head. "Sorry - not today ... We have to sign off, Almyra's waiting for me, I have to dust off myself ... And this patrol caused me to skip my dessert at supper, so I'm just not in the mood ... Maybe next time."

Harry had listened anxiously. Fleur's words rang in his ears, about a No that could mean anything. Cho hadn't said she didn't want to talk with him.

An idea formed in his mind. Without hesitation, he used it. "Tell you what. Sign us off and warn Almyra you'd need some more minutes ... Until you're back, I'll have a surprise for you."

Seeing her look, he added, "A nice one, I mean."

Cho studied Harry's pleading face. "All right, I'll do it ... It was the curiosity that killed the cat ... That'll be something new - a *nice* surprise."

She went upstairs.

Harry gave her a head start, then raced into the building and down to the kitchen rooms.

He opened the door. Surprised looks from the house elves inside, cleaning up almost finished, a smile when they recognized him.

"Good evening, all of you. Is Dobby here?"

Heads shaking. "No, Master Harry."

He looked around. "Could you do me a favour? I'd need a nice dessert."

A moment of thinking, several elves going toward cupboards and cabinets. A small eternity passing, then he had a parcel in his hands.

Looking in, he saw a choco éclair. "Thank you, you've saved me! Bye."

He sprinted upstairs.

Nobody was waiting for him.

Had she been there and left? Panting, Harry tried to calculate how long it took to reach Madam Hooch's office, from there to the Ravenclaw tower, from there back ... How long had he been with the elves?

A figure came along the Entrance Hall - Cho.

She reached him. "Here I am. Where's the surprise?"

Harry offered the parcel. "That's for you ... As a recoupment."

Cho took it, weighing. She opened the packaging, looked in, eyes widening. "That's ... I can't believe it." She looked up. "Harry, you've hit my weak spot ... Where did you get it - at this time?"

"I've some little friends."

"Not too many, as I remember, but you've placed them very efficiently."

She took the choco éclair and started to eat.

"Let's have a walk - I'm not going to meet classmates here with this in my hand ... We'll see what will be left for Almyra." She held the parcel to Harry. "What about you?"

"No thanks. My supply is - er, good enough."

"I bet."

They started to walk toward the lake.

"I don't know whether this is allowed," said Cho, "but who cares ... Some people just aren't made for rules, what, Harry?"

Harry had a short grin, then went serious. "Cho, I'd like to ask you a question."

"Now that really takes me by surprise ... Ask."

"Could you consider ... I thought ..." Harry choked. "Do you want to join the ball with me?"

Cho had stopped walking. "What? Which ... For Chrissake, Harry, are you talking about the Christmas ball?"

"Yes"

"Why do you ask me now? ... It isn't even officially announced yet!"

Harry inhaled. If he was going to fall hard, at least he was still in mid-air, she hadn't refused immediately.

"Yes, I know, but - er, I wanted to make sure at least I'm not too late asking you."

Cho laughed up, stopping abruptly.

Harry was aware of her thought, it had been Cedric, being quicker a year before.

"You did it ... You're the first to ask me."

Harry waited for her to continue.

"But I wonder why you don't ask Ginny ... She would be happy to accept your invitation - especially such an early one."

Harry felt like exposed to blows. "I know," he said carefully, "and if you don't want to go with me, I might ask her in time ... But I'd ..."

Cho waited a moment for him to finish. When he didn't, she sent her next blow. "Are you developing a taste for girls older than you?"

Harry said nothing, not knowing which answer was worse, yes or no.

"If so, what about Fleur? ... Wouldn't she be the most obvious choice?"

With shock, Harry realized - more people than just Ron and Hermione had registered Fleur's attitude toward him. Of course - Fleur had accepted to do the dance lessons secretly, but she simply refused to hide her feelings. So Harry got her natural attention, for example in the Great Hall.

Too weak to blush, he said, "Fleur teaches me how to dance, that's all ... I didn't want to appear as clumsy as the last time, so I asked her ... Then Ron found out, and then Fleur taught both of us."

Cho had stopped eating, otherwise Harry's confession might have sent a bite the wrong way.

She studied him, a new look in her face. "I see," she said thoughtfully. "This evening is full of surprises."

It seemed as if now Cho had trouble speaking.

"Listen, Harry," she said after a moment, "I don't know what to answer ... A year ago, it would have been a pleasure - although then", a short grin crossed her face, "you were certainly no dancer." The grin faded. "But things have happened since then ... If I say yes, I don't know whether I'd do you a favour."

Looking into his face, she added, "Aside from that - I'm not sure whether I want to do you a favour."

Fleur had been right. At least he would find out the reason for Cho refusing to join him in the ball.

Before he could answer, Cho had come to a decision.

"You protected me in the train," she said. "For this, I owe you one ... But there are a few things I need to clear out. Before I give you my answer, I want to know exactly what happened in the tournament last year."

Her voice was gaining speed. "All I know for sure is, Cedric died and you came back with his body ... Sorry, Harry, but that's been on my mind since then."

Harry felt slightly better. So that was the barrier which had built up, keeping Cho at such distance.

The thought of feeling again the horrible events wasn't enjoying, but he had found time enough to live with the memories. This was because he knew the details - in contrast to Cho.

Walking along the water, Harry told her about the third task in the maze, how he and Cedric had mastered the Blast-Ended Skrewt, how they had separated again, how Cedric was cursed by Viktor Krum, being cursed himself, until Harry could find a way through the hedges, how they had separated again, until the final fight with the giant spider had brought them together once more. He told her about Cedric refusing to touch the trophy first.

When he recalled his suggestion to take the trophy simultaneously, Harry had trouble controlling his voice.

After a moment, he finished his report in a flat tone, suppressing any emotion, like a battle report. "We took both our wands out. Then this figure turned, and a voice said, 'Kill the spare.' The figure called the Killing Curse, and it hit Cedric ... He fell and was dead."

He continued with the figure binding him, performing the ceremony that brought Voldemort back, and how Voldemort had summoned the Death-Eaters and then tortured him. He told her how he could break the Imperius Curse, how the wizard duel took place and how the two wands had performed their combat. Then the shadows of Voldemort's latest victims had materialized, Cedric first, his parents then, and Cedric had asked him to bring his body back.

He closed, "When the arc broke and the four shadows went round Voldemort, I ran back, got somehow past the Death-Eaters, reached Cedric - I mean, his body, summoned the cup, and came back."

At some point during Harry's report, Cho had started crying silently. Tears streaking down her face, not even him saying Voldemort's name breaking the emotion.

After he had finished, she looked up, and Harry found there were more ways to fall in trance than from a quarter-Veela.

"Thank you, Harry ... I didn't know ... Yes, I can imagine how you two ... Cedric had told me how you two helped each other ... Harry - " she took his hands, "I didn't think you were the one who killed Cedric, but - all the time I sensed some feeling of guilt in you." She pressed his hands harder, "Now I know where it comes from - you offered Cedric to join at the cup, and ... that's why. ... Please, Harry, don't feel guilty - you are not."

Harry didn't know what to say. He didn't know whether he could ever look away from Cho's face, in which the dust and the tears had made an interesting pattern.

Then Cho got on tiptoe and, close to his ear as if surrounded by people, she whispered, "Right now I don't feel like dancing, but - if you still want to give me a try, I'd say yes."

09 - New Students

During the next days, Harry sailed through heaven. To the objective eye, sailing looked more like broomstick flying, and heaven hung pretty low above ground, but there was no doubt about his feelings. The usual patterns of time seemed replaced by a counting before, during, and after patrol flights with Cho.

All this played only in his mind, or so he thought. This belief encountered a deceiving support from his friends, who had the decency not to tease him or - to be correct - not more than unavoidable.

The only person who didn't have any intention to play blind, deaf, and mute was Fleur. The day after his conversation with Cho, she passed him at the breakfast table. A look into Harry's face was enough to tell her yes, he had followed her order and yes, the answer had been positive.

Strolling to the teachers' table, Fleur met Cho's look and waved, not the least annoyed when Cho didn't wave back.

Glancing up occasionally, Harry watched an agitated discussion between Cho and Almyra, giving proof that at least Cho shared such news with her friend.

For himself, the issue was still very sensitive. In a way, he felt grateful for Fleur's genuine attitude, he hoped to get used to a more natural style until the ball, or afterwards. In the meantime - if he felt embarrassed, it didn't matter, he would have exchanged this scenario for no other.

Harry's happiness had melted all remnants of the ice between him, Ron, and Hermione. Appearing at the breakfast table, he'd been determined to target the conflict between him and Ron but, somehow, it had dissolved.

"Ron," he started, "sorry I didn't make it yesterday. Can we talk after breakfast?"

"That's okay - after breakfast is fine with me." Then Ron increased this signal of peace by asking, "How was your flight?"

"Super!" Harry beamed. "I met Hagrid. He'll meet us next weekend." At the memory of Hagrid's remark and the scene afterwards, he couldn't avoid a short giggle.

"What's so funny?" asked Ron.

Harry would have preferred to keep the story to himself, however, after terms with Ron had improved only seconds ago, there was no choice. So he told his friends about Hagrid's choice of words and about his own flying jokes. It caused so much giggling that other students were looking at them.

"I bet you had to pay afterwards," said Hermione, "listening to Cho's comments."

"Not at all," he hastened to defend Cho, realizing too late how Hermione had prompted him to reveal more. "Yes, we talked, although she didn't want at first, but then I could persuade her."

"Really?" Hermione voice was neutral.

"Yes. She had missed dessert, so I went into the kitchen and got some sweets."

It raised another wave of giggles, followed by a respectful look from Ron. "Harry, that's a clever trick," he said.

"And then?" asked Hermione. "Did she eat or talk?"

Harry saw the opportunity to close the subject. "Both - and the talking had to do with the Tri-Wizard's Tournament - with Cedric ... I told her all about it."

He was right. Neither Hermione nor Ron asked another question.

The four-eyes talk with Ron in his mind, Harry started toward the library, the place they had agreed upon. Yet before he could reach the staircase, he saw himself intercepted by Cho, with Almyra trailing behind.

"Good morning ..." Cho's voice sounded alarmingly cheerful. "Harry - didn't you tell me breakfast wasn't your best time?"

"Yes, why?"

"Oh, a few minutes ago, I couldn't help watching a lot of fun at your table." Cho's eyes, almond-shaped by nature, had widened in mock astonishment.

"Well, um - you know, we had a few differences lately, and - er, this morning, we managed to clean them up."

"What a coincidence ... And I just happen to be a - say, witness??"

"Yes ... What else?"

"Dunno ..." Cho looked innocent. "You three sounded like a bunch of chickens ... You know, these li'l birds."

Watching his expression of guilt and uneasiness, she laughed. "Harry, you're a bad liar. But you're too close to a source of excellent cakes, so I'll forgive you."

He still felt shaky when meeting Ron in the library.

His friend looked self-conscious. "I had a talk with Fred and George ... They told me I've missed a splendid evening. Then I talked with Lee. Now I'd like to ..."

Harry tried to interrupt him, was waved off.

"... to talk with Bob. So - if you could introduce me to him, I could put the thing straight."

Harry stabbed him, grinning, "I know what you mean. No need to say more, you ..."

"Mee too - I know what I am ... No need to say more." And with these words, the Flying Squad no longer hung between them as a taboo.

At their second patrol, Harry awaited Cho with another parcel from the house-elves.

She looked at the parcel, then at him. "Harry - it's obvious you're the wrong person to ask, but did it ever cross your mind that people can eat too much?"

Dudley's image appeared in Harry's mind. He started to giggle, unable to stop.

He looked away from her to calm down - sure enough, seeing her face again started the next wave of helpless shaking.

Eventually, Cho said, "I better won't ask what's so funny - otherwise we're never going to make that flight ... I take it, at least it's not me."

It sobered him up sufficiently, though just for a moment, to assure no, it wasn't her, he he he.

They agreed to save the habit for special occasions.

Thinking about it, Harry asked, "Then what's a special occasion?"

"I'm sure you'll recognize one if you see one." Seeing his doubtful face, Cho added, "Well, if not, I'll point them out to you."

Now both of them had to fight a fit.

Halfways calmed down, Harry started to carry the parcel inside.

"Are you mad??" Cho looked genuinely shocked. "The new rule's only in effect as of tomorrow."

* * *

It was after lunch. Harry and Cho on patrol, had already passed the second turning point. No rain today, the air dry but cold and unfriendly, a first harbinger of winter coming soon.

While crossing meadows and reaped fields, Harry couldn't shake off a disturbing thought. A week from now, the teams would change partners again. He would fly with Patrick, and Cho would fly with Bob. The image made his stomach twist, he didn't know how to stand it.

There would be a last patrol, certainly this would be counted as a special occasion. And then?

As easy-going as it felt between him and Cho during their patrols, Harry had found no way to extend this state beyond the limits of the Flying Squad. Under different circumstances, he might have invited her for a visit in Hogsmeade, only Dumbledore had cancelled such visits.

It was frustrating how badly the narrow space of Hogwarts was suited for socializing - if you, like Harry, felt terrified at the thought of other students watching.

The lake came into view.

The water surface showed some motion, more than could be explained with the slight breeze. At the far lakeside near Hogwarts, figures were visible. Harry stopped in mid-air, gesturing Cho to join up.

She reached him, stopped. "What's the matter? ... We're too close together - remember what Hooch said?"

Harry pointed toward the lake, in which the waves were getting stronger. "Something's going on there."

The waves seemed to come from a point close to the center of the lake, quite as if a deep water fountain had opened.

Cho studied the surface, turned to him. "Okay, let's get back to report it." Seeing his expression, she added, "Hey - our job is to watch and to inform ... Nothing else!"

Harry pointed toward the tiny figures at the other end. "They're already informed - and Dumbledore also mentioned exploration ... See that point where the waves are coming from? - C'mon, let's give it a closer look."

"No, Harry - we don't know what it is ... This is just the kind of foolish ..."

"Oh, c'mon - one pass, full speed ... We're not going to stop there and wait till something's catching us." Without awaiting her answer, he pushed forward, pursued by an angry shout.

Glancing back, he saw Cho speeding up.

He approached the lakeside in a gentle slope. Passing the shore, he steadied the Firebolt and scurried across the water, less than a foot above the waves. He couldn't recognize any detail beneath the surface, even under best conditions, the water didn't look transparent.

Another ring-shaped surge erupted ahead.

As he was about to reach its origin, the surface rose, threatening to swallow him stretched on the broomstick.

He jerked to the side, pressing upward.

His feet hit the top of the wave, something glowing like a giant ruby deep down, then he was free.

With undiminished speed, he raced to the opposite shore closest to the school. Over ground, he bolted, dismounted.

Turning, he saw Cho arriving.

She came along, fuming. "You - you fool! ... You were almost caught!"

"I wetted my feet, that's all. Don't wet your p ..."

A hissing sound from the lake made Harry turn, probably saving him from worse - Cho was staring at the same spectacle.

A huge shape erupted from the lake, streams of water spilling to its side.

Astonished, Harry watched the shape gaining contours. It was a ship ... looking familiar ... the ship from Durmstrang!

"Attention - Flying Squad!", shouted a voice, Lupin's voice.

Turning, Harry saw Lupin pointing toward him and Cho.

"You two - up to the dragons ... Red alert - no action until further notification ... Go!" Not waiting for a reply, Lupin turned toward another patrol team.

Mounting his Firebolt, Harry called, "Cho, you lead - I'm tail!"

Cho's Comet jumped, gaining speed.

He followed, tempering the urge to whoosh past her and let the Firebolt run free.

The treetops flicked away under their feet. Passing an opening, Harry noticed a light shadow at the periphery of his view. Had it been a unicorn? A Centaur?

They reached the first nest. Nobody in sight.

Next one, then the third. A figure walking to a hut, looking up as Cho was zooming in.

She shouted something.

Closing in, Harry recognized the figure. Charlie.

"... nothing until you're told!" Cho was gesticulating.

Harry reached them, was greeted by Charlie who asked, "What ship is this?"

"Looks like that ship from Durmstrang last year."

"And what are the dragons supposed to do? ... Set it on fire?"

Cho waved impatiently. "Maybe, whatever's suitable ... You know as much as we do, but one thing's for sure - this is not a visit for an afternoon tea."

Charlie nodded agreement.

"Bye," called Cho, and they took off again.

On their way back, it felt even harder for Harry to keep the formation.

Reaching Hogwarts, he saw the ship lying motionless near the shore, nobody aboard. The water surface had calmed down, students at the shore, as close to the ship as possible, staring, talking excitedly.

Asking around, Harry and Cho learned that a group of people had been on board, adults and students, and they'd been guided into the building. Nobody knew more, everybody had a theory.

They went inside. Signing off in Madam Hooch's office, they asked for news.

"People from Durmstrang," was the answer. It was no attack, otherwise their own guess seemed as good as any other.

So they went for lunch, or what might be left of it.

Reaching the table, Harry saw Ron's and Hermione's expectant looks resting on him.

He told them what he had seen, and how Lupin had sent them off. "We met Charlie," he finished, "and delivered the alarm message ... What happened here?"

"Nothing," replied Ron irritably, "we missed the action outside ... What we've heard is those people are refugees."

"Refugees? ... Hm." Harry was chewing, swallowed. "Could you see any of them?"

"No ... Some said there were two men, plus some students ... About twenty people altogether."

Harry looked at Hermione. "Viktor finished school last year, right?"

She looked up, nodded, looked down again.

"Well, then ..."

He spooned more food, letting the thought hang in the air.

Ron and Hermione had finished eating, were free to talk. Ron kept making suggestions how to find out more, discarding most of them immediately.

Hermione said, "We'll hear more this evening. Until then, business as usual."

A thought occurred to Harry. "You haven't got a letter, Hermione, have you?"

"No." Her face looked worried.

Watched by his friends, Harry emptied his dish, swallowed the last bite. About to leave together, the three of them stopped, glanced toward the spot that had caught the general attention - a door through which right now a group of strange-looking students was entering the hall. They followed the figure on top - Madam Pomfrey, who let them sit down at the teachers' table, obviously for a late lunch.

Harry checked the new faces. One of them looked vaguely familiar, but he wasn't sure.

* * *

The afternoon classes went by slowly, overshadowed by the event. Rumours had settled to the story of a group with teachers and students, asking for asylum in Hogwarts.

Taking into account the portkey links with Beauxbatons, their initial choice had widened to two alternatives - assuming Madame Maxime would agree. If this was true, probably interrogations were currently in progress, maybe with the final question whether the particular teacher or student would prefer Hogwarts or Beauxbatons.

History with Professor Binns experienced something rare - nobody fell asleep. The students had forced the small ghost to delay today's topic and to tell them more about Durmstrang.

It turned out a disappointment - what Binns could relate sounded quite unremarkable.

The school was even older than Hogwarts. Durmstrang had been founded by a wizard of the same name, together with another one called Palatyk. Soon afterwards, Palatyk had retired - according to the official version, in the unofficial and more realistic version, he'd been killed like some former partners of Durmstrang.

Since then, the school's reputation as a centre of black magic had grown, without ever giving proof.

All considered, Durmstrang's history contained nothing spectacular - black magic and the fine art of getting along with competition had always been a factor in the wizarding world.

Durmstrang was not organized in different houses. Aside from that, nobody knew details of the internal structure. But then, an almost pathological secretiveness was the trademark of *every* wizard school, with the notable exception of Hogwarts under the authority of Dumbledore.

Divination was next. The students assailed Professor Trelawney to tell them all she knew about the newcomers, and asked whether she could foresee anything related to them.

The witch smiled innocently. "My dears, I certainly know about our guests and their ill fate, but how very bad manners would it be to tell. Our Headmaster will reveal to you this evening in the Great Hall."

"What will happen next?" asked Lavender Brown.

"As for any decision already taken, you'll need the patience to wait until later, my dear ... If you're asking about future inclinations, why don't you use your recently earned skill and try to answer the question yourself? I might remind you," Professor Trelawney sounded slight piqued, "this is Divination."

Her look fell on Harry's and Ron's table. "Mr. Weasley, as limited as your mastering of the I Ging tradition might be, I recommend this particularly to you, as you'll soon ask that question to yourself."

Ron looked at Harry. "Now what might that mean?"

He lowered his voice more. "It's as clear as mud, just what you'd expect from her. She's just picked someone to show off, and it was me."

Harry grinned. "For once, it's not me - welcome to the club ... Anyway, why not? Should help us killing time."

Ron shrugged, took a parchment and his pen nonetheless. After a moment's thinking, he wrote a line without showing it to Harry.

"All right - I have my question ... Go ahead."

Harry recalled the I Ging ceremony, which started with three traditional questions, supposed to filter out all mockery.

Looking at Ron, he asked, "Is your question more than simple curiosity?"

"Hmmm - not really ... But wait a second." Ron took the pen again, criss-crossed his first line, and wrote another one.

Looking up, he said, "Okay - now my answer is yes."

"So tell me, oh Ron - is your question beyond the pursuit of fame, truly honest?"

Listening to Harry's intonation, Ron couldn't help smiling, grew serious again before answering, "Yes."

"And is it true there isn't any better authority to ask?"

"Yes."

"Then, my troubled friend," completed Harry the tradition, "draw your hexagram."

Ron closed his eyes, seized into the small bowl with the sixty-four pieces, and took one. Opening his eyes, he put it on the table.

Closing his eyes again, he took the second and placed it above the first. He did the same for the other four pieces of the hexagram. His result looked like this:

```
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
XXXXXXXXX XXXXXXXX.
XXXXXXXXX XXXXXXXX.
XXXXXXXXXXXXXIIXXXXXXXXXX
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
XXXXXXXXX XXXXXXXX.
```

Harry checked a diagram. "Number eighteen. Let's see." He opened a book, browsed, stopped, scanned a page back. "Here we are," he said, reading.

After another look at the hexagram, he continued reading. "Hm."

"Harry," growled Ron impatiently, "would you please read aloud?"

"Okay ... Number eighteen. Working at putrefaction - that's the title."

"Sounds like Herbology, spraying manure. Great ... What's the judgment?"

Each hexagram was described with its title, a judgement, and a counsel. In addition, the book offered special remarks for those lines in the hexagram that were in transition, as with the third in Ron's hexagram - counting from bottom up, the traditional I Ging order.

Harry read, "Counsel ... Progress and success for the one who knows to use the opportunity. Crossing the great water is of advantage ... Carefully consider the events three days before the alteration, carefully watch the state three days afterwards."

"That's nice," commented Ron. "Those students have crossed some water, and there's little doubt Hogwarts is an improvement for them ... So if this is the alteration, what's been three days ago?"

Harry tried to remember. "Nothing special ... I had a squad flight in the morning. Then classes ... We played chess. I lost - as usual."

Thinking about it, he added, "You know - these statements mustn't be taken too literally."

"Yeah - that's fairly obvious ..." Ron stared ahead, found nothing better in his mind, shrugged. "So what's the counsel?"

Harry scanned in the book. "Counsel ... The noble rouses his people, nourishes his virtues, his characteristic qualities."

"Good advice, indeed."

Dropping his sarcasm, Ron studied the hexagram again. "The transit in the third - what's the comment on that?"

Harry read, giggling, "A son, compensating lapses of the father. Certain details to feel sorry about ... No severe mistakes will happen."

"Lapses of my father?" groaned Ron incredulously. "What a nonsense. Even if I knew about some - I'm not Percy, working for the Ministry."

"Well - it's a picture ... Think about it. You didn't really expect a statement like 'Do this and that' from I Ging, did you?"

Not receiving an answer, Harry looked at the folded parchment. "I might have a better idea if I knew the question ... Would you show it to me?"

After a moment, Ron took the parchment, unfolded it, presented it without a word of comment:

What can be my contribution
in the fight against our enemies?

"I see." Studying his friend, Harry tried a joke. "I don't translate it into going to the Ministry and cleaning up after your father ... Let it work - once we know more about the Durmstrang people, we might come up with an idea."

"Sure," said Ron, not sounding convinced.

* * *

At supper, an air of expectancy hung in the hall. When the food did not arrive as expected, the excitement grew higher. The noise level ebbed and swell up again when Dumbledore entered the hall, followed by a dozen figures.

Hearing Hermione sharply intaking her breath, Harry examined the faces again, then saw the reason - could only be the second figure, after an unknown wizard and trailed by ten students.

Viktor Krum.

"My dear students," announced Dumbledore, "we have guests, and as they will share our meal, let me introduce them, and let me explain what brought them here."

As the Headmaster quickly confirmed, the people from Durmstrang were indeed refugees, escaping from a school in which the Dark Forces had taken over control. The refugees' total number included two teachers, nineteen students, and an ex-student who had joined them as the only one to steer the ship - Viktor.

Half of their number had voted for Beauxbatons. Dumbledore's words gave no clue as to whether the balanced quota had been forced.

"After granting the request for asylum," Dumbledore finished, "we took the liberty to run a short Sorting Ceremony without letting you watch ... There are new students for all four houses - please welcome them at your tables, and for all questions you have in addition, you might ask them personally ... This will be the quickest method of integration in our midst."

Harry watched as Professor McGonagall, Gryffindor Headmistress, guided three students to their own table, two boys and a girl.

Then the dishes filled the tables, and everybody started to eat.

Within minutes, the new students were the centres of animated conversation, involving a lot of gesticulation to compensate for their limited English skills.

"Hey, Hermione," asked Ron with a casual voice, "what do you think of it?"

Hermione looked slightly embarrassed. "I don't know yet ... but I'll find out more soon enough."

"I bet," replied Ron grinning. "I wonder what will be Viktor's job in Hogwarts ... This ship won't need another helmsman for a long time."

Helmsman, thought Harry, remembering the I Ging hexagram, *cross the water regularly ...* Except Viktor didn't cross, he dived, so to speak, but only once ... Next moment, it struck him.

"Isn't that obvious?" he called. "Viktor's exactly the squadron leader we need ... Hooch isn't really up to the task."

Hermione looked surprised, then nodded.

Harry caught fire, seeing her agree. "When you talk with him, Hermione, tell him about it. The sooner it's settled, the better ... Today we had our first mission besides patrol - it wasn't too well organized."

"I'm not so sure," said Ron. "I mean, he didn't strike me as the commanding type ... As a Seeker, he's more of an individualist than a coordinator."

Harry was aware of Ron's mixed feelings for the Flying Squad. He also remembered how Ron's opinion of Viktor had changed several times in the past year. But whatever the motivation, the argument couldn't be rejected as prejudice.

"A Seeker is a team player like any other," he said, kicking off a discussion with Ron about Quidditch tactics versus squadron demands.

Hermione listened until it seemed as though her thoughts were drifting off.

When Harry and Ron looked up again, after an agitated exchange, she was gone.

* * *

Next morning at breakfast, the scene in the Great Hall looked almost normal. There were two more figures at the teachers' table, Viktor and the other guy who quite obviously was bare of any English.

Of the new students, those speaking the language had trouble to find enough time for some bites between all the questions, while those without this skill found themselves in a multi-teacher English lesson, except their teachers were students.

Hermione's face reminded Harry of his own mood during a breakfast not too long ago. He decided to take the initiative. "Say, Hermione, can you tell us more about the Durmstrang people?"

"Yes." She smiled self-consciously. "The school's a mess ... Karkaroff is on the run."

"From whom?"

"Voldemort, who else?"

Since the events of the previous school year, most people had learned to say that name. Hermione informed them that Igor Karkaroff, the Durmstrang Headmaster, had disappeared as soon as the news about Voldemort's revival had been around. Nobody knew his whereabouts, on the other hand, nobody so far had found a dead body looking like Karkaroff.

The new Headmaster never had been given a chance to establish control. The Dark Forces, always in a strong position at Durmstrang, kept threatening everybody and, more or less

openly, tried to take over. The others were not strong enough, or too badly organized, to fight back.

Then, rumours of the *fortress* Hogwarts reached Durmstrang. A group of students, with some of the former visitors among them, developed a plan to seek shelter in Hogwarts. They contacted the two teachers. Their plan implied the ship as the means of travelling - the only known method to reach Hogwarts. But none of them had knew how to steer it.

In desperation, they took the risk and asked Viktor. Fortunately, he had agreed. And here they were.

After Hermione's last words, Ron opened his mouth to say something, closed it again, glanced at Hermione, and finally asked, "Would - would Viktor have come with them - er, anyway?"

Hermione looked at him appreciatively. "Ron, it's incredible how elegantly you can formulate questions - You'd fit in the Diplomatic Corps."

Ron flushed.

"But to answer your question - what Viktor said was he didn't think twice ... He wasn't completely sure he would survive a denial, and he had no intention to find out."

"What about the ship?"

Hermione shrugged. "Nothing ... Basically it's still operative, could be used any time to travel back to Durmstrang ... But who would?"

Harry's thoughts dealt more with air forces than with naval ones. "Did you find time to talk about the Flying Squad?"

"Suddenly I feel like Viktor's business manager - that's not what I had in mind."

As if to prevent any remark on her own, she added quickly, "Actually, Viktor talked about it ... You were right," she nodded to Harry, "this was exactly Dumbledore's first idea. But - "she nodded toward Ron, "you were right too - Viktor says he's not a commander."

Harry grimaced. What a nuisance. There was this excellent Quidditch player, cool-minded enough to steal a ship under the eyes of the Dark Forces, and now he seemed frightened to lead twenty-eight students on broomsticks.

His thoughts were interrupted by Ron's next question. "Did Viktor ...", Ron hesitated, kept his voice careful. "Er - did Dumbledore accept the story immediately?"

For an instant, Hermione's eyes looked piercing. "Of course not ... The three - that is Viktor and the teachers, offered to volunteer for any kind of interrogation. They did some ... Dumbledore was satisfied afterwards."

With his mind already drifted back to the Flying Squad, Harry turned to Hermione. "What do you think - are they just happy to be safely away, or would you say they're still ready to fight?"

"They're no cowards!", she snapped. "They're more than willing to fight with us!"

Harry raised both arms. "Sorry - no offense intended ... I was just thinking how to convince Viktor that his place's in the squad."

Hermione smiled apologetically. "My mistake ... But don't worry - since Dumbledore thinks the same, there's little doubt Viktor'll make you happy."

At these words, Ron started to grin.

Registering that, Hermione turned scarlet, busying herself with her dish.

* * *

During the next days, Harry looked for an opportunity to talk with Viktor. Strangely enough, he found none.

Yes, they were saying hello to each other, but whenever Harry made an attempt to start a conversation, Viktor was suddenly in a hurry. Why did Viktor avoid him?

The only reason crossing his mind was this, Viktor knew Harry's intention and, not willing to discuss the matter, ran away.

Harry's last patrol with Cho, an after-breakfast flight, was scheduled the day before the new assignments would take effect.

Cho, awaiting him, said accusingly, "Hey, what's this? ... Your hands look so empty!"

"Why, no ... See, I have my Firebolt."

"That's not what I mean." She studied his blank face. "I can't believe you didn't count this as a special occasion?"

"Oohh - that!" he replied as if suddenly understanding, "Of course I did ... But certainly not right after breakfast - your cake will be ready later that day."

Cho stomped her feet. "Harry Potter, don't tell me when it's time for a cake!"

He had no choice, he had to go back into the kitchen and ask for a parcel.

The scene carried Harry's mood for the most part of the flight. However, on their way back from the dragons' nest, the prospect of the next two months fell over him like a black shadow.

Entering the hall, all he could muster was, "See you - bye," then he turned quickly away.

"Harry."

He stopped, waiting.

Cho came over. Her finger touched his forehead lightly. "I'm looking forward to it ... Bye."

She hurried upstairs.

Classes didn't reach Harry's mind. He filled a seat here and there, mechanically answering questions. Somehow, his answers seemed satisfyingly enough, although he'd been unable to repeat them. He still felt a light touch at his scar, still saw a figure climbing the stairs.

During lunch, Madam Hooch announced a meeting of the entire squad, in the Great Hall after supper.

Harry knew what would happen. They would establish the new pairing, and then they would fix the recent assignments as the permanent pattern.

Somehow the day passed. In Transfiguration, McGonagall started on a new spell that could change hair colours and bleach freckles, a first step into the Animagus wizardry.

The girls were thrilled. Harry couldn't care less.

Heads were turning to him, somebody asked, "Professor, would this spell hide scars?"

"Basically, yes." McGonagall looked in his direction. "Mr. Potter, would you like to try?"

"No."

Heads turned quickly off.

Startled, Harry realized how rude his answer had sounded. Still, the others seemed more embarrassed than he himself. He felt no intention to resolve the misunderstanding.

After supper, he simply kept his seat, waiting for the other squad members to reappear. Slowly, they gathered. With these few students, the hall looked emptier than before, matching perfectly Harry's mood.

Bob strolled by, greeted by the other Gryffindors. "Hi, Harry. Swapping day, isn't it?"

Harry mumbled an answer.

Bob looked at him, saw something in Harry's face that made him move without another word.

Madam Hooch appeared, somebody in her trail. It was Viktor.

"I am your Quidditch teacher," she began, "but I'm not the right person to lead the Flying Squad."

Some protest made her smile. "That's very kind of you, but let's be honest ... I've been the only one around - but now we've found someone who's suited much better to the task ... It's Mr. Krum here."

Applause, answered with a nod from Viktor. Considering how often he would have been the focus of attention from ten thousands of people, he looked quite nervous.

Madam Hooch gestured. "Viktor - your turn."

"Thank you." Viktor stood up. "My dear squad members. You must not think I'm a commander ... I did not want this job. I have to learn so much."

Viktor started to pace back and forth. "But Mr. Dumbledore said I could do it, and you know how he is."

Laughter.

"I want to do my part in our fight against the Dark Forces, and then Sy ... er, Mrs. Hooch promised me to help in the organization ... I am not good in an office. But I can lead a team - then I guess I can lead a Flying Squad."

Looking up, he finished, "So if you accept me, I will be your leader."

Applause went up, the few squad members made as much noise as they could.

Viktor stood smiling, his nervousness had disappeared. "Thank you ... I strongly believe in team spirit. S ... Mrs. Hooch has told me how your twin teams were formed, to increase the friendship between your houses."

Laughter, somebody shouting, "Yeah, you can put it that way."

Viktor waited for silence. "For what I know, this goal has been reached."

Giggling, then nodding.

"Then we can continue with the most natural system, used by every other patrol force ... Find yourself a permanent partner."

Viktor folded the arms and stood, waiting.

"Now?"

Viktor nodded. "Yes. I wait."

The twins reacted quicker than anybody else. Without even looking at each other, they stood up and strolled to an empty spot.

Katie turned to Alicia. "Shall we?" Alicia nodded.

Harry sat frozen.

Lee turned to Angelina. Before he could speak, Angelina said, "Sorry, Lee - don't take it personally, but ..." She was looking over, then started to smile.

Suddenly Bob stood there. "Taking the opportunity, Angelina, what do you think ..."

Angelina stood up. "I had the same idea."

They walked to another spot.

Lee had watched the scene. Grinning, he left to find another partner, not even asking Harry.

Looking to the Ravenclaw table, Harry saw a figure talk with Cho, then turn away. It made him finally move.

He walked over, not feeling his legs. The other figures were somehow out of focus, anyway, nobody seemed to show surprise.

Cho watched him approaching.

He reached the table. "Cho ..."

She stood up, they made a few steps. "Harry," she complained in a low voice, "I've seen you move quicker than that before."

He twisted, flushing, "I'm sorry. I ... it came so suddenly ..."

"Now that's a real compliment ... If it's a Dementor, you're up in no time. If it's me ..."

Watching his face, she grinned, "Only joking." She took his hand. "Let's find a place."

Looking around, Harry saw the squad had regrouped. What previously had been four Quidditch teams now appeared as fourteen pairs.

Viktor nodded. "Good ... This is the only change for now. You must register your teams, and then sign for the patrols like before."

He took the seat beneath Madam Hooch, watching how she prepared the lists.

Pairs rose quickly. The first of them would get the noon and evening flights, although in the long run, each team had an equal amount of early and late patrols.

Harry and Cho stood in line, waiting to register.

"Doesn't talk much, our new leader," said Cho.

"Remember the cup final?" replied Harry. "He's more the action type."

Cho giggled. "I'd like to ask a certain someone whether she'd confirm that."

Harry looked shocked.

It didn't bother Cho much. "By the way - how's your dancing with Fleur?"

"Scarce," he replied, looking anxiously if anyone had heard her. "She's doing either meetings or visits in Beauxbatons."

"Isn't that a pity," murmured Cho.

This conversation made him feel uneasy. He was relieved to reach the table. "Evening, Mrs. Hooch ... Hello, Viktor."

Viktor looked up. "Hello, Harry," looked down again.

Madam Hooch was writing and speaking simultaneously, providing Viktor with the names. "Harry Potter and Cho Chang."

Harry listened in awe.

"Thank you ... Next!"

In unspoken agreement, all squad members lingered around until the lists were completed. At the end, Viktor announced he would accompany patrols in the next days to get familiar with his squad as soon as possible.

This was the signal to leave.

The Gryffindors reached their tower where a group was awaiting them, including Ron and Hermione.

"The squad has a new leader," announced Angelina, "it's Viktor Krum."

Sounds of surprise and agreement. Harry watched Hermione, realizing she had known.

"The first he did was to assign us in permanent teams," called Fred, and George added, "... with free choice of partner."

Fred again, "Surprise number one, I'm stuck with George."

Laughter, someone shouting, "How could this happen?"

Then George, "Yeah, but listen - surprise number two, guess who's our captain teaming with?"

Hermione was quickest. "Bob!"

Angelina nodded, smiling, her face darker than ever.

"Angelina, that's super," came Hermione to help, "you're a true captain."

Nobody asked Harry for his partner.

Lazily following the conversation, he reconsidered the evening. Viktor had worked a miracle for him. But something was wrong, Viktor hadn't been able to look at Harry.

"Say, Hermione."

She looked up.

"I wonder ... is there something Viktor holds against me?"

"None that I know of." Hermione looked surprised. "Why?"

"Well - I had a feeling he avoids me. I mean ..." Harry's voice trailed off.

"We'll find out," said Hermione, looking thoughtfully. "I'll ask him."

After some more minutes, she left.

* * *

Saturday morning was wonderful. Sitting at a late breakfast, Harry thought about the day ahead. He felt like bursting from energy. He would use it to finish his part about the Giants.

His friends would probably do the same, the next milestone was due soon. Ron looked restless, while Hermione was chewing mechanically, her mind far away.

Sensing his stare, she looked up. "Harry?"

He waited.

"Er - can you spend a few minutes? - After breakfast?"

"Sure." He waited for an explanation, to no avail. Hermione looked a little tense.

With the breakfast finished, she said, "Let's have a walk outside ... Await me downstairs - okay?"

Harry waited at the entrance, wondering what took Hermione so long. Then she appeared in the door, holding somebody's hand.

It was Viktor.

They came over. Hermione said, "Harry - surprise ... It's Viktor who wants to talk with you. I'll just listen."

Viktor seemed to belie her words, but Hermione didn't let him go.

They walked toward the lake.

Finally, Viktor spoke. "Harry, do you remember the maze?"

"Yes."

"I tortured Ssedrick, and you stopped me."

"Yes ..." Seeing Viktor's pained expression, Harry added, "You were under the Imperius curse."

"This iss the point." Viktor paused. "I couldn't apologize to him ..."

Harry tried to help. "Of course not, because ... But I think he knew it wasn't you."

"No." Viktor smiled sadly. "But it's kind off you to say that, Harry."

There was no good reply, at least none coming to Harry's mind, so he kept silent.

They walked some steps, Harry aware how Viktor's and Hermione's hand were together. Then Viktor spoke again. "Harry - Hermione says you can stand the Imperius Curss."

"Yes."

Another pause, giving Harry time for a mental note - Viktor could pronounce Hermione's name correctly.

Viktor stopped, looked into Harry's face. "Can - can you teach me?"

Harry felt thunderstruck. After a moment, gathering himself, he answered, "I don't know ... Yes ... I mean, I'm not that skilled ..."

An idea crossed his mind. "Viktor, I'll do what I can. My resistance ... I might be able to teach you. But for the training altogether, we'll need experienced help." Smiling, he added, "I think I know whom to ask."

Back from the walk, he didn't waste time. Finding Lupin in his office, he explained Viktor's request.

To his disappointment, Lupin shook his head. "No, Harry ... It's impossible."

Seeing Harry's face, the teacher added, "Okay, I'll tell you why, but this is confidential." Then Lupin informed Harry that, a few days from now, he would pass over the Defence against the Dark Arts job to the new teacher from Durmstrang, who currently was going through the wizard's version of an English crash course.

"I'll be outbound a lot," finished Lupin, "but I might have an idea. Let me think about it."

Harry liked this news not the least bit. Without his new acquaintance with Cho, he would have felt worse, while even so, the thought of Lupin away from Hogwarts opened a void. He couldn't even discuss it with his friends, awaiting the day of its publishing as much as dreading it.

Monday after classes, Harry was asked into Lupin's office.

"I've found your person," announced Lupin, pointing to his side.

There, smiling placidly, sat Snape.

10 - Moving Figures

At supper, the news about Snape as the trainer of Viktor and Harry brought Hermione's chewing to a sudden halt. She had no experience yet with a Snape apologizing for years of insults.

Before she was able to speak, Ron's fork hit the table. "Oh dammit," he muttered. "I can't stand it."

"Listen," said Harry, "Snape wouldn't have been my own choice but ..."

"No - I mean all this busy-boiling!"

"With Viktor and Snape? ... Why does it bother you?"

Ron was shouting. "It doesn't bother me - that's exactly the point!"

He lowered his voice as other students were looking up. "I'm outside," he groaned. "I'm excluded."

It dawned on Harry even before Ron explained more. "Look - you're doing Flying Squad ... The twins are doing Flying Squad ... Viktor is doing Flying Squad ... In your spare time, you two are training the Imperius Curse - no, the opposite, whatever."

Ron looked at Hermione. "You, in your spare time between seven O.W.L.s, are raising the spirit of our squad leader ... In the meantime ..."

"What does that mean? Raising the spirit??" Hermione was glaring.

Ron waved her off. "Nothing in particular ... You and Viktor, you are together. Harry and Cho are together. You see purpose ... And me?"

He turned to Harry. "Remember that question in Trelawney's class? ... I'm still looking for the answer."

"Which question?" asked Hermione.

They explained to her.

"Did the answer tell you anything?"

Ron shook his head.

"Small wonder," she said, "Divination!" The word was spat out.

"Yeah, okay," conceded Ron, "it was a try ... Do you know better?"

"Yes I do." Looking triumphantly, Hermione added, "It's called Brainstorming."

"Sounds even worse than I Ging," Ron's face expressed more suspicion than hope. "What is it?"

"Wait and see."

Hermione wasn't ready to tell more until after supper, taking her time to relish the defeat of Divination, even though she was the only one so far with this conviction.

"Come to the library," she announced finally.

They followed.

In the library, Hermione sat down, arranged some parchments around her, ink and pen ready. "Brainstorming," she declared, "is a technique of the management science."

It was the magic word for Ron, raising his full attention.

"You have a problem ... You collect ideas how to solve it ... Then you discuss them and select the best ... Basically, that's all."

The shining in Ron's eyes faded. "And I thought you'd come up with some Muggles' trick ... This - it's what everybody with a problem does."

"Really?" Hermione seemed in her element. "We'll see." She took the pen. "Ron, what's your problem?"

"I want to have a g ..." He giggled, became serious. "I want to have a function in the fight against the Dark Forces."

Hermione wrote it down. "Okay ... Now. Ron, what are you good at?"

"Stupid remarks." It came like a shot.

Astonished, Harry and Ron watched Hermione writing it down.

"Stop it," said Ron, "I was just joking."

Hermione didn't smile. "No, you weren't - it's true."

"But ..."

She interrupted him. "That's what Brainstorming means - taking seriously what pops people's mind first ... So - what else?"

"Chess," said Harry.

'Chess,' wrote Hermione. Then she looked up. "What's the essence of chess?"

"Moving figures," said Ron after a second. Grinning, he added, "even if they complain."

With fascination, he watched Hermione writing down his description.

"What else?"

"Hmm ... Nothing." Ron looked embarrassed.

"Wrong," said Hermione. She wrote some lines.

Ron tried to read them. "What are you writing?"

Hermione read aloud. "Quick temper. - Quick mind. - Detects his own mistakes. - Can apologize. - Can be diplomatic."

"Oh." Ron flushed. "That's very kind of you."

Hermione looked roguishly, "Never mind ... That's just brainstorming."

"Fearless," said Harry, catching the idea. "Takes risks." After a moment, he added, "Reliable."

Ron was pink.

Hermione kept writing. Finished, she looked up. "More?"

Two heads shaking.

"So then ... Ron, what are your interests?"

"Quidditch. Chess." After some seconds, "Dancing."

A longer pause. "This management stuff."

Ron was about to shake his head, stopped. "Star constellations."

At Hermiones look, he explained, "Stars, organized in patterns, listed in catalogues."

She wrote it down. "Okay ... Now, which functions do we need?" Hermione sat waiting, her pen ready.

The answers came quick, Ron's first. "Charlie needs help with the dragons."

"Viktor needs help in the office," said Harry.

"Hagrid needs help with the Giants," said Ron.

"Fleur needs help with office work," said Harry.

They waited until Hermione had written all of it. None of them found anything else.

"Then," said Hermione. She scanned the parchment. "Let's see - what do we have?"

Her finger moved along the lines. "A fearless - wisecrack - wants to move figures even if they complain ... Well, there are enough figures - dragons, Giants, squad-hoppers, normal students."

She looked up, in time to see Harry's eyes widening. "What ..."

"Bloody baron," whispered Harry, "of course ..." He looked at Ron. "Can't you see it? The Ging oracle!"

Ron was dumbfounded.

Hermione made a face at the word *oracle*, except Harry wasn't going to stop now. "Three days before the change you moved figures - with me ... The change was the arrival of the ship ... Some days later, Viktor got the job of the squad leader. But he said he's not a commander ... You have to correct the lapses of your father."

Harry's voice became urgent. "Ron, it's not your father - it's Viktor! ... Your job is to do the organization for him!"

He looked awe-struck. "And we had to do a Brainstorming to solve the riddle of the hexagram."

Ron was staring in disbelief.

Hermione said flippantly, "I don't like that Ging stuff too much, but I have to admit - this is more or less what crossed my mind." She looked at Ron. "I'd call it coordination - otherwise, I'm with Harry."

"But ..." Ron hesitated. "I can't see myself commanding Viktor and his squad around." Turning to Hermione, he added, "And I can't believe you support this crazy idea."

Hermione smiled archly. "Ron, Viktor is *very* disorderly ... That's part of what I like so much."

Ron was speechless. He opened the mouth, closed it again.

After a moment, he said, "Harry, that Ging ... you're just bending it ... According to your interpretation, it's me who has to cross the big water, not Viktor. But ... if I follow that idea, I don't see any water to cross."

Harry shrugged.

Hermione said, "At the risk of me interpreting an oracle, Ron - you have to contact Dumbledore this way or another ... Maybe that's your mysterious big water."

Ron still had objections, however he agreed to talk with the Headmaster about volunteering for an office job.

"It sounds like asking for a detention," he said thoughtfully, "but you're right ... At least I get it from the man at the top."

* * *

Before meeting Snape for the first training, Harry and Viktor wanted to get themselves prepared, by doing an exercise of the type Lupin had recommended, although Harry took care not to talk about Zen.

Viktor had a small office of his own. He invited Harry to this overheated room, cold-weather walks along the lake weren't his cup of tea. Actually, tea wasn't his thing either - he preferred coffee and had already established a supply chain to Beauxbatons.

Harry declined an offer of this bitter brew.

Viktor sipped his own, then asked, "Harry, how do you stand the Imperius Curse?"

"Well ..." Harry searched for words. "You know, the curse doesn't come like a blow ... it's more of a plea. It makes you wanting to please, to do what it wants ..." He grimaced. "For me, it never paid off to please. I had to fight even for ..." He broke off. "Maybe that's an explanation."

Viktor frowned. "My life wasn't easy too. But I had always my talent ..."

A smile cursed his lips. "Harry, we're both Seekers. Please - explain it to me in Quidditch words."

Harry looked helpless. "Standing it is much easier than explaining it ... Let's see ..."

He thought about his Quidditch matches. Slowly, he asked, "Did you ever catch a Snitch with some bones already broken?"

"Yes," answered Viktor, "more than once."

Harry nodded. "Of course ... And you were rewarded with storms of applause."

"Yes." Viktor's eyes were looking at pictures in his memory.

"Good." Harry made a parting gesture. "Now imagine this - nobody wants you to catch the Snitch. Nobody expects it from you ... the worst that could happen is, you're hit by a Bludger, not to mention a broken bone ... They would boo, and yell in anger."

He paused, then his fist came up. "But you're still the Seeker ... Of all ten thousand people there, you know you must catch it."

Viktor considered Harry's words. Slowly, he asked, "What happens if I catch the Snitch?"

"Right," shouted Harry, "you get the point!" His voice grew hoarse. "They scream at you ... They shake their fists. People are leaving in disgust ... Your own Beaters are trying to send Bludgers at you ... But you hold - you hold for dear life."

Viktor's eyes were shining.

Harry inhaled deeply. "And suddenly - it's over ... The pain stops, and you still hold the Snitch."

* * *

Viktor's first chance of testing the theory came soon. Snape had announced their first training session.

Harry was strongly reminded of his meetings with Lupin, more so when Snape guided them into a dungeon. The air had a foul smell.

"Not a cosy place," said Snape, "but it's simpler for starters."

"Why's that?" asked Harry.

Rather than answering, Snape asked, "Mr. Potter, do you trust me?"

"Yes." It came without hesitation.

"You shouldn't." Snape smiled mockingly at Harry's look. "The Imperius Curse can be stood the better, the least you trust who's cursing you."

His wand shot up, pointing at Harry. *"IMPERIO!"*

Harry's mind was filled with mist. No, something else - mist didn't make the skin burn. Somebody told him to lick the dirty walls. It sounded as if this would ease the burning ... The green slime looked like the proper cure, much better than anything Madam Pomfrey could offer. Harry made a step, then stopped. Who'd said the licking would ease the pain? ... Nobody - it had been his own stupid idea, to explain this stupid suggestion.

His head jerked up. "I don't think so!"

The pain faded as quickly as it had started. Harry's view was clear again. In front of him stood Snape, smiling.

"Extraordinary, Mr. Potter!" Snape's wand was resting idly in his hand. "It wasn't me who broke the spell - though I'd need less than a hand to count the wizards with an Imperius Curse stronger than mine."

Harry wondered if he had courage enough to ask Snape for their names.

Before he could find out, Snape said, "I'll show you another aspect."

His wand came up again toward Harry. *"IMPERIO!"*

Harry felt a slight sizzle in his ears. After seconds, it faded.

"Nothing's happening," he said.

"The immunity effect," confirmed Snape. "It would take an hour or more until I'd achieve nearly as much as the first time - without ever coming that far again ... Immunity between two particular wizards doesn't fade entirely."

His gaze fell on Viktor. "Mr. Krum, ready for your first turn?"

Viktor cleared his throat. "Yes." He stood motionless, looking at Snape.

"With the Imperius Curse," explained Snape, "there isn't much of scaling ... Anyway, I'll try my least."

His wand pointed at Viktor. "*Imperio.*"

Viktor didn't move. His eyes had a glazed look.

"Sing us a song, Mr. Krum."

Viktor opened his mouth and started to sing in a flat, unmodulated voice. Probably it was Bulgarian, Harry couldn't even recognize the tune.

"Stop singing!"

Viktor closed his mouth.

Snape's wand pointed again. "*Recorrigo!*"

Viktor's eyes gained focus. "What happened?" he asked.

"You were singing," replied Snape. He studied Viktor's face. "Mr. Krum, are you really determined to master the Imperius break?"

Viktor nodded, then said, "Yes, I am."

"Are you ready to suffer pain? ... Real pain?"

"A Quidditch Seeker knows pain," answered Viktor proudly. "Go ahead."

Snape turned to Harry. "Mr. Potter, please don't interfere." Next moment, his wand pointed at Viktor. "*Crucio!*"

Harry gasped. The Cruciatus Curse!

His own body twisted while watching Viktor's body tremble, shake, collapse, guttural sounds coming from his salivating mouth. Looking horrified at Snape, Harry saw the teacher count.

Then Snape raised his wand. "*Exsurdo!*"

Moaning, Viktor tried to get up. Hands still at the floor, he looked up at Snape, his eyes burning flames of hate.

"Don't move, Mr Krum!" Snape's voice was cold, piercing. "You rotten piece of mud, that's the right stance when talking with me ... On your knees!"

Viktor's muscles tensed.

"I'll curse you now, and if you're still too stupid to break it, I'll torture you twice that long ... Do you believe me???"

At Snape's last words, Viktor snarled. His body came up. One arm outstretched like a claw, the other grabbing for his wand, he moved toward Snape.

"Imperio!!"

Viktor froze, his arms fell to his sides.

"You will repeat my next words, Mr. Krum ... Say yes!"

"Yes."

"Bulgaria is a dirty bunch of thieves and murderers."

"Bulgaria is a dirty bunch of thieves and murderers." Viktor's voice was tonelessly, he spoke without his heavy accent.

"Hermione Granger is a filthy mudblood."

Tremor was shaking Viktor's body. After a second, he repeated, "Hermione Granger is a filthy muttblood." The accent was back.

"She should have drowned in the lake."

Viktor's fists clenched. "Nrrrg ... She should have drowned in the lake." It was like a cry.

"The Basilisk should have killed her before you met." Viktor hadn't reacted yet when Snape yelled, "Killed! Killed! Killed!"

Viktor's knees buckled, steadied, buckled again. "The Basilisk should have ... have ..." The fists grabbed his ears, the head jerked upward. "Nooooo!"

Shaking from side to side, Viktor groaned. Arms outstretched like a wrestler, he made a step toward Snape, stopped. Slowly, the arms came down.

Snape stood, smiling, palms raised openly toward Viktor. "Congratulations, Mr. Krum ... There's more power than dark magic."

Viktor nodded, looked around. In a shaky voice, he said, "I must sit." He hunched down on a stool, panting.

A pounding in Harry's chest reminded him his own body needed air too.

"Enough for today," said Snape. "It was quite a success ... Mr. Krum, I have homework for you - a fairly nasty one, I have to admit."

Viktor's face came up.

"Remember how it felt ... Remember how you broke the spell, and save it."

Viktor nodded.

Snape turned to Harry. "Mr. Potter - can we agree on a public version which only mentions *bad insults*? ... I think that's detail enough."

"Yes, of course," stammered Harry. "Er - thank you, Professor Snape."

Snape waved and left.

After some more minutes, Viktor had regained sufficient strength to follow Harry upstairs.

* * *

Harry and Hermione were sitting at the supper table, waiting for Ron to join them. When their friend arrived, he sat down and started to eat without registering the others who had waited for him. There was a hounded look in his eyes.

Harry studied him, then glanced over to Hermione, who shrugged her shoulders. He asked, "Ron, what's up? ... Did you see a ghost?"

"Erm - what? ... No."

After a second, Ron registered the joke, however his smile didn't last. "I ...," He stopped, looked around. "Can we meet in our special room? ... This is a very private matter."

His gaze passed the twins, for a split second, he looked genuinely frightened.

Harry wondered what could make Ron terrified of his brothers. The Weasleys ... Oh no! His heartbeat failed a step. "Bad news?" he asked.

Ron looked uncomprehending.

"Something from your family?"

"No, why ... Oh - no, everything's fine." Ron tried a laughter, it came out rather croaky. "Nobody's hurt. Relax."

He couldn't follow his own advice.

Unable to extract the slightest hint from Ron, Harry and Hermione continued their conversation about O.W.L.s. Ron didn't even listen, his eyes rarely focused on the dish in front of him.

Hermione told Harry that she had changed her planning from Potions to Charms, still without a specific theme.

Harry, for the first time, mentioned his idea of an O.W.L. about Transportation.

It took Hermione by surprise. "Didn't you say Flying's one of your topics?"

"Yes," admitted Harry, "but as a special issue ... That's not against the rules, is it?"

"No, although you might find it more difficult than expected ... See, for Flying, you can easily round up with a short broadbanning about other techniques of transportation ... And then - " Hermione held her palm upward, "what's left for the other? ... They'd grill you no end."

Harry's mouth felt dry. "What a mess ... Then it's high time to fetch another topic."

Hermione looked wondering. "Why not chose the obvious?"

"What's obvious?" Harry frowned. "There's Flying, and there's the Patronus ... I mean, I don't have your goals, but - two O.W.L.s is a little thin."

"Nobody can see the obvious, that's another thesis of the management science." Hermione grinned. "Harry, how often have you been exposed to Unforgivable Curses?"

"Dunno, didn't count them." Harry's eyes widened. "You mean ..."

Hermione laughed at his look. "Right ... It's not another self-runner, yet easy prey."

Harry tried to settle for the idea. "Wouldn't it be counted as Defence against the Dark Arts? - Then I'd have two in this faculty. This ..."

"Use a trick."

Both Harry and Hermione spun around.

Ron had awakened. "Provided you can talk about it," he said, "you could call it *Unforgivable Curses, under the Special Condition of Sibling Wands* ... Then you'd declare it as Charms, and nobody would object."

Hermione waited anxiously for Harry's reaction at this sensitive issue, found no reason to worry because Harry called in delight, "Ron, you're a genius!"

Ron looked pleased, for the first time since arriving to the meal.

Hermione drew a pouty face and made her voice shrill. "You unthankful creature. It was my idea!"

"True," agreed Harry. "So you're the scientific genius who has the ideas, and Ron's the coordinating genius who makes them work."

Hermione beamed at his description. Only - checking Ron's face, Harry noticed that the hounded look was back.

* * *

He reached the room of their dance lessons, lately used also for project milestones, to find Ron already waiting. It took some more minutes before Hermione arrived, giving Harry time for speculating about his friend's worry.

When Hermione sat down at the table, a voice from the corner said, "This isn't a dance lesson, is it?"

Ron jumped almost in the air, yelping. He wheeled around. "Myrtle! ... For Chrissake, you've terrified me like hell!"

Harry couldn't help giggling, joined by Hermione.

Myrtle said pleadingly, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to."

"Myrtle, please." Ron looked desperate. "This is a private conversation."

"I'll tell nobody." In a mix of defiance and threat, she added, "I have as much right to be here as you - more, actually ... By the way, I could watch you anywhere, only I was honest enough to manifest."

They looked at her in perplexion.

Harry found his speech first. "Myrtle, what happened to you? - You never spoke that way!"

Myrtle's face looked like silver, the ghostly equivalent of a deep blushing. "You're my only friends," she said in a miserable voice.

At least toward Harry, she had hit the right spot. He looked questioningly at Hermione, who nodded, then at his friend. "Ron?"

Ron grimaced. "All right then." Turning toward the corner, he said angrily, "But come over here where I can see you. I'm a little jumpy today."

Beaming like a halo, Myrtle glid to the table.

Ron's face was gloomy. "If you tell someone else, I'll ..." He stopped, looking confused.

Myrtle raised her hand. "I swear by my own grave."

When the laughter had faded, she added, "And I'll warn you if Peeves comes sneaking."

"Okay, Ron," said Hermione, "there's no safer place in Hogwarts right now ... Spill it out."

Ron was kneading his hands. "I spoke with Dumbledore."

They had to explain toward Myrtle about Ron's request.

"What did he say?" asked Hermione impatiently. "Must be a very bad job he's offering."

"No ..." said Ron hesitantly, "basically it's just what we had in mind ... Lots of paperwork ... But he said something about a *magnificent performance years ago*. You know, my chess match." Ron informed them that he had told Dumbledore about the Brainstorming.

"Sounds good," said Harry. "Where's the problem?"

"Well, um - there's a condition." It wasn't Ron's habit to spoon-feed them with words.

Harry tried a joke. "You have to be polite."

Ron managed a smile. "No. - Yeah, certainly, but that's not what he said."

"You have to wear a uniform." It was Hermione's guess.

"Worse."

Seeing their blank looks, Ron explained, "Dumbledore said my function would be that of an assistant - of whom in particular isn't quite clear yet ... Maybe of Viktor, maybe of Dumbledore himself ... But what I'd need in any case is some formal rank. And the only solution he saw was to give me ... to make me ..."

"Ron, what??"

"... a Prefect!" shouted Ron. "I'll have to wear a badge!"

After a second of stunned silence, Harry and Hermione were shaking in howling laughter.

Myrtle didn't join them, unable to see anything ridiculous.

"I knew it, I knew it," groaned Ron, "that's just what I expected. Imagine Fred and George seeing my badge!"

Wiping tears off his eyes, Harry said, "Take it easy, Ron ... Don't worry - we're gotta find a solution."

"It's only the first time," assured Hermione. "Once they know, the teasing will stop quickly."

Ron wasn't convinced. "They'll never stop ... Remember how they hunted Percy all the time? Pompous Percy, they called him, and the name stuck ... I don't dare to think what they'll call me. Righteous Ron or ..."

He was interrupted by another burst of laughter. "See what I mean?"

"Ron," said Hermione after calming down, "you're not Percy. You don't look ridiculous - with or without a badge."

"Wait and see," muttered Ron. "Look at yourself! Even at the thought of it, you can't stop laughing."

At least, he had relaxed enough to look satisfied at the reaction to his joke.

"I have an idea," said Myrtle.

They looked at her in surprise.

"You know - er, I've been teased in life and death, but I had lots of time to think about revenge." She silvered again. "I never dared to do it for myself, but I could do it for you."

"And what would that be?" asked Ron carefully.

"Oh, us ghosts have ways." Myrtle giggled. "When I developed my ideas, I had mostly girls in mind ... While for the twins, I'd know some more." She giggled again. "I'd feel too embarrassed to tell you, but I can promise - they won't try it more than twice or so."

Hermione also started to giggle.

Harry felt enthralled. "A gh ... a girl body-guard. Ron, that's unique!"

Myrtle was beaming.

After a few seconds, Ron nodded. "Yes, that might work." With malice in his eyes, he added, "You're right, Myrtle ... They won't like their own medicine much."

He promised to contact Dumbledore first thing tomorrow.

They said good night to a Myrtle who appeared happier than ever, inspired by her new purpose.

Coming downstairs, they reached the crossing to the girls' dormitories.

"Hey, Ron," said Hermione grinning, "I always thought Myrtle had a crush on Harry. I never realized it's you."

Chuckling, Harry climbed the staircase to their own dormitories, recalling his encounters with Myrtle, in particular those of the previous year, how they had met in the lake, and before that in the Prefect's bathroom where he had to dive into the water and ... His foot stopped in mid-air, an instant later, he was almost knocked over by Ron.

"Hey, Harry - watch your step!"

"Ron, I have it." Harry beamed in admiration.

"Fine ... Keep it, but move." Ron didn't like to be blocked in the narrow staircase.

"No - look. The big water ... remember, you have to cross the big water? It's just a picture; what it means is you have to reach new horizons. Getting a badge and being Prefect, that's your new horizon!" Harry was gesticulating in anticipation.

Ron pushed him upward. "You're mental ... Time to sleep."

Still, the push felt more like a pat on the shoulder.

* * *

After classes next day, Harry and Viktor were scheduled for another training with Snape. The dungeon was the same as the last time, "to stir the memory," as Snape put it.

Today it would be Harry's task to curse Viktor, and Harry felt certain Viktor would break his own limited power in the Imperius Curse.

He cursed Viktor a first time, made him sing. Disappointed with both the singing and the obedience, he stopped.

"C'mon, you lousy Seeker," he shouted and cursed him again.

This time, Viktor had to frog-hop through the dungeon, doing so thoroughly and with amazing speed. Frustrated, Harry stopped him again.

"Mr. Krum," asked Snape, "what made you break my curse?"

Without even thinking, Viktor answered, "The thought of what you said was unbearable."

"And how did you do it?"

"I ..." Viktor paused. "I decided to die before I'd let it happen."

"Hmmm ..." Snape was absent-mindedly scratching his neck.

Viktor asked, "Would it help if you'd cruciate me again?" He didn't look happy yet quite determined.

"No, no," replied Snape, "this was an extreme measure to trigger your first successful breaking ... Even then, it wasn't enough - doing it now would be a cruelty without purpose."

The teacher sighed. "Mr. Krum, our problem is that your tolerance against pain and humiliation is too high."

"Pain, yes," replied Viktor, "humiliation, no." His voice was casual. "I cannot be humiliated."

Snape's eyes narrowed a little, then he smiled. "Agreed, Mr. Krum. Anyway - do you accept my diagnosis in general?"

"Yes, I know what you mean." Viktor shrugged. "Do you want to change it?"

"Let's see," said Snape. He raised his wand toward Viktor and said in an even voice, "Imperio."

Viktor stood waiting.

"Mr. Krum, go and kill Harry!"

For a split second, Viktor appeared to Harry like Draco Malfoy, thinner and smaller but the same distorted face - except Viktor's outstretched claws held no wand. In a reflex, Harry drew his own wand, about to raise it for the counter curse when Viktor's arms fell down and he turned to Snape.

"No, I won't do that." Viktor's gaze cleared, realizing what had happened, a smile appeared in his face.

"Okay, Mr. Potter," called Snape, "your turn."

Harry looked at Viktor, his wand came up. "You bloody, stupid cripple, defend yourself! Imperio!"

Viktor stood, still smiling.

"Say ... say 'Hermione is an unsufferable know-it-all'."

"Hermione is an unsufferable know-it-all." As flat as his voice was, Viktor copied exactly Harry's intonation.

"Dammit," muttered Harry. He pointed his wand. "Recorrigo!"

Viktor exhaled, looking undisturbed.

Snape's lips twisted. "Mr. Potter, I could tell you four reasons why this didn't work."

"Four?" Harry couldn't think of more than two.

"Yes - although some of them might exclude each other." Snape tried to keep serious. "One - Mr. Krum trusts you too much ... Two - Mr. Krum didn't believe you were serious ... Three - it was too close to the truth ... Four - you're gaining expertise in the Imperius Curse."

Listening to Snape's explanation, Harry had to grin, while the last guess sobered him up. "Oh ... I hadn't planned that."

He tried to think of something terrible enough to make Viktor recoil. Any insult would bounce off like water from a duck. Snape was better suited to the task, he was an experienced spy. Spying ... interrogations ... He had an idea.

"Viktor!" He pointed. "Imperio!"

Viktor stood waiting.

"Viktor, you know that Snape was a Death-Eater?"

Viktor kept motionless.

Snape's calm voice behind Harry said, "He's waiting for commands ... You have to express your question as a command."

"Viktor, if you know that Snape was a Death-Eater, say yes."

"Yes."

"He still is. Keep that in mind. ... Say 'I'll remember that'."

"I'll remember that."

"Viktor, if you had help escaping from Durmstrang, say yes."

"Yes."

"If someone's left behind as a reliable contact, say yes."

A slight tremble crossed Viktor's body. "Yes."

"Tell Snape the name and address!"

Viktor opened his mouth, but no word came out. He turned to Harry, disbelief in his eyes, then back to Snape. "Var ..." He turned again. "No, Harry." He shook his head, stopped.

His eyes widened, his right fist came up, as if holding a Snitch. Triumph was spreading his face. "Got it!"

"Well, well, well." Snape looked satisfied. "Very good, Mr. Krum ... We're still on shaky ground, but a real enemy might find it hard to control you." He turned to Harry. "Mr. Potter, you're very inventive ... What I find most remarkable is how you take profit from a trainer who wasn't your first choice."

Harry flushed. "Er - yes, Professor Snape ... Still getting used to."

The training session was over, Viktor's immunity would hold for a while.

* * *

Once again, Harry and Hermione were waiting at the supper table for Ron who was late, however this time, the food was late too.

Ron arrived, panting, dropped to his seat. "I talked with Dumbledore ... It's settled - I'll start tomorrow." He looked around. "Where's our food? ... Hey, Hermione, did you finally manage to make the house-elves strike?"

"So you were hired for wise-cracks?"

Reminding Hermione of her initial misjudgment at the house-elves' view of things was a short-cut to the next row with her. Luckily, Dumbledore's voice made both of them drop their angry stare and turn around.

"Sorry to be late," the Headmaster said, "and sorry to keep you from a well-earned supper for some more minutes ... I have two announcements for you. The first one has to do with a change of teachers."

He turned to his side. "Professor Lupin, who has held Defence against the Dark Arts as a temporary substitute, will pass it over as of tomorrow. He will use his free time for other purposes in the pursuit of our targets - mostly outside Hogwarts."

Harry's face saddened. The dreaded day had come, Lupin would be off like Sirius Black. The improved relations with Snape didn't feel like a replacement. At least, one secret less that had to be kept from slipping his tongue.

Dumbledore's words came back into focus. "... new colleague who mastered our language from blank to brilliant in no time, thanks to the help of our good samaritan, Madam Pomfrey."

Dumbledore looked at the teacher from Durmstrang. "I'm very pleased to present our new Defence against the Dark Arts teacher - Professor Kristof Drilencu."

Drilencu was a remarkable figure. He looked small until someone else stood at his side, then it became clear he was just extremely broad-shouldered. A long moustache extended to both sides of his face, turning upward and inward in a semi-circle. His short black hair had a strand of silver from back to front, as if this spot had never recovered from a burning spell.

The new teacher bowed to the polite applause. "Thank you ... When looking at the list of my predecessors in this position, I must admit they were quite extraordinary - each of them in his own style."

Laughter came from the older students, while Drilencu's new colleagues tried to look serious.

"So I hope you are still with me when I declare my own intention - which is to be truly unspectacular ... Thank you again for your confidence." Drilencu sat down.

The applause, this time significantly stronger, gave the teachers an opportunity to steady their faces. Harry watched Snape's reaction, recalling his conversation with him.

The Potions teacher mastered the scene gracefully. When his gaze drifted off his new colleague, it seemed to meet Harry's for a short moment. Snape's head tilted slightly, Harry wondered if this had been a silent remark to him.

Hermione's voice took his attention. "... much of surprise."

"Er - what?" Harry shook his head. "No - I knew about."

Hermione's eyes narrowed. "Oh ... You didn't bother to tell us."

Before Harry could answer, Dumbledore went on. "The second news has to do with our growing team of non-teaching combattants. One of our number has volunteered for the unthankful job of an organization assistant - to be performed on top of his duties as a student of Hogwarts."

Dumbledore looked to their table. "Mr. Ron Weasley - please come to me."

Ron started to walk, pale changing to pink.

Harry and Hermione applauded enthusiastically, while other heads at the Gryffindor table looked baffled first, then started to join the applause.

Ron had reached the teacher's table.

"This position," explained Dumbledore, "requires as much as it deserves the status of a Prefect." He twinkled. "Getting an assistant was the hard part, making him Prefect is a matter of seconds." His voice rose. "Ron Weasley, I appoint you Prefect of Hogwarts!"

His hand seized Ron's and shook it. From Harry's perspective, Ron's stance seemed pretty much that of Viktor during his first attempts in the Imperius training.

"The badge for our new Prefect is ready," called the Headmaster through the noise, "and there's just one person who should assign it ... I'm talking about another member of the Weasley family - most commonly known as Charlie the Dragon Guard."

Charlie appeared in the door, stepped quickly to his spellbound brother. Grinning broadly, he fixed the badge at Ron's chest, then shook his hand.

Ron made a step as if walking back to his seat, but Charlie grabbed him. Harry saw how he whispered something in his brother's ear that made Ron jerk.

Dumbledore spoke again. "As new as our assistant is in his job, he has already found assistance for himself ... It will help him in more ways than meets the eye." Dumbledore had much fun at his own words. "This is a true example how all forces of Hogwarts join together. A long-standing resident of our school takes on new responsibilities. Here comes - Miss Myrtle Scammy!"

Moaning Myrtle appeared in the air, close to Dumbledore. For a moment, she seemed to vanish again, then could steady herself, although even from Harry's seat the wall behind her shape still shimmered through.

After the first stunned silence, the hall echoed from the shouts and hoorays. Myrtle joined the two Weasleys, then all three of them came toward the Gryffindor table.

"Move over," shouted Harry. "Make room for our two guests!"

The other students obeyed good-naturedly.

The three had reached the table. They sat down, Ron flanked by Charlie at his left and Myrtle at his right. The burning cheeks in Ron's face offered a vivid contrast to Myrtle's equivalent in silver, a beaming smile on the ghost girl's unlovely face.

Right then, the food appeared together with the drinks. Everybody started to fill dishes and cups - except for Myrtle, who let her eyes wander around.

Ron looked at his dish, responding only with nods to the congratulations from Harry and Hermione. He looked tense, as if waiting for something more.

He didn't have to wait long.

"Ron, our little brother," shouted George, and Fred seconded, "... has got himself a job and a girlfriend at once!"

Ron twisted, turning dark.

Myrtle's head snapped around. "Watch your language," she hissed at Fred, "or you'll be sorry!"

Fred held his palms upward. "No offense ... We're proud of Ron, ready to sing his praise." He filled his cup with pumpkin juice, raised it. "To the PAMPAR - the Perfect Assistant Manager Prefect Alias Ron!"

He started to drink. Next second, his mouth spilled a dark fluid over the table. "Ouch - dammit, what's that??"

"Hot coffee," came the prompt answer. Myrtle's voice was threatening. "Just a fair warning ... I don't want to think of what will be next."

Eyes turned to the cup still in Fred's hand, a faint cloud of steam twirling upward.

"Ron," called George angrily, "get that assistant of yours under control ... There is something like freedom of speech! ... Ulgh."

A hot potato had jumped from a bowl and had sped into George's mouth, too large to be chewed. He was desperately trying to tear it off with his hands, watched by a fierce-looking Myrtle.

Ron's eyes were glistening. "Lost your freedom of speech?"

Laughter waved up. As much as the twins were liked, there was nobody among the older students who hadn't suffered from similar treatment at some time or another.

Fred and George made attempts to cool their burned palates, their suspicious glances switched between Myrtle and the cups of juice they used for this purpose. The glare in their eyes left little doubt of the remarks they'd like to give, except a look into Myrtle's face and the burning in their mouths made them think better of it.

Myrtle ascended. "Thank you for your hospitality ... I have to leave." Toward the twins, she added, "I'm off - not away," and disappeared, accompanied by good-bye's.

Harry chuckled. "Hey Ron, that's settled ... What do you think?"

Ron didn't answer, still watching the twins.

Charlie turned to them, grinning. "I never saw anyone shutting up those two so quickly ... That's the second highlight for this evening."

It was the signal for other students to contribute in repayment.

Fred and George tried to put a good face on it, without being too convincing. After a while, Fred said grumpily, "Okay, okay - you had your fun."

It raised protests from the other students, claiming their rights to use the opportunity.

George looked at Ron. "You know - Myrtle can't be always around with you ..."

His voice stopped, widening eyes transfixed on a cup which hung mid-air over the table, right in front of him.

After a moment, he leaned slowly back, hands flatly at the table. Still looking at the cup, he said, "All right, Myrtle - I give up ... There are matches you just can't win."

* * *

Ron's job took all his spare time, if there ever had been any besides his O.W.L. obligations. The Flying Squad turned out the centre of his responsibilities, with the effect that he arrived late to the meals, only to leave early.

The squad desk moved from Madam Hooch's office into another room which became Ron's office, as well as that of Myrtle.

In contrast to Ron, Myrtle had lots of time, used it to play receptionist as much as she could. Unfortunately, owing to her nature, her capabilities were more limited than both of them would have liked. Soon after their start, Ron arrived at the breakfast table and muttered, "What a nuisance. My wrist's hurting like hell. If only Myrtle could write."

Hermione looked astonished. "What? ... I can't believe she didn't learn it."

"Oh - of course can she write," replied Ron. "Trouble is, her writing disappears quickly and only reappears around midnight ... That's not very helpful, is it?"

In spite of his short-measured leisure time, he looked happier than ever since terms had started. While always complaining about "the bloody mess" he had found, Ron spent long hours "to establish a proper framework". He had borrowed some books about management and organization from Hermione. When she said, "Ron, that's slavery. Tell Dumbledore to cut it down," he replied, "Why, he didn't set a time rule. That's me."

Not long after his appointment, Fred and George came over to his place. Fred said, "Ron, we have to talk with you and Myrtle ... This state is unbearable - for us, it feels like suffocating!"

Ron smiled wickedly. "What do you suggest?"

George showed a good imitation of despair. "A joke every now and then must be allowed ... What world is this in which you cannot even tease your younger brother?"

"Okay," laughed Ron, "but listen ... This badge wasn't my idea. In fact, I almost declined because of it. If you think I'd never got it the regular way, you're right. But - I have it, I'm going to earn it, and I'm going to be proud of it ... So - if that's clear, I've got no objections left."

"You mean," asked Fred carefully, "you wouldn't be mad about remarks that would mention - say, ghostly girlfriends?"

"Me - no." Ron looked maliciously. "Of course, I cannot speak for Myrtle."

The twins left, discussing the new situation. Somehow, it seemed worse than before. A total censorship was a simple thing, so to speak, but watching their choice of words for every remark? For them, it felt like betrayal, it was as if they would have to be aware that, after they'd said something, someone would slab their faces.

Ron watched them leave, turned to his friends, grinning. "No need to tell them how easy it's going with Myrtle ... This job has done wonders to her mood."

"That's pretty strange," said Hermione, raising her eyebrows. "I wouldn't know anyone for whom the effect is anywhere close to that." She looked at Harry. "Would you?"

"What an absurd question," said Harry and presented a face of disbelief to the watching Ron. "I know only ordinary people who feel most satisfied with an easy living ... Well, yes, an O.W.L. or two, when it's unavoidable ... maybe even three, come to think of it ... four at the most ..."

"You're right," interrupted Hermione the counting, "it's really an absurd question ... But while on the subject, Ron, your office job looks to me as if you'd put your O.W.L.s at risk."

"Oh - didn't I tell you?" Ron grinned sardonically. "I spoke with Dumbledore about this reorganization I'm working on ... He told me it would definitely be counted as an O.W.L."

He waited a second to let the news hit, then added, "It's true, Hermione - people tend to forget the obvious."

Harry's grin suddenly felt as if freezing in his face. He still waited a moment, only what he had expected didn't come - Ron didn't say anything about dropping one of his other four O.W.L.s. Which meant, he was aiming at five!

Anger was stirring in Harry, although he couldn't decide was he angry at himself for being envious, at Ron for being so ambitious, or at himself again for being unable to think of more than four. It was unfair of Ron, all the time they'd been sailing far behind Hermione but side by side, and now his friend made him falling behind. It had to be the badge, that bloody piece of metal changed *every* member as soon as it stuck to a chest.

The scene with Ron in front of the Mirror of Erised came back to Harry's mind, how Ron had seen himself as Quidditch captain, Prefect, Head Boy, plus all kinds of cups in his hands. And now he was sitting there, giggling like a fool. Well, Quidditch captain was definitely out of reach, and the other goals ... with astonishment, Harry realized the only title missing was Head Boy, Gryffindor currently held both the House Cup and the Quidditch Cup.

What could he position against that? Being famous, having a scar and a powerful enemy? This was old news. Winner of the Wizard Tournament? Didn't count - for many reasons, and besides, he'd been helped all along. Only living wizard with a Golden Patronus? There was no proof, had anyone ever challenged Dumbledore to conjure up a Patronus?

Eventually, Harry knew - he was angry with himself being mad at Ron, only it was no help knowing why, the bad feeling didn't fade.

11 - Allies and Enemies

The Gryffindor fifth-graders gathered for their first Defence against the Dark Arts class with the new teacher. Coming into the classroom, they found him standing patiently behind his desk, making the space look as if it had narrowed since the last time they saw it.

He watched them sit down, then started, "Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. My ..."

The giggling made him stop. He waited a moment, studying the students' faces.

"We are still strangers to each other," he said then. "This was the best I could find in my freshly achieved memory. However ..." another pause until the laughter ebbed, "in my native country, students of your age count as adults, so they expect to be addressed properly ... I tend to see you that way, in particular so because our next topic is more to the adult side."

The announcement stirred a wave of murmuring, anticipation was growing in the faces.

Drilencu seemed in no hurry. "It is good tradition to start a new assignment with an inaugural lecture ... Since this is our first class together, I'll gladly stick to the habit and present an outline of what's going to keep us occupied for quite some time ... You might call it an *eye-catcher* - although I'd also appreciate if you lend me your ear, *young lady!*"

Parvati Patil stopped whispering at Lavender Brown and twisted around, flushing.

The teacher continued in normal tone. "What I'm trying to say, there'll be no homework from today, also there's no need to write all the time because we'll come back to all of it."

Hermione was still holding her pen, head tilted to her parchment. When Drilencu didn't continue, she glanced up to see him watching her. Quickly, she dropped the pen and sat upright.

"You might do me a favour in return - please ask as much as you can, and start your question with your full name ... When I call you by your name first, please take it as the signal to stop with."

Harry felt amazed. This funny-looking newcomer hadn't even started to speak about his topic, and yet his grip held easily as tight as that of Professor McGonagall. More comfortable, yes, but ...

"Over the past years," explained Drilencu, "I have dedicated my special interest to our new topic. Quite naturally so, you might say, since the southern and eastern parts of Europe are their territory more than here around ... Before you give up hope I'll ever come to the point - I'm talking about Veela and Vampires."

The room had been quiet before, now the silence was that of astonishment.

Hermione, naturally, recovered first, raising her arm.

Drilencu nodded at her.

"Hermione Granger. Professor Drilencu, why did you put them together?"

"Thank you, Miss Granger ... Before I answer, please let me add something I forgot to mention." He looked at the class. "It simply takes too much time to say my title plus my name - in addition to the fact that, in your language, it sounds more like borrowed footwear. So ..." he let the giggling fade, "just drop it ... Or, if you are in dire need of something other than *Hey you*, call me Prof."

The class gawked, unsure whether giggling wasn't too impolite.

Drilencu turned to Hermione. "Why both together, Miss Granger? Because they have much in common - as different as the details are ... The first common factor is quite obvious; they both start with a 'V'."

Some students laughed. Not so Hermione, who drew a face at this answer, not bothering to hide it.

Drilencu's expression didn't change. "The second common factor is the context in which Veela and Vampires gain and use power that looks magical. This context is the adult part - sex."

The class froze.

Nobody dared looking to the side, partly afraid of being watched and teased afterwards for the astonished face, partly to avoid seeing such faces.

Hermione leaned back. Looking at her, Harry could hardly avoid the feeling her question had been a test.

"We'll use that word more often," said Drilencu, "although today I just want to set some spotlights on myths and rumours that go with these creatures ... So let's separate fact from fiction. I've numbered them ... Don't bother with the sequence - it's more by accident than anything else."

He used his left hand to spread his right thumb. "Myth number one. Veela and Vampires have magical power ... Fact or fiction?"

Nobody wanted to answer.

Harry wondered if Hermione really didn't know or, for a change, avoided to appear as a you-know-what.

"Unclear," answered Drilencu his own question. "Fact is - reliable proof of true magical power is still missing ... Fact is - they can raise extreme power through chemicals, injected in the bloodstream by Vampires and spread into the air by Veela. The technical term for the latter is pheromone; a Veela victim looks like a sex maniac - although the most accurate term would be pheromoniatic."

An arm was up. "Lavender Brown. Prof ... er, what's a maniac?"

Harry turned to watch Hermione's arm shoot up. He wasn't disappointed while she was - Drilencu let Ron answer.

It came as a real surprise to Harry, had to be Ron's Muggles' literature. "Ron Weasley ... A maniac is an acute case of a mania ... A mania is the suffering of an obsession, such as, um ..." Ron flushed.

"Correct, Mr. Weasley ... By the way, don't be disappointed if I'm not spreading Gryffindor points through the air. It would be unfair to give points while no homework."

This turned out to be the teacher's first command that wasn't followed, murmurs of protest indicated a different view of fairness among the students.

Drilencu wasn't impressed. "Myth number two - Veela are animals ... Fact or fiction?"

Harry's arm raised by itself. "Wrong - er, fiction, I mean ... Sorry, Harry Potter's my name."

The class laughed.

Drilencu didn't. "Proof, Mr. Potter?"

"They can ... Veela can ... Humans and Veela can have children." Harry felt his cheeks burn.

"Correct, Mr. Potter ... The term you were looking for is *They can mate* ... Please note," said Drilencu to the class, "the ability to have sex with them wouldn't be sufficient - only a child who survives *and* can have children of its own is proof."

The class started to get used to the three-letter word. Harry's cheeks felt normal again.

Drilencu spread his next finger. "Myth number three - Vampires are immortal, unless you find a way to kill them ... Fact or fiction?"

Another arm. "Seamus Finnigan ... It's fiction ... although I can't prove it. Everybody thinks it's true, so I guessed your question ..." Seamus' voice trailed off.

"Judge your own guess, Mr. Finnigan." Drilencu held his hands like scales. "Truly immortal - no ... De facto immortal - sometimes ... Vampires revitalize from the blood of certain victims ... We'll come to the details later - I don't want to let you drown in this new territory."

Drilencu's face was even, while Harry could hear Hermione suppressing a giggle.

"Myth number four - Veela are, if not animals, but stupid like animals." Forestalling any protest, Drilencu added, "Let's not discuss whether animals are stupid, let's just agree some are ... Anyway - fact or fiction?"

It was Harry's turn to raise an arm without luck.

"Neville Longbottom ... Fiction."

"Proof, Mr. Longbottom?"

Neville surprised Harry again. "Our Beauxbatons Liaison Officer - Fleur Delacour."

In most other classes, the answer would have caused a short tumult, more so because it had been Neville giving it. Not here.

Drilencu smiled for the first time in a while. "Proof accepted, Mr. Longbottom, thank you ... Yes, the intelligence of Veela is in the human range. The myth probably stems from the fact that they don't use it very often ... Miss Granger?"

"Why not, Prof ... erm?"

"To survive, you'll use what suits best ... Thinking hurts, so if you ..."

Watching Hermione's look, Drilencu said, "Well, some people feel more pain, some less ... Anyway - if you have something better, for instance Veela power to let someone else do the work, there's no need."

Parvati Patil had a fit of giggles. Harry saw Hermione's jaws going tense.

The teacher's voice stopped both of them. "That raises another question - can you see it? ... Yes?"

"Dean Thomas ... Does it make them parasites?"

"Precisely, Mr. Thomas. What's the answer? ... Miss Granger?"

"Yes, of course." Hermione looked satisfied at her indirect remark to Parvati's hidden insult.

"Wrong, Miss Granger ... Science defines a parasite as a creature requiring a host to exist. Veela survive without a host ... Whether a parasite is just taking without ever giving is irrelevant - some do, some don't ... The term is badly misused for prejudices and insults."

Oh, what a bitter moment for Hermione. Defeated with her own weapon, she sat tight-lipped in her seat, glaring at the teacher who continued shredding myths to pieces.

Was it true that garlic protected against Vampires? - Not really, garlic disintegrated the revitalizing effect of a victim's blood and made it useless, so there was a limited protection ... Did daylight kill Vampires? - No, only unreflected sunrays quickly decomposed the life-preserving substance in them ... Did Veela power work only toward males? - Basically yes, details to be discussed later ... Did crosses or rosaries protect against Vampires? - Not if the Vampire was a Jew or Muslim ... Did a piece of wood, driven through the heart, kill a Vampire? - Certainly so, same as with any other human or non-human. The other students, including Harry, listened in fascination.

Close to the end, Hermione had recovered enough to ask a final question. "If none of them have true magical power, what's the reason for this topic?"

It was the final blow. "I thought it's obvious," answered Drilencu, "this is Defence against the Dark Arts - neither Care of Magical Creatures nor Defence against Black Magic ... Veela and Vampires are quite artful, and their power involves enough elements that can be counted as dark ... It will be our task to figure out if it's in us or in them."

* * *

The last milestone of the Giants project was scheduled after classes, still before supper. It shouldn't take long, the narrow time frame was barely enough, leaving the rest of the day for other duties. Ron in particular had insisted, this schedule would enable him to dedicate the full evening to his organization project which - in contrast to the Giants' O.W.L. - still held all the glamour of an adventure.

The milestone's agenda span just two items - delivering the completed papers of the first six sections, and deciding about the split of the last one. Keeping this speed, they would finish the last line until January.

At the beginning of the school year, an O.W.L. in store - even before the signing deadline was due - would have looked like a dream to Harry. Today, however, it felt more like a threat. What to do afterwards? Leisure time was great - unless your friends kept working like house-elves on their additional O.W.L.s.

"All right," said Ron, "papers completed? ... Fine. I think we can handle them like books, with a list who's hiring them out and so ... Here, I've prepared one."

He presented a parchment. "Is it okay to keep it in my office, together with the papers? ... Myrtle can be our librarian."

Harry stared. Ron the manager in full action, that was something new, and not entirely pleasant. He seemed to be alone with his feelings, Hermione looked appreciating.

"But ... somehow I thought we could read them any time," Harry said lamely.

"Nice idea," replied Ron, "only a little problem - where's the copier?"

Harry bit his lips. It had been a stupid thought, and Ron had made it clear to everybody without using a word of insult. Looking at him, he saw it hadn't come by accident.

"Talking about copiers," said Ron, "I wish we had something like that ... In those books, they seem like the absolute minimum of office equipment - and here?"

Hermione said thoughtfully, "There are magic copiers ..."

"Really? ... Tell me."

Ron's hand already held a pen, another detail which enervated Harry. Always ready, always the busy assistant ...

"Ask your bank first," said Hermione with a dismissing gesture. "They cost a fortune ... The original is hexed to make the ink iridescent, then they run it through a grid of ..."

"Forget it," interrupted Ron. "Hogwarts has no money for it." He looked around. "So it's okay with our papers in the office?"

They nodded.

"Then we come to the last part," announced Hermione.

To Harry, it seemed her satisfaction with Ron's business style hadn't lasted long. A milestone without Hermione doing at least half of the directing probably counted as a disaster, still more so after the unlucky episode in the Defence class.

Hermione took a parchment from her bag. "I have prepared a split in three parts - pretty balanced I'd say ... First cut after the break-off between Giants and wizards ... Second cut after the last year - which makes negotiations, contracts, and events since then the third part ... If you agree to my offer, we can settle it right now."

"Wouldn't it make us parasites?" asked Harry. "Using your work?" It came out without thinking, result of a hidden anger.

For a second, Hermione didn't understand, then she looked hurt.

Ron chuckled, "Can't be, Harry - we are no Veela ... By the way, are there male Veela? ... Must be - probably most of them in Bulgaria."

Hermione was close to tears. She grabbed the parchment, about to tear it apart. Suddenly, she threw it across the table. "You are *so funny*, you two ... I could roll over from laughing ... So this moustached gorilla has caught me giving a wrong answer, huh? Because that hollow-head Parvati provoked me ... Must have made your day ... All year long, you can blurt out the worst nonsense and nobody cares ... But woe me saying ..."

Her head fell on her hands, the face hidden.

Ron's expression showed consternation and guilt. Harry felt sick of shame. His stupid anger had spoiled the evening! He looked at the parchment.

Hermione, still head down, seized for her bag, held it ...

"Wait," said Harry.

Hermione's hand rested on the bag. She didn't move, didn't look up.

"I'm sorry. It was a stupid remark." He took the parchment, folded it. "Thanks for the structuring ... I'll do it alone."

An instant earlier, he hadn't known what to say or what to do. It had come as a reflex.

"You're mental?" Ron's hand waved through the air. "What about me? ... I mean, we did it ..."

"Save it," said Harry. "It's okay - I have my reasons ... At least," he added with a short grin, "it'll teach me a lesson - to leave stupid remarks to more qualified people."

Ron looked unsure, still not knowing why Harry had taken all the blame for himself, plus all the work.

Harry felt grateful for this, he had no intention ever to lift the secret. Although Hermione might know, considering the expression on her face, in which the eyes still were red. But this was okay too, she wouldn't tell Ron.

He felt better by the second. "That's it?" he asked. "Is the stone milled enough?"

Hermione's hand seized again for her bag, took it finally. "Yes," she said.

* * *

Supper was a quiet occasion, if only for Harry and his friends. They ate while enjoying the comfortable mood between them, listening to the other students' agitated discussion about the new teacher. Harry still could twist inwardly thinking how the meal would have been without him finding the proper solution. Keeping silence wasn't too bad, even better when the discussion shifted from the teacher to his new topics and their common background.

Hermione's voice interrupted his thoughts. "By the way, Harry - what's your opinion of our new Defence teacher?"

"Well ..." Harry weighed his words carefully.

"Frightened to burn your mouth again?" Hermione looked challenging. "Okay, I'll help you ... I think he's great."

"Really? It didn't seem so ..." Harry stopped.

"... in class," completed Hermione his sentence. "True - but only toward the end. Let's say it was my own mistake ... Otherwise, it was the most brilliant lesson I've heard in a long time."

"He knows what he's talking about," agreed Harry.

"Of course, nobody can compare against Lupin ..."

Harry nodded, then saw the grin spreading in Hermione's face. He flushed.

"I do share your feelings," said Hermione soothingly, "as far as it's possible for me ... I don't have your special experience with him - I only profited from it. And that's something I'll never forget ... him, I mean," she added before Harry could turn pink. "He gives you the feeling you can do everything ... and talk about everything, something Drilencu doesn't offer ... Although," now her grin was really malicious, "he's going to talk about everything by himself."

Harry gave no reply. In his opinion, some things could be discussed only with Fleur, a fact he would hide from Hermione even under torture. He welcomed the interruption from Ron who went for his office work.

They finished their meal with less haste, Harry being grateful when Hermione didn't stress the issue.

After supper, he fetched his papers and took them to Ron's office. Myrtle was as helpful as possible, which wasn't much - papers handed to her would simply fall to the floor. Hermione

had given him the list of books she had prepared, this seemed a good time to check through the library.

Passing the staircase to Dumbledore's rooms, Harry noticed a figure, then the figure waved at him. Looking up, his step broke abruptly. There stood Sirius - holding a finger at his lips.

"Harry - you're the one I was looking for ... Please keep quiet and come over."

Harry walked to him. Before he could do anything close to a hug, he was pulled upstairs.

At the landing with the Gargoyle, Sirius stopped. Turning, he extracted something from his pocket that looked like a black ribbon, or a thin shawl.

"Okay, Harry, nice to meet you ... Listen, Dumbledore sent me for you. He'd appreciate very much if you'd follow his invitation - and if you'd agree to the special precautions." Sirius held up the black thing. "I have to blindfold you."

"What??"

"Yes ... He has visitors who'd prefer not to be seen by you."

"Why? Who are they?"

When Sirius only held the thing without answering, Harry realized how thoughtful his question had been. "Baah ... okay, go ahead."

What a strange thing from Dumbledore, thought Harry while Sirius fastened the scarf around his head, leaving the ears free. He didn't like it much, he had agreed in the assumption that Dumbledore wouldn't have asked for something like that without good reason. And of course, this was the only way to find out more.

A hand grabbed his shoulder. Sirius' voice said, "Up we go."

Harry climbed stairs, recalling the memory of this path.

"Watch it - last step," said Sirius.

A knocking, Dumbledore's voice from inside, "Come in."

A hand pushed him forward, took his shoulder, steering him through the room. The hand stopped him, a chair touched the back of his knees. "Sit down, Harry."

He obeyed, grabbing for the chair first.

Dumbledore's voice spoke. "Thank you, Mr. Potter, for following this unusual invitation." The smile came through the voice. "It was certainly helpful to let Sirius make the request."

Harry nodded, then forced himself to overcome the odd feeling of talking blindfolded. "Er - yes, Professor Dumbledore."

"Harry, my next request is even more unusual."

Dumbledore changing to his first name - this reminded him of the meeting in the summer break, and why the Headmaster ...

"Our visitors asked me for a detailed report of the events that resulted in Voldemort coming to full life again ... I have followed this demand as much as possible. For the critical evening, however ..." Dumbledore's voice hesitated, "you are the most qualified witness."

Dumbledore paused. Harry suppressed the urge to check his ears. The message was clear enough - Dumbledore asked him to talk about this evening again!

"Please believe me, Harry, I know what I'm asking you ... All I can say is, I have good reason, and I hope you trust my judgment."

Which visitors might ask for that? Harry felt at a loss to come up with the slightest idea. Other wizards? - Certainly not, they would be satisfied with Dumbledore's own description. If Dumbledore asked for so much, these visitors had to be very important. Maybe - probably, some more allies. Ready to help, but not satisfied with Dumbledore's words only. Or just curious to hear the story from himself. They could watch him, while he couldn't see them.

A memory came up, something Mr. Weasley had said. "Professor Dumbledore, I trust you ... and basically I'm ready to tell the story - but not blindfolded."

"Harry," came Dumbledore's voice, "it would make things a lot easier ... Why not?"

"An advice from Mr. Weasley. *Never trust anything that can think for itself, if you can't see where it keeps its brain ...* I can't see anything."

A pause, then Dumbledore's voice. "Gentlemen, I respect Mr. Potters view - or the lack of it, and I feel the implicit obligation in safe hands ... What about you?"

A low murmur, unintelligible, strangely familiar.

Dumbledore's voice, "Very good ... Sirius?"

A hand at his head, stripping off the scarf.

Harry blinked, adjusting his eyes to the light. What he saw first was Dumbledore, sitting at the table, inviting Harry to look around.

He did. Goblins!!

"These gentlemen," said the Headmaster, "are representatives of a ... movement in the Goblin Federation. This movement is willing to ally with us against the Dark Forces."

Dumbledore gave Harry time to take the news before he continued, "It won't surprise you to learn that secrecy is most imperative in this matter ... Now you see, and now you know ... Harry, this is strictly confidential until told otherwise. Nobody - must - know - about - it ... The price of confidence."

Harry nodded, swallowed.

Another secret to hide. Hopefully, routine would do it. Had Dumbledore trapped him? - In a way, yes ... No, he hadn't. He had tried to hold the knowledge off him, had warned him. Dumbledore wasn't the man to warn twice. Harry had insisted, and Dumbledore had treated him like a reasonable adult. The second one today. Why did it feel like betrayal to be treated like an adult?

"Please begin with the portkey in the maze," said the Headmaster.

Harry started to speak. He had told the story not long ago, it was helpful in presenting an orderly report.

His audience were six Goblins of different ages, sitting nearly motionless. They watched him, studied him.

His mind had time to study them in reverse. Leathery faces, one of them clearly older than the others, the Goblin equivalent of Dumbledore but beardless, the long fingers calmly on the table in front of him.

Coming to the final, Harry's focus retreated to the pictures in his memory. Involuntarily, his voice echoed the emotions, gained speed while his speech became more chopped. "... ran to the portkey. The others were hunting me ... Voldemort cried to stun me ... 'Only stun, *He's mine,*' he called ... I slowed some with a spell. Then I called the portkey and took Ced ... Cedric's corpse and came back ... That's it."

He looked at his feet, exhaling.

"Mr. Potter."

It was the old Goblin. "We are in your debt for your cooperation, and we'll find a way to express our thanks properly ... Be assured, your contribution to our meeting here is kept as confidential as anything else of this evening."

The old face moved. Goblins were difficult to read, Harry couldn't make out much, at least it didn't look like disappointment.

The Goblin spoke again. "It was a wise man who gave you that advice ... We feel respect for your principles. We feel satisfied with the decisions, yours and ours."

It sounded like a good-bye. Harry stood up and did the only thing that felt right - he bowed, then turned to Dumbledore, who nodded and indicated Sirius to escort him out.

Down the staircase, Harry tried to squeeze Sirius a little more. He didn't learn anything he couldn't have guessed himself.

"I'm Dumbledore's agent in this business," said Sirius, "that's all I can tell you ... Harry - I'm sorry you're so deeply involved that you cannot talk with anyone but me - and I'll be off and away this evening."

He interrupted Harry's protest. "No - I have to go upstairs. And listen - you haven't seen me, right?"

Harry nodded. "At least I can talk with you - when we'll find time."

Sirius disappeared upstairs.

After the encounter, the idea of working on the Giants' O.W.L. felt ridiculous to Harry, too much kept whirling through his mind. It seemed a little early for his dormitory, maybe he could check the library for some books about Goblins.

He considered what that old guy had said, about expressing their thanks. What could it mean? - With Goblins, probably money, that was more likely than a large box of sweets ... Wouldn't hurt, although he couldn't do anything with it here, certainly not playing generous, the source of the money was part of the secret.

He felt like a spy. Had Snape earned money? - Maybe it would be just a letter with some weird Goblin diploma, or the Order of the Purple Vault or something like that. And he couldn't talk about it. Suddenly he felt like the twins after Ron had been appointed Prefect.

* * *

Some days later, on his way to the lunch table, Harry passed Ron's office. Glancing in, he saw Ron talking with a man. When Ron looked up, the man turned and, seeing him, smiled broadly.

"Harry!" It was Bill Weasley.

"Bill - that's a surprise!"

They shook hands. "Let's go get some lunch," said Bill. "Ron's too busy."

They walked toward the hall. "What's brought you over here?" asked Harry.

"My job, what else? ... I'm helping Dumbledore with some money business."

Bill worked for Gringotts. Of course, Gringotts was a bank. Run by Goblins.

"Money, huh? ... Because Dumbledore can't do it alone."

Bill's look met Harry's eyes. Without smiling, he said, "Yes, Harry. Money. That's why I'm here, and that's why I might come more often ... Right?"

"Yeah, got it ... What else - with lots of parchments and so."

"Exactly." Bill was smiling again. "You got it right to the spot ... So after this is out of the way, how are you doing, Harry?"

"Meeting people - all kinds of."

"Strange, isn't it? ... On a place as far off as Hogwarts." Bill hadn't asked which people. So he knew, although not from Ron.

They reached the Gryffindor table.

"That's Ron," announced Harry. "The office job is ageing him more than you'd expect."

A few students looked perplexed - no doubt, this was a Weasley. The twins hurried to provide a proper introduction, then asked why Bill had come.

"Money business," answered Bill, giving the twins the opportunity to tell everybody about Bill's job at Gringotts, and that he was the only family member in decent distance to some fortunes - without finding enough family sense to let them benefit ... Nobody thought it unusual finding Bill here.

Ron didn't even come for a few bites. They talked about Hogwarts, about life in other places.

Fleur strolled by. "Salu, 'arry ... 'as Ron given up eating?" She looked at Bill occupying Ron's place.

"Hi, Fleur ... Bill, Fleur Delacour is our Liaison Officer with Beauxbatons ... Fleur, Bill Weasley is the oldest of the Weasley gang."

"We saw each other last year," said Fleur.

"Yes," said Bill.

Fleur found a place at the table, right next to Bill. She asked him why he was here, he answered, than asked her about her job, she explained, and they were lost in a conversation that excluded all people around.

Harry watched, feeling admiration. He remembered their glances toward each other at the Weasleys' visit, felt amazed at how easily some people could walk to a table, sit down, and start talking and laughing and looking great.

They didn't need him, so he decided to take some left-overs to Ron, feeling pleased at the thought of Fleur and Bill.

Coming to the office, he found Ron talking with Viktor. Both looked worried.

Harry placed the dish at the table. "Here, some food for you ... Something wrong?"

"The pre-lunch patrol is late - more than late ... Viktor's going to trace back their route."

Harry checked times. How long had they been lunching? Twenty minutes? "Which route?"

"Normal," replied Ron. "Giants - Dragons - back."

"I'll fetch Cho." Harry turned. "Viktor - if you're going to scan counter-clockwise, we'll do the same from the other side ... Okay?"

Viktor nodded, already leaving.

Ron looked at Harry, nodded. "Be careful ... Maybe I should ask Dumbledore first, but ... It's cold outside."

Harry stormed back. Reaching the hall, he saw Cho still sitting at the Ravenclaw table, talking with Almyra. He walked, close to running.

Cho looked up, saw him coming over. When he reached the table, she was already up.

"Cho, Almyra, hi ... The patrol's late. Viktor's scanning back their route. I said we'd do the other direction ... Okay?"

Cho didn't lose time. "See you outside."

She went to get her coat and broomstick. Harry did the same.

They flew at medium speed in the direction of the Giants' camp, scanning the ground with their eyes.

At first, Harry had tried to use his Firebolt's superior speed for serpentines along the main course, to cover a wider track to both sides. It didn't work, he realized immediately how this technique narrowed his viewing angle down to single spots, a race flyer couldn't watch the landscape.

Now, they kept a side offset as wide as the distance between them, Harry in front. Empty soil, leafless trees and bushes didn't make it too difficult at this time of day, with a milky sun hanging behind a haze of clouds. There was nothing that looked like a squad member.

They reached the camp in which, over the months, wooden huts had replaced the former tents. Harry swerved down to Hagrid's spot, bolted, and jumped to the ground.

"HAGRID!" He hammered at the door.

Nothing.

He called again, listened. Trying the handle, the door opened. Inside, Hagrid's large figure was coming up from a bedplace of woodwork and stray.

"Harry!" Hagrid yawned. "Yeh doin' here? Yer' scarin' the craws with that racket of yeh's." He scratched his hair, stretching.

"We're looking for our patrol ... the one before lunch. Did they pass by?"

"Dunno. Bin sleepin'."

The full meaning made its way into Hagrid's sleepy mind. "What ..."

But Harry was already storming out. He checked around, looking for the hut of the chief Giant. All he knew about him was his name - Lleyrin the Fist. The thought of talking with a Giant made his mouth a bit dry, only he had no choice, not with Hagrid being just too slow in a situation like this. He took his Firebolt and started to walk.

Almost having reached the next hut, he recognized Cho coming around the corner. "They've been here," she said, pointed backward. "I asked Lleyrin, and he asked someone else, and yes, he has seen them."

Cho's face showed nothing but concentration. Small as she was, talking with huge figures seemed to be a life-long habit, in which a Giant just marked the top of the range.

"Forward," she said, mounting her Comet.

They jumped into the air, circled cross-wise round the camp, and followed the course toward the dragons' nests. This area contained more trees, they slowed down to find enough time for scanning without a stop in mid-air.

Passing the top of a small rising, Harry saw a black dot in the distance ahead. The dot grew to a comma, then the comma glittered in the sunlight. A broomstick flyer - drawing a circle in the air. Coming closer, they recognized Viktor.

Then Viktor had seen them, pushed his own Firebolt. Next moment, he was there, stopped. "I haff found them ... They're lying on the ground."

"What's with them?" asked Harry. Lying on the ground didn't sound good.

"I don't know ... Alone, I didn't want to be caught in the same trap." Viktor gestured. "Listen. We fly over. I go down, you watch. *Stay in the air* ... If something gets me, you two go and tell Dumbledore - *Don't come down* ... If I waff, Cho comes down. Harry, you - stay - away ... Okay?"

Harry said, "Let me ..."

"NO!" shouted Viktor. "You haff the faster broomstick, and this is a command ... Know what this is? - Go!!"

With a side-fall movement, Viktor turned and sped up.

They followed.

Viktor let them close in, then pointed downward. "See?"

A group of trees, at their feet, a lumpy shape. The shape divided into two.

Viktor called, "Wait!" and dived down.

Harry watched him reaching the spot, stopping, checking around. Viktor dismounted, walked to the shapes, knelt. Bent over them, came up again, turned, held an arm upward, thumb up. So they were alive.

Viktor waved toward Cho.

She swerved down and reached him. Harry saw her doing much the same as Viktor before. They talked. Cho nestled with her coat, the movement of a wizard getting a wand ready. Viktor held her, shook his head. They talked more.

Cho mounted her broomstick, jumped up, reached Harry. "They are alive - they don't look hurt, but unconscious ... Viktor doesn't want anyone but Dumbledore or Pomfrey to try on them."

She pointed. "Viktor stays with them. I'm going to call Lleyrin with two Giants, to carry those two back to Hogwarts ... You go and tell Ron and Dumbledore."

Cho was about to push forward.

"Who are they?" asked Harry, pointing down to the scene on the ground.

"The Hufflepuff Beaters," answered Cho. "Now GET LOST!" She pushed her Comet and flew off.

Harry did as told.

It was probably the first time flying something like patrol at the full speed of his Firebolt. The cold air drove tears in his eyes and wiped them off immediately. He checked landmarks, holding the approximate direction to the school.

Reaching Hogwarts' surroundings, he saw his course would pass left. Bending rightward, he corrected in a wide curve at full speed. The buildings appeared, figures at the entrance. He shot down, aiming point blank. Seconds before he bolted, doing it at the very last moment, some figures quickly stepped aside, others waiting calmly.

Stopping, he realized those who hadn't moved were other squad members.

"We've found them! ... They are alive." He raced upstairs.

Ron waited in the office, Dumbledore with him, also Flitwick, the Hufflepuff Headmaster.

Harry gave them the news.

Hearing about the missing squad members alive had a calming effect, their eyes lost some worry.

"Good," said Dumbledore. "Harry, please tell Madam Pomfrey to get prepared. Afterwards in class, please tell the teacher Ron's kept with me." To Ron, he said, "I'm downstairs."

Harry reached the hospital. Madam Pomfrey asked for details, he told her what he knew - alive, unconscious, no visible wounds.

"So the cooling-out won't be too bad," muttered the witch and started to prepare for their arrival.

Checking the time, Harry saw the first afternoon class was due. What a mess, he wouldn't be able to see the Giants arrive.

Charms was first. The class awaited Professor Flitwick - only the one appearing instead was Professor McGonagall.

She announced the Charms teacher was busy, then informed the class about the current state of events. "Trying to do a normal Charms lesson would be a lost effort," she said, "so let's take the opportunity and do a cross-over lesson."

She paused to wait for the most of attention she would get. "Our topic is, how to transport living bodies?"

The class was delighted - until McGonagall asked for volunteers to be moved through the air with spells of the other students. As long as the spells had been her own, everybody had wanted an air ride along the floor. But when Hermione got ready for her first try and McGonagall looked around, all students kept busy with their parchments.

"Mr. Potter," called McGonagall, "what about you?" She came closer to a grin than Harry had thought possible. "This is the time to show true friendship."

"All right," sighed Harry, "I'll do it."

The class breathed relief.

"But only for her."

Hermione beamed, the rest of the class groaned.

What an odd feeling ... The best that could be said, Hermione didn't let him bump - in contrast to the unlucky victims of other students' attempts.

Neville wasn't able to do his turn; not that he wasn't willing, however nobody could be talked into serving as his test object. McGonagall offered ten points for Gryffindor - nothing. Harry came to the conclusion Viktor's choice of transportation had been the best they could find.

Ron joined them afterwards. He reported that the Giants had arrived - "You should have seen them move!" - and that the two Hufflepuffs now were under treatment of Dumbledore and Pomfrey together. Patrol duty was stopped until they would know more.

In Defence against the Dark Arts, Harry found it difficult to concentrate. While Drilencu spoke about Veela origins, his thoughts drifted off to the memory of the figures in the ground, speculations what might have happened to them, and what the impact might be toward the Flying Squad.

At one point, Hermione elbowed him. Paying attention, Harry heard Drilencu talk about male Veela. They existed of course, but they didn't have this specific power. It was the only detail Harry remembered of the lesson.

At supper, waiting at the Gryffindor table for the food, Harry watched Ron enter the hall and pass along the tables, talking with squad members. Then he reached their own table. "Squad meeting afterwards," he announced.

Hardly aware of what he was eating, Harry had trouble tempering his impatience. He ate quickly, trying to slow down when he realized the meeting wouldn't start until *all* students had finished - and all teachers. It was unbelievable how slowly they spooned, Dumbledore among the slowest. He tried to squeeze Ron.

"Save it, Harry," was the answer. "I don't know much more than you. In a few minutes, we'll hear all of it."

"Then tell me the bit you know."

"You may not believe it, Harry, but I'm hungry!" Ron was chewing again.

Eons passed.

Harry looked at the Ravenclaw table, Cho was eating. Where did she stuff all that food? He checked the Hufflepuff table, the two Beaters weren't there. So they were still in Madam Pomfrey's hands. What did it mean? Hopefully just recovering from the exposure to the cold. Where they awake, or had they been awake? Probably, the meeting announcement seemed to confirm it.

Right now, Ron went for another helping. How could one be so greedy? Just what you'd expect from office people. The first students were leaving, thank God for small favours. His own cup was empty again - did the juice evaporate?

Eventually the hall cleared. Quite a few students tried to share the meeting, only to be driven off with polite words from Dumbledore and more rude pushes from their own housemates.

Ron, of course, was the exception, he had joined Dumbledore and Viktor at the teacher's table, prepared with parchment and pen. The squad teams sat together, it was the first time Harry sat on the Ravenclaw table. Then Myrtle appeared and took the seat next to Ron.

Dumbledore stood up. "My dear squad members, let me tell you first there's nothing confidential in what you'll hear. So you can spread the news afterwards - provided you'll be quicker than the owners of all those ears around." His gaze passed the corners and exits. "This meeting is members only just for the proper atmosphere - and in honour of your service."

The Headmaster looked at the Hufflepuff table. "Our two victims are in good health, that's the most important news ... They will be back tomorrow morning, Madam Pomfrey wants to make sure the loss of body heat won't leave any permanent damage."

A murmur of satisfaction ran through the squad.

Dumbledore waited until their attention was back. "Let me tell you - in the proper sequence - what happened ... The two were caught in a trap that was as simple as efficient. The first of them saw a body lying on the ground. He went down to examine it. The other came down to help him. Next they were both stunned by hidden wizards - maybe under an Invisibility Cloak."

Harry twisted, but Cho at his side didn't notice. Ron didn't look at him.

"... been treated with Veritaserum and then interrogated. The questions were about our internal organization, about the Durmstrang people, and about specific persons."

Harry felt Cho's glance at him.

"Then they were stunned again, lying in the cold ... Thanks to the rescue operation that was triggered in time by Mr. Weasley, and thanks to the clear minds of the rescuers led by Mr. Krum, they could be saved before suffering a serious freeze."

Harry, like the other squad members, contemplated how efficiently the Dark Forces had performed their attack. Without setting a foot into the fortress Hogwarts, they had spied it out from top to bottom.

"Before I come to the conclusions," continued Dumbledore, "let me add some more news we've gathered recently ... They may not be directly related to the events today, but they are important to understand the consequences we'll take ... This information comes from reliable sources, something like an espionage network of our side."

Harry barely managed to suppress a gasp. Of course - the Goblins! Doing the money business in the entire wizarding world, they represented the perfect spies.

Cho had sensed his stirring, she was looking at him, then turned back to listen.

"Aside from his global goal to establish the dark power all over the world, Voldemort has three specific targets," explained Dumbledore. "The first is Hogwarts in general and my own person in particular." He smiled. "This is our least worry. Currently, Hogwarts is truly a fortress which not only protects its inhabitants but also holds the role of the central counter power ... We'll make sure to keep it that way."

Sounds of agreement went through the seats. Myrtle beamed, being part of a counter power was better than anything she had dreamed of.

"The second target is Professor Snape ... He is living proof that it's possible to join the Dark Forces - to detect and correct this mistake - and to damage their strategy successfully."

Dumbledore paused until the murmuring faded.

"Obviously, they could reconstruct that it has been his work which enabled us to defeat them so triumphantly at the Hogwarts Express."

Some heads were turning toward Harry.

A hand grabbed his and pressed it, Cho's hand.

Harry pressed back, looking steadily at Dumbledore.

"Professor Snape knows about this - it's nothing new to him, and it doesn't hurt his good sleep ... What's important in this matter," Dumbledore's voice rose over another murmur, "Voldemort has made it clear to every Death-Eater he wants him alive - so Snape's immediate risk is that of being abducted ... Still, as he asked me to tell you, he does sleep well."

Shouts of "Yes" and "Bravo" came from several places. Looking up, Harry saw the applause was mostly raised by Slytherins.

"The third target has much in common with the second - it's nothing new, it's another living proof of some defeats, and Voldemort himself wants him alive." Others were already looking at Harry when Dumbledore said, "His name is Harry Potter."

Much in common with Snape - what a strange idea, thought Harry while waiting patiently until everybody's attention had turned back to the speaker.

"Which are the conclusions we have to take from this?" asked Dumbledore and started to answer himself "First - we have seen our control organization perform successfully in the first serious test ... The missing patrol was rescued."

Ron flushed, Myrtle silvered, the others applauded enthusiastically.

"The same cannot be said about the discipline in the squad teams," interrupted Dumbledore in a sharp voice. "May nobody think he or she wouldn't have fallen to the same trap!"

Silence fell over the squad. Inwardly, Harry agreed, the trick had been very clever.

"But the same accident also has given us an example how patrols should work," said Dumbledore, "and what we have to do ... Remember, the rescue party also found bodies lying on the ground. The sample tells us that we need some reorganization, plus some training."

Harry recalled the scene in the early afternoon, him in the air, Viktor and Cho on the ground. It would mean ...

"A patrol team needs three people," confirmed Dumbledore his thought. "We will restructure the squad into triple teams, and Mr. Krum will let you train the proper handling of events like today ... The training will be finished with some tests."

Dumbledore was right, thought Harry. Their action today would have been impossible with only two members ... Whom should they ask, he and Cho? ... Twenty-eight squad members in triple teams, that didn't fit. One would be left ...

With cold shock, Harry saw Dumbledore looking at him.

"The third and last conclusion is that Mr. Potter's exposure as a flying squad member is too much risk ... Taking him out leaves twenty-seven members - in other words, nine teams ... Mr. Krum expects you to organize yourself until ..."

"NO!" Harry heard his own voice shout.

Viktor spoke for the first time. "Harry, it's true ... Remember, I'm the only one that can follow you at full speed - nobody else has a Firebolt."

"But if that's an argument, everybody else is more at risk than me!"

"Nobody else is a wanted person," replied Dumbledore, "that's the difference ... Mr. Potter, please see me in my office after this meeting."

Harry closed his mouth. Dumbledore's voice had been sharp. He looked around, suddenly all heads were turning the other way, with one exception, Cho.

"I'm sorry, Harry," she said.

Harry couldn't remember any detail of the rest. Viktor talked about training, squad members discussed team grouping, Cho was busy joining a team. His eyes were burning, Ron looked at him in sympathy.

Some time later, a voice said, "Harry, please come with me." It was Dumbledore.

Walking to the office, Harry awakened enough from his stupefaction to prepare some arguments, the most important of them that he wanted to be the master of his own life, and if it would be a short one, then ...

Dumbledore's first words killed the discussion at the spot. "Harry, I'm truly sorry ... I know what you are going to say, and for your personal risk alone, I might even agree with you - although I might be the only one."

Dumbledore smiled, not finding an echo in Harry's face. "I know what the squad means to you ... But I have no choice."

Dumbledore waited until Harry looked up. "You are the only one who knows about our espionage network. We - cannot - risk - you - being - interrogated. Once the secret has spilled through other channels, we might discuss the issue again. Until then, no."

In his dormitory, Harry had to fight waves of hate. These stupid Goblins, why had they needed his story? His stupid self, why couldn't he just sit there and tell it blindfolded? The damned Hufflepuff Beaters had been too stupid to follow the rule. Cho had just walked off to search herself a team. But Cho couldn't be stupid.

Who was to blame then? The Death-Eaters. Cornelius Fudge, the bloody fool who hadn't been able to believe the testimony of a fifteen-year old against wizards like Malfoy. Which was proof that he was the most stupid of all, because even the Goblins had no doubt he was telling the truth ... They believed him ... risked their lives out there ... and hadn't hesitated to make him know. Why not, he could stand Voldemort's Imperius Curse ... well, yes, but not Veritaserum, nobody could that ... Really nobody?

What would be the look at Snape's face if he came and said *Professor, you promised me Veritaserum, here I am* ... What a nonsense, he couldn't think clearly. He, the insufferable want-to-know.

What had Cho said, it was the curiosity that killed the cat? Wrong ... it was the curiosity that spilled the squad! Ha, that was good, could have been Ron's comment. After all, he, Harry, was at least good for stupid gimmicks. He should join Ron ... except that Ron could use him in the office like Cornish Pixies in the kitchen ... A nice idea actually, to buzz around and trash everything to pieces ... maybe ...

Sleep came.

12 - The Present for the Future

The day after promised a nightmare come true. On the evening before, being excluded from the squad had been a bad dream, today it grew to reality.

No, said Ron at breakfast, he wasn't excluded, he was only suspended from flight service.

"That's comforting," snorted Harry, "I can do Keeper of Broomsticks ... Wait - just let me get my kit, then I can start polishing them."

Ron didn't answer, which was for the better, as long as Harry felt like hitting the next best face. Ron didn't ask him for help in the office either.

When Hermione heard the news, she wanted to know every detail. It was Ron who had to explain, Harry found himself dangerously close to the point of shouting *Because I know too much about Goblins* through the hall.

Hermione asked what Dumbledore had in mind for their vacation, whether Harry had to stay in Hogwarts, then said at least Harry would get rid of the Dursleys.

Harry suppressed another remark. This catastrophe wasn't Hermione's fault, the day would hardly grow better with her being mad at him too.

The other Gryffindor squad members came to console him, actually with some success. When they asked what they could do for him, he found the strength to say, "Do me a favour - don't pity me ... If there's something worse than this mess, it's listening to Fred and George playing polite."

They laughed. Fred said, "Harry, we'll ask Mum to adopt you. With you, we're better off than with our own brother."

Even Harry could manage a smile.

George said, "Know what, Harry - we'll catch a Dementor for you, just to take it out."

The laughter of the others was a little shaky.

Katie and Alicia came over. Katie said, "Harry, can you imagine - Angelina turned us down when we asked her in our team. And guess why?"

Harry looked at Angelina whose face was a little darker than usual. Why wouldn't she ... of course! "Must have to do with your long-standing prejudice against Blacks," he said, grinning wryly.

"True," replied Katie, "but this wasn't enough."

"After all these years, she got bored of you."

"It's amazing, Harry, how good you understand Angelina's feelings." Katie smiled archly. "But even that wasn't enough ... You have one guess left. To help you - stay with 'B'."

"'B' ... hmmm," faked Harry, "what else with 'B'?" He made astonished eyes. "It couldn't be Bob, could it?"

"Bingo," shouted Alicia. "And now guess who's joined us instead ... It's not far away from 'B'."

B ... C ... This time, Harry's astonishment wasn't faked. He glanced over to the Ravenclaw table, then back at Alicia. "Cho? But ..."

"Hit at first guess!" Alicia smiled proudly. "We're the only girls' team in the squad."

Watching Harry's face, which had lost the joy and again showed all his misery, she put a hand at his shoulder. "We'll take care of her, Harry."

Classes did little to improve Harry's mood. The only scene that caught his attention was in Potions, a double with Slytherins and Gryffindors together. They were working at sleeping drinks. The basic recipe was simple, now Snape tried to teach them a proper scaling for the various levels of sleeplessness or pain, also for various periods of sleep.

The students behaved attentive and obedient to a degree unprecedented in Potions. They watched Snape with a look in their eyes that made him finally stop to ask, "What's wrong with me?" Snape touched his head. "Did I grow a third ear?"

A Slytherin answered. "No, sir ... You look normal."

"But you don't," replied Snape. "To me it feels as if today I could say, *Jump out of the window*, and you would - even deep in this dungeon."

Hesitantly, the same student confessed they had heard about him and Voldemort and the Dark Forces, and how ...

"I feel flattered," answered Snape, not changing his expression, then pointed toward the writing at the blackboard. "You must know, I drink this stuff a gallon a day. That should bring your respect back to normal."

It earned smiles even from the Gryffindors. Nobody believed him.

"All right then," sighed Snape, "I'll give you a serious statement, because I don't think I could stand this kind of attention for long."

Faces looked guilty but still full of admiration.

"With Voldemort out there," Snape pointed over his shoulder, "*every* wizard who stands against him is at risk. I'm special only because he wants me now - for reasons in the past rather than in the future."

Snape's fingers patted the desk. "But I'm here in Hogwarts - that makes me safer than anybody outside ... Once I made a wrong decision, later I made the right decision - in contrast to poor Karkaroff." His face tightened for an instant.

"Anyway, I'm in good company - in more than one sense." Snape's glance passed Harry. Before more heads could turn, the teacher finished, "And now let's get back to healthier matters, if you please."

After lunch, the two Hufflepuff Beaters came to Harry. They wanted to thank him for his part in their rescuing. He tried to wave them off.

"But it's our mistake that you ... you know, the squad ..."

"Don't be silly," replied Harry sharply. "That's nonsense, and you know it."

They looked unhappy. It was enervating, more so because what they said was exactly what Harry felt.

"Listen," he sighed. "yesterday evening I was thinking just the same ... I thought, those bloody Hufflepuffs, and your ears should have rung. I could have kicked you from here to Hogsmeade ... But that's only because I looked for someone to blame." He managed a smile. "Honestly - I would have been caught in the same trap."

"No, I don't think so," said the other.

"Yes, I would." Harry aimed with his leg. "Now get lost before I really kick you."

They strolled away, looking happier than before.

Harry lips curled. Hufflepuffs weren't his thing, especially not today. The two reminded him of Justin Finch-Fletchley.

"Harry?"

It was Cho. "I just watched your thankful visitors ... Could you make them feel better?"

"Yeah, probably." He grimaced.

Cho laughed. They walked away from the others.

"Let me ask you a stupid question," said Cho. "How are you doing?"

Watching his face, she stopped waiting for a reply, "Okay - that's answer enough."

Harry steadied himself. "Katie and Alicia told me about your teaming with them."

"Yes." Cho grinned. "An unexpected opportunity. They asked me, and I accepted gladly ... I'm sure they'll be great teammates - the best I could get." It was added after another look into Harry's face.

Harry nodded, sighed.

"It's also good to improve the bad relations between Ravenclaw and Gryffindor."

"What??" Harry looked perplexed.

"Yes, didn't you know? ... Gryffindors can visit Slytherin, but Ravenclaw? No - they don't even find their way to our table ... Now I've found a reason to come over to yours."

Harry blushed.

Cho touched his arm. "I see, it's the wrong time for jokes. And the wrong ... Anyway, at least there's one thing better than before - you're safe here."

Harry's head jerked up. "Safe, safe ... For my own safety, it would ..." He stopped, barely avoiding the mistake.

"It would what?" Cho studied him.

"Nothing ... It was nonsense what I thought."

"Yeah, quite a habit of yours."

After a pause, Cho said, "I was wondering where Dumbledore got this information from."

Harry tried to keep his face steady, failed.

After a moment, Cho nodded. "I knew it."

He tried to save the lost. "Knew what?"

"Never mind." Only she couldn't resist herself. "Something didn't fit ... It's nothing new that you ... And suddenly Dumbledore cannot take the risk any longer, after he's sent you against ..."

Her voice calmed down. "If I ever get bored of flying, Harry, I'll come and squeeze you a little - then Dumbledore will have to keep me inside too." Her smile was sad. "But don't hold your breath waiting for it ... See you."

The afternoon did not leave the slightest trace in Harry's memory. He pondered what Cho had said, fighting the temptation to go and tell her. The thought how Dumbledore would look at him, after having trusted him so much, was the first thing that felt worse than the status quo.

After all the adventures, and after all the occasions at which Dumbledore - openly or secretly - had encouraged him to do something, it was a totally new experience to be trusted for *not doing* something. He longed to talk with Sirius. Not that Sirius would tell him any details ... actually he didn't want to know. He just needed someone he could talk with openly.

What felt worse? To be suspended from the squad service, or to be suspended for reasons that couldn't be joked at - by Ron, or himself, or the twins? The question seemed quite hypothetical, considering how impossible it was to change either.

During supper, the new squad organization and the planned training were still the subject of conversation - the others' conversation, not Harry's. Without patrols to check, Ron wasn't late, showed none of his usual hurry.

The twins's choice for the third teammate had been Lee, of course. They entertained the table with the promise their team would - after a quick test under Viktor's eyes - be counted as trainers rather than trainees.

"Hey, Harry," called Fred, "you could train them too."

The remark made Harry's stomach hurt.

George, watching him, turned to his brother. "Fred, you got it wrong ... What Harry meant this morning was it would be okay to stab him - he didn't say you should turn the knife in the wound."

Fred did a good imitation of dismay and guilt. "Sorry, Harry - my mistake ... You know, the habit of air troops toward ground staff."

"Yes, Fred," said George, "that's much better."

Harry couldn't muster a good reply. Ron looked worried, listening to apparent cruelties, but the twins were right, the sooner he got used to it the better.

After the meal, Bob came over to the Gryffindor table. He was greeted with remarks from Katie and Alicia, complaining about insidious Slytherins leading naive Chaser girls the wrong track, and how they had always known this warming up between the houses would do no good. They grouped around a beaming Angelina, as if to protect her against him.

"Be warned," said Bob. "Slytherins aren't nice if something stands in their way."

"Ha," shouted Alicia, "dare you! ... Nothing will hold us from saving that poor girl."

Bob held his hands like claws. "Not even tickling?"

With shrieks, they jumped aside.

Harry watched the scene with more jealousy than amusement. Bob had it all, and he, Harry, had been the one to open the doors.

After a while, Bob looked at him, then came over to his place. "Hi, Harry ... Hurts like hell, doesn't it?"

"Is it that obvious?"

"Even if not - I'm the one to know, remember? ... It may take a while - in my case, at least it earned me a Nimbus Two-Thousand-and-One." His voice was matter-of-fact, lacking pity.

Harry tried a joke. "I may look bad, but I won't fall as deep as that."

Bob smiled. "It's always a matter of perspective ... Harry - today, you hate it ... Tomorrow - " he paused for better effect, "you'll really hate it."

"That's awfully good to know."

"No, it's not." Bob slapped his shoulder. "It's only true."

Harry took his parchments and went to the library. He would work at the last Giants paper.

The total break between Giants and wizards, first cut according to Hermione's structure, showed parallels to his own situation. The wizards had isolated the Giants completely, claiming it were for their own good. The Giants didn't need the wizards in any regard, so the new rules failed to establish a real disadvantage. The reasons, however, and the verdicts against trespassing wizard areas were considered the worst insult. Wizards protecting Giants - ridiculous. In a way, the recent events gave proof the opposite was a more realistic view.

The work made unexpectedly good progress. For the first time after yesterday's meeting, Harry's mind was free of those horrible black clouds. He didn't think about the squad for a second, or so it seemed. Except that, after reading about the years of separation, suddenly he was sure. He wouldn't accept this state.

He had no idea how, or when, only this vision - he had to find a way back into the squad, without breaking his promise toward Dumbledore.

* * *

Saturday morning brought the next severe test of Harry's nerves. Viktor had scheduled squad training for as long as there would be daylight, plus a little more.

During breakfast, squad members at all tables chatted excitedly about the exercises ahead. It would be a lot of fun, playing victims and rescuers, bandits and patrols, and it would take them back onto their broomsticks. Patrol *exams* were planned for the next day, after that, the modified patrol service would start again - with nine triple teams.

Nourishing an ill-humoured mood, Harry sat at the table. The more he watched and listened, the more his meanness grew, yet he wasn't able to get off.

Ron had all the time of the world, with the ease of someone who can watch other people work at something he'd done already, or will do but not before the day after tomorrow.

Hermione also kept idling around, it didn't improve things that Harry felt pretty sure she stayed only to play buffer between him and the others, or to sacrifice herself by receiving his angry remarks.

"Don't look at me so pitiful," he muttered.

"I don't," she said, her expression not changing at all.

"Hey, Fred," shouted Harry, "please do me a favour - tell me something bad, so I can give you a good one on your nose."

"Sorry, Harry," came the reply without hesitation, "no time ... Some people have to do squad training."

The squad members were leaving.

In the uproar, Harry failed to notice the owl until it appeared right in front of him. A beautiful animal it was, at least as large as Hedwig, a shimmering capsule at its left foot. There was no question, the owl post was for him.

"A letter?? ... From whom?"

Watched by Ron and Hermione, Harry took the capsule. The owl spread its wings and left without waiting for a refreshment.

Harry tried to guess a sender. Sirius was the only one that came to mind, except he couldn't connect Sirius with the majestic owl. It had looked somehow official.

For a bad instant, Harry expected a letter from the Ministry of Defense about his unlawful magic in Privet Drive. Then he remembered how many weeks had passed since then. There was a way to find out more. He opened the letter.

Dear sir,
in the course of executing a Trusted Order, I have the great pleasure to inform you that you are entitled to a Goblins Request of the 'Privileged' category, to be executed at your command at any time and by any Gringotts residence. As our client has assured, you are well aware of the reasons, which saves us from the need to describe them hereinafter.
The respective document has been deposited in your vault, with a copy in the Gringotts Archive. We expect your claim whenever you feel it suitable. Until then, we would be most pleased to be of assistance in your decision.
Yours sincerely,
Modragh Morony, Managing Director

Harry didn't understand a thing. The letter showed the Gringotts' emblem, a location wasn't specified. As he remembered from Ron's droning about organization techniques, this would indicate the letter came from the Gringotts' headquarters. As if he knew where Gringotts had its headquarters. He read the letter again.

"What is it?" It was Ron's question.

"From Gringotts," replied Harry. "I'm still trying to figure out what they're talking about."

"From your bank??" asked Hermione.

It struck Harry like a blow. Of course, the Goblins! Whatever it meant, this was their 'Thank you' for his reporting.

The others had watched his expression change. Harry tried to play dumb. "Someone's paid me something, except I don't know what for." Glancing at his friends, he saw they were ready to believe the first part of his explanation, not more.

"Oh yeah," snorted Ron, "the trouble of the rich and famous ... Why doesn't this happen to me? I wouldn't care where it comes from."

"I know," announced Hermione. "Sirius has robbed a bank, then transferred the money to you ... Now they want to know how come the sums are identical."

For a fleeting instant, Harry's face had looked scared to death at Hermione's words. Glancing at her, Harry knew she had noticed.

"Whatever it is," said Ron, "I wouldn't look so unhappy if I were richer than before ... You might contact Bill if there's something fishy."

Ron sounded exactly as Harry had felt only a few minutes ago.

"It wouldn't be jinxed, would it?" asked Hermione.

Her question hinted at the last time when Harry had received an expensive gift - his Firebolt - without knowing the spender. It was further an unsuccessful attempt to save the atmosphere, which at once held a false note.

Harry wouldn't show the letter around, the others didn't ask. Ron was, all of a sudden, in a hurry. Hermione still looked thoughtful, after reminding Harry that McGonagall was Hogwarts' financial affairs manager, she left him alone.

Harry read the letter a third time, extracting not more than a confirmation of his suspicion. Stupid of him not to realize in the first place that this had to be a Goblins' letter, it might have saved them the embarrassing situation. He couldn't remember having heard about a *Privilege*, no matter which category. What was a *Trusted Order*? Those Goblins had it with trust all the time, small wonder for people running the largest bank on Earth. He had to find out more.

Ron's advice, thought Harry, was better than Ron knew himself. Bill would be aware of the Goblins' role in the play, Harry could discuss every detail with him.

When was Bill expected in Hogwarts next? - Dumbledore might know, Ron might know ... Fleur might know! The thought of again talking with Ron, right now, wasn't promising; on the other hand, if eventually he would talk with Bill without Ron knowing, things would get worse. Harry started for Ron's office.

He found Ron sitting on his desk, writing. Ron was alone - that was to say, Myrtle could be seen nowhere.

"Ron?"

Ron looked up. Seeing Harry, his eyes narrowed. "Yes?"

"What you said about asking Bill - I think that's what I should do."

Ron's expression lost its hostility. "So it's really about some unknown money?"

"The letter is from Gringotts," explained Harry, forgetting to mention it wasn't from his own branch, "and I don't know whether I'm richer now or just more privileged ... That's why I'd like to talk with Bill."

"Sorry," said Ron, "I didn't believe it down there. Somehow you ... Never mind."

Ron didn't ask whether he could see the letter. Harry knew why - his friend was afraid, or embarrassed, to read the exact size of Harry's fortune. As wrong as the reasons were, Harry felt grateful for them.

He asked, "Do you know when Bill's expected here again?"

"Again? ... Why should he?" Ron frowned.

So Bill hadn't informed his brother that he would be at Hogwarts more often. Another grease-pot Harry had found and hit blindfolded.

Just in time, he had the idea. "Why? ... Because of Fleur - if there's no other reason." Harry grinned. For once, his flushing didn't look unnatural.

"Fleur??"

"Didn't you ..." Then he remembered - Ron hadn't been at lunch with them. He told him what he had witnessed.

"Look there ..." said Ron with a definite lack of pleasure. "Then go and ask Fleur. Nobody is telling me anything, but she might tell *you*."

Harry chuckled. "Ron, some things happen even outside your office."

"I'd never guessed." But Ron seemed mollified.

Asking Fleur about Bill was a little beyond the scope which, for Harry, felt like safe ground. However, it was only him who might be embarrassed, not her, he was certain about that. He went to her office and knocked.

"Come in."

He opened the door. "Hi, Fleur."

"Harry!" Fleur's eyes widened with pleasure, then changed to sympathy. "I 'eard about the squad ... Poor you, all the training outside, and all you can do is visit me." Her smile grew warmer. "Is it about some last dance lesson? You know, the ball is due three weeks from now."

"Only three weeks? ... I wasn't aware."

"And there was a time when you couldn't think about anything else ... What's on your mind, Harry?"

"I'm trying to find out ..." He cleared his throat. "I wonder when Bill will be in Hogwarts again. I ... er, I thought you might know." He didn't know what to expect.

Next second, Fleur's genuine laughter filled the room. "What's this, our shy little 'arry ... with the big eyes for other people's love affairs?"

Harry flushed. "At least I didn't listen."

Beaming, Fleur came around the desk, grabbed Harry's shoulders, and put her cheek at his. "I know ... Even if you did, I wouldn't care."

Leaning back, she asked, "So you think Bill's right for me?"

Harry grinned. "That visit last year - I watched you both."

"Yes, of course ... Lately, I see you only as a dancer 'o's afraid of his first evening with a pretty girl of black 'air and green eyes ... I sometimes forget what a sharp 'unter you are."

Then she asked, "And Ron?"

Harry noticed how Fleur wasn't bothering to ask whether Ron knew. "Well - he didn't look entirely amazed."

Fleur giggled. "What a surprise ... brothers ..."

Getting more serious, she said, "Bill wasn't specific - said 'e couldn't be." Her face beamed again. "The next I know about is the ball ... He's *my* partner."

About to leave, Harry was stopped by Fleur. "'arry, if you know more, you'll tell me, yes?"

He nodded.

Three weeks until the Christmas Ball ... Harry dismissed thoughts of dancing with Cho and concentrated on the Goblins' letter. Could he wait three weeks for Bill? - Maybe so, he simply didn't know enough. Then he realized, when asking Bill about Goblins' business while Fleur was waiting somewhere, he would be as welcome as a dragon in the girls' toilet - or the boys', for that matter. Better to ask someone right now, McGonagall or Dumbledore.

McGonagall's office was next. His hand already outstretched for knocking, Harry stopped. Could he talk with McGonagall about Goblins? - He didn't know.

The door opened, the Headmistress stood in front of him. "Mr. Potter - are you coming to me?"

"Er - yes, Professor McGonagall."

"Please sit down ... I'll be back in a minute."

Seated, Harry looked around. He knew this office only from short conversations, most of them dealing with unpleasant things like detentions, whether given or promised. The desk was cluttered with parchments, glancing at them, he saw the Goblins' emblem more than once.

McGonagall was back, sat down. "What can I do for you, Mr. Potter?"

Harry showed the folded parchment. "I got a letter from Gringotts, and I'm trying to find someone who can explain it to me."

He waited for the natural question whether she could see it.

"Gringotts, Mr. Potter?" McGonagall's expression was wondering. "Or Goblins?"

"Isn't it the same?"

The impoliteness didn't lift an eyebrow. "No, Mr. Potter - it's not ... as you should be well aware." She smiled. "If you want to know whether you can talk with me about Goblins, the answer is yes ... By the way, your qualification as a spy is still very limited - although this is more of a compliment than a criticism." Her hand came up. "May I see that letter?"

He watched her reading, saw her eyes widen. When she had finished, the Headmistress started reading again. Then she looked up, something like awe in her face. "Congratulations, Harry."

Did she really look embarrassed?

"I hope you don't mind me calling you Harry."

"Not at all, Professor McGonagall." Something in the letter had to be extraordinary.

"Call me Prof, Harry - I think Mr. Drilencu had a good idea."

Harry stared. "Yes ... Prof." Then, recovering from the shock, he asked, "Congratulations for what - Prof?"

"Harry, do you know about Goblin Requests?"

"No."

McGonagall's eyes scanned the letter again. "I think we should go through this step by step ... It's a beauty - I wouldn't have thought I'd see something like that here in this office." She looked at Harry. "Do you know what a Trusted Order is?"

"No."

"A *Trusted Order* means the executioner, this Modragh Morony, is not authorized to tell you where it comes from. But he - and you might as well say Gringotts - guarantees by every measure one might think of that the client is serious and trustworthy. Business people would call it *bona fide* ... It would be a tremendous loss of face if such an order would imply the slightest dubious aspect." McGonagall pointed at the emblem. "Normally, Goblins accept a Trusted Order only from other Goblins."

"I think I've seen him," said Harry. "Or them ... You know, we met."

McGonagall watched him for a moment, nodded. "Yes, I know. The price of confidence ... And this," her finger touched the letter, "is the reward ... And more."

"Is the request the reward, Prof?"

"A reward - and an obligation." McGonagall thought for a moment. "A Goblin Request means you can request something from them ... Simply speaking - you have one wish free."

"What can I wish?"

"Something within their reach to fulfill - money, for example." She looked sympathetically. "A counter example would be your wish to fly with the squad."

Harry nodded, the thought had already crossed his mind. "Why so - so complicated? ... Couldn't they just send some money?"

The Headmistress smiled. "Yes, they could - only this would be an entirely different reward ... A Goblin Request is not specified like a cheque. It's your own decision what to ask for, and this is quite a challenge ... Harry, they challenge you to ask for the right thing, nothing too big, certainly nothing too small. They challenge you also for the right purpose ..."

"Please, Prof - can you give me an example?"

The enthusiasm grew in McGonagall's voice. "Assume you would ask for a thousand Galleons. They would pay, and they would be deeply insulted - because it's too small."

Harry gasped. "Too small??"

"Yes - this is the Privileged category ... We'll come to that." McGonagall gestured. "Assume you would ask for a million Galleons. They would pay, and they would be quite embarrassed because it's too big."

"Embarrassed? ... You mean angry."

"Not angry - embarrassed ... by your own failure of personal honour. If you ask for that, you must be greedy."

"Then something in-between?" asked Harry.

"Yes and no ... These examples only show the aspect of size, or quantity. Still more important is the aspect of purpose ... If you would ask for plain money, whichever sum, they would be disappointed."

"Because it's unspecific?"

"You get it, Harry." McGonagall beamed. "Assume you ask for the means required to make you an Auror ... You don't specify the sum, you specify the purpose. In the end, it may be little more than thousand Galleons, or even more than a million - it doesn't matter ... And - it's not *you* who decides whether something is required or not. You see - you return the challenge."

"Wow." Harry inhaled.

"In addition, the Request establishes a bond - they trust you, that you trust them, that they trust you, that ..." McGonagall's finger painted a criss-cross pattern in the air, then she looked at Harry. "Not by coincidence, I'd say."

"No," sighed Harry, "not at all."

So he got paid, although he wasn't a good spy, according to McGonagall. Paid to sit here and learn about clever Goblin tricks while the others trained squad tactics. Without the slightest idea what to ask for, Harry decided to aim as high as possible. How high was high ... how privileged was he?

"Categories," he said. "What is Privileged, Prof?"

"Let me tell you what I know about the categories ... The lowest is *Personal*. This would be something like a generous gift - for example, a four-week's vacation trip to any luxury resort in the world ... At this level, the purpose can indeed be personal luxury."

His', thought Harry, was higher.

"*Classified* is the next - at this level, you could ask them to provide Mr. Black with the financial means to make him a respectable citizen, a house for example ... Just to give you an example."

"And Privileged?"

"*Privileged* is the highest level - the highest I heard about," corrected the Headmistress herself. "It's unlimited in any regard - financially. The purpose is what counts ... Harry, you're expected to ask for a honourable purpose - whether it's cheap or tremendously expensive doesn't matter."

Harry didn't care whether Privileged could be surpassed by some unknown level, unheard-of outside the inner Goblin circles. A nice little weekend bungalow under palm trees, plus a portkey for easy travelling, why not something as simple as that?

Coming back from his thoughts, he asked, "What about the rest, Prof?"

McGonagall checked the letter. "You can ask for it whenever you want ... You can ask at any Gringotts branch ... You know the reason for the Request ... well, the rest is Legalese about documents, copies, etcetera - it simply means you don't need this letter to claim your request because they know ... No, here's something else ... this Morony offers help."

She looked up. "Probably a contribution to your little experience in Goblin games of purpose and challenge."

"Oh yeah - that will be quite helpful."

McGonagall handed him the letter. "Harry, it may take years until you want to ask, or know what to ask for ... Please keep the letter at a safe place - it would be quite difficult to explain."

"You bet ... er - sorry, Prof."

The Headmistress smiled. "No, Mr. Potter - I'm not betting against the resources of Gringotts."

* * *

Thinking about a Goblin Request of the higher ranks seemed a good way to forget the squad - if only for a while. Imagining the next talks with his friends, Harry decided to prepare a good spy story first.

What would a good spy do in his situation? - The idea of asking Snape had a lot of appeal, except Snape might not know about the Goblins. The letter, he had to hide the letter. Private items did not get lost in Hogwarts, and he didn't think anyone would sneak through his possessions, only it was his own responsibility not to take chances.

He went back to McGonagall and asked her to keep the letter at a proper place, which she promised with an expression that told him she had hoped for this. Leaving the office again, he knew which story might work. Bad spy, huh? - He was learning quickly.

Then he scanned the library for literature about Goblins and Goblin Requests. He couldn't find a description as concise as McGonagall's, what he found instead was a collection of famous requests. The author didn't bother to explain the basics, the pamphlet just mentioned the category, what the grantee had asked for, and what it had done to him or her.

With growing unease, Harry learned the Goblins had nasty ways to follow claims dictated by greed or megalomania. Once a wizard had been granted a Personal Request, and he had asked for a life-long pension. It had been paid, until his early and unexpected death a year afterwards.

Another wizard, entitled for a Classified one, had asked the Goblins to smoothe his way into the Wizard's Council of that time. As honourful as the purpose was, it ranked too demanding by far for this category. The wizard had made it into the council all right, had even found time to scoff at those who had warned. At his third council meeting, a medieval version of Voldemort had captured the entire council, to be held in prison for years.

The most remarkable case was the story of the wizard who had tried to follow the example of a famous Greek philosopher. According to the myth, the philosopher, being granted a free wish from a king, had asked the king to step aside - for better sunbathing. The wizard, probably the most powerful of his time, was rich, respected, happy - everything. So when granted a Privileged request for his merits toward the Goblins, he had asked for an *interesting afternoon*, not giving any further specification to establish the desired challenge.

For several months, nothing happened. Then, one magnificent winter day, he was invited to a Goblin residence, not far away from his beautiful home. Inside the residence, the Goblins guided him to a window offering a grandiose view of the mountain on which the wizard's castle hung like a bird's nest.

Watching, the wizard saw an eagle at the mountain top, rising into the air. The small movement had stirred some snow, which quickly grew to a monstrous avalanche, carrying snow, trees, stones, everything.

Frozen in horror, the wizard - husband and father of several children - watched how the slide wiped the castle off like a toy.

Hours later, working at the slide track like a maniac to find, if not survivors, then the dead bodies, shouts of astonishment made him turn - to discover his family. They had been lured away from the castle, minutes after he'd left.

So Harry would ask for more than a visit in Hogsmeade, no question about that. Otherwise, the book didn't help much. Most of the cases dated back centuries, either today's Goblins were less generous or - more likely - the grantees had learned to keep silence.

At lunch, he was listening to the chatter of the squad members, when Ron asked - as expected - if he had solved the riddle of the mysterious letter.

Harry was prepared with the good spy's first weapon - an answer in spitting distance of the truth. "Not yet ... First I talked with Fleur to find out about Bill. She didn't know ... Then I spoke with McGonagall. It's some kind of inheritance, as far as I understood ... Anyway, it's still some time until it'll take effect."

The hidden reference to his parents had the desired effect, neither Ron nor Hermione showed the intention to ask more.

Harry made the good spy's second move - leading them to something else. "By the way - Fleur reminded me the ball's due three weeks from now." He glanced at Ron. "Do you know already whom to invite?"

Ron's voice sounded less casual than Harry's. "Yes."

Harry waited for more, which didn't come. Still searching for an unharmed question, he heard Hermione ask, "Does she know already?"

"Not yet."

Which was enough to kill this subject too. They ate in silence, each of them following different thoughts. Watching Hermione, Harry wondered what might be on her mind. Sensing his gaze, she looked up.

Before he could look away, she started to speak. "I wonder ..."

"Yes - I saw."

"Huh?"

Realizing the joke, she smiled shortly. "No, I was thinking about my ball robe ... You know, I'm not really prepared ... trouble is, we're locked here in Hogwarts, so ..."

Harry listened in amazement to Hermione chewing words. A rare moment. Then it dawned on him. Trying desperately to suppress a grin, he asked, "So you were thinking about another way to get you a robe?"

"Er - yes." Hermione seemed grateful to be interviewed.

"With some help?"

The smile was slightly embarrassed. "Yes."

"For a nice shopping in Paris?"

In spite of his obvious teasing, Hermione didn't get upset. "Probably not by myself ... but ..."

"Ahh - now I see," said Harry with all seriousness he could muster. "You're looking for a reliable person - with good taste - who, armed with your measures and your shopping list, will ..."

"Harry, please!"

Hermione looked around, but nobody was listening to them. "If you could ask Fleur ... what do you think ... would she ..."

Until now, the air between Hermione and Fleur had been quite cool. It was more a coolness from one side, finding windows closed at the other. Harry wondered if it was just the ball robe, motivating Hermione to thaw. Maybe Drilencu's lessons had changed her view, maybe something else. He would welcome it, and he wouldn't chomp on this timid tentacle.

He said, "I think she'll be delighted."

"Yes, probably."

Noticing the ambiguity of her words, Hermione added hastily, "I mean, I would be too ..." She still looked worried.

"Then what's your problem?" asked Ron. He had followed the last part of the conversation.

"Oh, can't you see it?" Her anger wasn't directed toward Ron. "All the time, I turn away from her ... I know what I said about your dance lessons ... And all of a sudden, because I need a ball dress, I come crawling ... It makes me look mean, and selfish, and spineless ..." She looked horrified.

Ron said, "I know what to do."

For an instant, Harry tensed. Hermione's words had provided more than enough for the most damaging remark.

Hermione glanced at Ron, hope in her eyes.

"Go to her upright ... It looks better."

Next second, Harry was howling in laughter. Ron beamed with satisfaction, the other students were looking at them, then wanted to know. They had to chase them off. Hermione hadn't laughed very long.

"Hermione, don't worry," said Harry, still panting. "Fleur isn't the grudging type ... After all," he added chuckling, "it can't be more difficult than asking someone for the ball."

At last, Hermione could grin. Now it was Ron's turn to look worried.

* * *

Harry suggested to ask Fleur right away, pointing out a Liaison Officer might have little opportunity for shopping.

Hermione agreed but couldn't be persuaded to follow immediately. "Ask her alone, so she can say no," was her answer. She would wait in the hall.

Harry ran after Fleur, catching her at the door to her office. "I know someone who wants to ask you a favour."

"But yes ... 'arry, 'o is it?"

"It's about a ball dress."

Fleur looked surprised, then smiled. "Matching black 'air and ..."

"No - matching brown hair, pretty curly one actually."

Fleur's smile turned to a malicious grin. "Really? ... Now that'll be a pleasure." Seeing Harry's expression, she rubbed his hair. "Calm down - nobody's getting hurt ... Where is she?"

"Down the hall."

Fleur went into her office, to get a tape-measure, as it turned out. Stepping downstairs, Harry prepared for a role as an *agent pacifieur*, or the British equivalent, depending on what might be needed.

He could have saved it, his dubious skill wasn't asked, with the public part being over within seconds. When they reached the hall, Hermione sat there, looking at them. She came up, hesitantly.

"Salu, 'ermione," said Fleur, waving with the tape. "Shall we go upstairs?"

Hermione nodded, unsuccessfully trying to deliver first thanks, or apologies, or whatever.

Fleur marched ahead, turning once more to Harry. "Don't wait for us," she called, "measuring up takes time."

Harry watched them disappear in the staircase toward the Gryffindor tower, then went for the library. He would have liked to get some parchments from his own dormitory, however this didn't seem the right time to follow Fleur and Hermione.

He didn't feel like working either. Scanning the library, his eyes fell on a book, *Pillowed Persians. The Noble Style of Flying*, by Suliman Dar'wheezing.

Flying carpets ... obviously not built for speed, not to mention sharp turns and other manoeuvres to catch a Snitch ... Would a flying carpet carry a Giant? ... With a sting, the squad training came back to Harry's mind.

He tried to think about Goblin Requests. That might be a challenge, asking for help to establish a flying carpet trade here. He remembered a conversation, overheard once between Mr. Weasley and Barty Crouch. Carpets were on the index, but an index could be changed. Anyway, he couldn't see himself as a merchant, further, he didn't give a damn at flying carpets, his choice were ... What a bloody afternoon.

The squad returned just in time for supper. The meal developed almost to a duplicate of the previous one, listening to stories about who had failed to do what, and how funny he had looked, only Viktor hadn't been amused, of course.

Hermione seemed more comfortable than at lunch, when Harry asked silently with his eyes, she glanced to both sides, indicating yes, she would talk, but not here.

Ron was late again, not offering any conversation either, maybe in consideration for the delicacy of squad matters in Harry's presence.

Eventually, the meal came to an end.

"Hey, Harry!"

It was Katie. "Come with us. We want to show you what we've learned."

What was that supposed to be? He didn't like the idea, still less he wanted to play the child whose toy had been taken off.

Anyway, he wasn't offered a chance, Katie took his hand and pulled him after her, Alicia followed, waving to someone.

They reached a quiet corner. Turning, Harry saw Cho arrive. She looked as unsure as he felt.

"Hi, Cho."

"Hi, Harry."

"How was the training?"

"Stressful ... We had some trouble with the speed, keeping the formation."

Katie interrupted the awkward conversation. "Harry, first we have to teach you the new terminology." She gestured to the other two girls. "Take position!"

Alicia, grinning, placed herself right from Katie.

Cho, looking self-conscious, moved behind them, forming a triangle.

"Now watch," said Katie, "and mind, you see it from across." She spread her left arm. "I'm port wing ... Alicia?"

Alicia spread her right arm. "I'm starbord wing."

"Cho?"

"I'm tail." After a second, Cho spread both hands behind, bending forward.

She reminded so strongly of a duck, Harry couldn't help giggling. Yet there was a difference, real ducks wouldn't blush.

"Okay," said Katie, "that's the patrol formation ... Now we see something." She pointed in front of her. "Harry, get down."

When he hesitated, she said impatiently, "We need a victim, that's you ... Collapse!"

The scene was addictive. Harry grabbed his throat with both hands, said, "Arrrgh," and crumpled down. Resting comfortably with his back to the wall, he let his hands fall down.

Katie looked appreciating. "Very good ... Now, port wing is in command, as you may have noticed ... Port wing checks first."

Her arm sailing through the air, she bent down, sniffed at him, and shrieked, "Oh my God - it's Harry!"

Alicia, her right arm still in the air, left arm at her stomach, was shaking badly. Cho looked like someone hoping dearly nobody might watch.

Katie stood up. "Watch, Harry ... This is the sign for starbord wing to come along." She stretched both arms, then let them slowly fall to her sides.

Alicia moved forward, looked down, giggled, "You're right, it's Harry."

"Tail's not supposed to come near you ... us, I mean" explained Katie. "Tail, watch around!"

Cho slowly spun around, visibly twisting at the sight of some Ravenclaw girls watching the scene from a fair distance.

"Now we have to decide what to do," said Katie. "Our decision is to get professional help."

She grabbed Alicia, who had trouble holding her balance. "We jump up and inform tail."

They reached Cho. "Tail, we're going for help. You stay. Be careful ... might take time till we're back."

Katie and Alicia walked away hand in hand, outer arms outstretched. Passing the Ravenclaw audience, they received frenetic applause.

Harry came upright, still chuckling.

Cho reached him. Glancing around, she said, "Let's find another place ... I'll hear them soon enough ... no need you hearing it too."

"So what," said Harry, walking with Cho along the hall. "It was great ... just what I needed."

"True ... especially me playing tail," muttered Cho, "and the other girls watching ... after I'd got rid of it ..."

"Of what?"

Cho glanced at him, looked away. "Some years ago, they had a nickname for me ... It'll be back first thing tomorrow."

"Which?"

Cho shook her head.

"Please - tell me ... I won't laugh."

"Yes, you would."

"No, I won't." Harry pleaded, "I won't laugh, I won't tell, and I'll never say it." He held his hands over his mouth.

"You don't know what you're promising," replied Cho, sighing. "Okay then ... Ready?"

He nodded.

"China Duck."

Harry's eyes were glaring, tearing, bulging, His stomach started to twist, shake, first bubbles of giggles bursting through the pressing hands. His knees felt like jelly, he turned away, every second now, he would collapse ...

"I knew it ... See you tomorrow!"

Cho walked away, her voice more satisfied than angry.

13 - The Request

Harry spent the rest of the Saturday evening thinking hard, and long. Several issues waited to be dealt with very, very carefully.

Would Cho be mad at him? - Probably not ... she hadn't sounded like that. But certainly he had to apologize - for that, he had to go over, she wouldn't come first. The squad exams would start after lunch ... What to say? - Well, this wasn't the difficult part, not really - what to say without starting to giggle again? ... Then he knew. The house-elves would save him.

This settled in his mind, he started to think about his vision - joining the squad again.

What could he do?

Lupin's lessons came to his mind. Zen ... Ways and goals. Use the force that threatens you for your own good. Nothing around to threaten him, that was exactly the problem.

Then he saw what it meant in his situation. He had to stay in touch with the squad - each remark, every scene had to be welcomed as an inspiration, rather than a depressing thought. So he would do it.

Watch for the weak spot ... Where was the weak spot? Nowhere - with himself bound by a promise toward Dumbledore. Bound still tighter by a Goblin Request ... How to use the request for his goal? The only method he could imagine was a letter saying, *Dear Goblins, please reveal yourself, so I'm free.* It would make the highlight in this book about famous requests.

Sleep refused to come until after midnight. He dreamed odd scenes, not remembering a detail next morning.

Now he was late even for a Sunday breakfast. Hurrying downstairs, he reached the Gryffindor table, found Hermione and Ron talking.

"Morning, Harry," said Hermione, "I just told Ron about my conversation with Fleur."

"Did I miff a lot of detaish?" Harry's pronunciation suffered from some food in his mouth.

"No," said Ron, "it was more like that - 'We talked ... period ... Fleur's going to buy me a ball dress ... full stop.'" He turned to Hermione. "Did I forget anything?"

Hermione smiled apologetically. "No, your protocol's accurate." Toward Harry, she added, "You're right - she isn't the grudging type ... Sure, we had a talk, and it was more than Forget and Forgiven, but ... She has a way to say something without you getting mad ..." Hermione pointed with her eyes, "in contrast to some other people I know."

Ron looked around. "Where? ... Show me!"

Hermione held both hands upward, thumb touching thumb. "Need a mirror?"

"That's our Hermione all right," said Ron to Harry, "one talk with a good old enemy, and she's going to lecture us ..."

"I'm not ..." protested Hermione, flushing, "but that reminds me - Fleur suggested you two might think about a ball dress too, it would be one washing-up for her."

"Hmm ..."

Harry found this a good idea. The critical point was Ron - more precisely, Ron's money. Harry didn't know whether the twins had followed his advice, given together with the price from the Wizard's Tournament. Glancing over, he saw Ron biting his lips.

"Yeah, sounds good," said Ron hesitantly. Seeing Harry watch him anxiously, he added grinning, "My credit line's good for that, no problem ... I was thinking of something else ..."

Harry waited.

"Of your partner?" asked Hermione.

"Actually, yes," confessed Ron. "A decent robe solves the last technical problem ..."

"Right," prompted Hermione, "so you can go and ask her."

Assuming he had missed another conversation between Ron and Hermione, Harry said, "Ask whom??"

Ron's face told him - he hadn't missed any such conversation, except that his question left as much as no other choice. And with some relief, eyes at the table, Ron murmured, "Padma."

Now he exhaled deeply, waiting for their reactions.

Hermione was first. "Why her?"

"Well ... she's good-looking, isn't she?" Ron paused. "You know, it's just for the ball, not like ..."

Hermione smiled sardonically. "Things happen during balls."

Harry had watched Ron's face. "Why else?" he asked.

Ron seemed grateful for this question. "I want to make good," he said. "You know, for last year ... For her, as well as for myself. When I remember that evening ..." He shuddered. "This time I want to make it right. I can dance ... a new dress ... she could do worse." He looked challenging.

Hermione was sceptical. "What if she says no?"

"Then I'm going to look for someone else," replied Ron. "Then I've tried, at least ... Then I can say, all right, I spilled the milk, but I offered to wipe it off."

Hermione pointed to the Ravenclaw table. "Then go and ask her ... Ask her for the colour of her dress, so Fleur can match yours."

Ron looked horrified. "Now? ... Here?"

"That reminds me," said Harry, having finished eating.

Followed by Ron's alarmed look, he walked over to the Ravenclaw table. His plan offered one big advantage - the first approach into this frightening territory would last less than a minute, and for the best reasons ... If it worked, that was.

Cho sitting there, Almyra at her side. Of course. Cho watching his approach, her expression expectantly. Now Almyra seemed watching him too, something like a nervous tic around her lips ...

"Morning, Cho. Morning, Almyra ..." He focused at Cho. "Please wait for me, I'll be back in a minute."

He started toward the kitchen.

"Harry!" Cho's voice made him turn.

She still looked sternly, in sharp contrast to Almyra whose hand pressed a twisting mouth. "Make it two," said Cho. "I have to bribe someone."

He nodded, headed for the kitchen. God bless the house-elves, they already knew what he wanted. God bless them again, they looked pleased when he asked for another.

Coming upstairs, he found Cho waiting for him, away from the Ravenclaw table ... Great ... Almyra with her, not so great ... "Here - a sign of my apology." He offered the parcels, one in each hand.

"You're lucky, Harry Potter ... I'd like to run you through a Chinese pardon ritual ... except that Almyra most certainly would roll on the floor ..." Cho took the parcels, handed them over to Almyra who, eyes already watering, quickly hurried away.

Harry felt better.

Cho turned to him. "Okay, young man ... Say, I won't do it again!"

"I won't do it again."

"I feel deep regret and bitter shame."

"I feel deep regret and ... and bitter shame." If this was going to last much longer, he'd burst out again.

"Good ... That was the short version." Cho looked appreciatingly. "After all, you can muster some discipline."

Harry steadied his voice before speaking again. "How was it with the other girls?"

"Oh, them," said Cho with a depreciating wave of her hand, "well, they found the scene had reminded them of something ... Then I said I liked their noses better the way they were, and we agreed that Sunday is such a lovely day, so ..." Her voice trailed off.

Harry looked at those small hands. "Did you mean it?"

"They had no intention to find out ... They remembered too well." It came with a fierce satisfaction.

"That's the way you stopped it before?" He longed to hear more about this new facet of Cho's character, although it didn't surprise him much.

"You want to hear that story?" She looked provocatively. "Okay. Trade!"

"What do you want to know?" And this a minute after he'd handed out all that cake ... Well, okay, counting for his ... "Shall I introduce you to the source of those cakes?"

"What for?" Cho looked genuinely astonished. "I get it, isn't that enough? ... No, I know something better - I'll tell you the story, and then I have an ob on you."

Harry nodded. "Agreed."

It took her by surprise. "Where did you learn what an ob is?"

"In the lessons with Lupin." He explained. "Zen, the art of the warrior ... Honour ... Obligation, the burden that weighs more than anything else." Lately, he was learning more about it than he had wanted to know.

Cho seemed impressed. "You talked about that - just so?"

"Yes ... No," corrected Harry himself, "it was after ... after the Patronus training was over."

"Oh." Cho paused. "Well, before the ob comes the other way around, let me tell you the story ... It was my first year in Hogwarts, and I was pretty small."

"Really?" He grinned.

Sharp fingers pecked him right below the ribs. "*That* small, yes ... Not only that, I still had ... er, baby fat." Cho hastened to continue. "Then one day, I walked in this traditional style Chinese girls are supposed to walk ... Tripling, you know?"

She wasn't ready to show.

"And then this girl said it ... Next thing was, her nose was bleeding like hell." Cho looked grimly. "It wasn't all fat, surprised her a lot ... Anyway, then I had her fist in the eye ... and then I was at her throat ..."

"Wow," said Harry in admiration. "And then?"

"Well, someone separated us ... Her face was a little blue at that time." Cho grinned. "Of course, both of us got detention, and together, and we talked ..." She looked up. "That was it, basically ... None of the other girls ever had the guts to call me ..."

"And this girl?"

"Sometimes ... When nobody's around."

It told Harry what he already had suspected. "Almyra." It was no question.

Cho nodded. "Yes ... Since then, we never had trouble again - with the other girls, I mean ... We weren't isolated, but ... You know, that teaming with Katie and Alicia, that's something new to me."

He felt her glance, obviously to watch his reaction at her mentioning the squad. However, she didn't need to worry, with him ready to try his new approach. "Yesterday, you said something about trouble with speed," he said. "The old problem?"

"Partly, yes ... The other two have been flying together for years, they don't need to adjust. And they both use the same model, a Nimbus Two-Thousand, while my poor old Comet ..."

Harry hesitated, then said, "I could lend you the Firebolt ..."

Cho's eyes were glittering for a moment, then she shook her head. "No, I won't take it ... but thanks for your offer."

"Why not?"

"For many reasons," replied Cho impatiently. "With my Comet, I fall behind. With the Firebolt, I'd run them over ... No, you must keep it to yourself, as a ..."

"Symbol?"

She nodded.

"Yes, I know what you mean." He paused. "I'll use it again - some day soon."

Cho looked suspicious. "What's on your mind?"

"I'm going to find a way back into the squad, that's on my mind."

"Sure," said Cho, "and pigs can fly." She sounded angry.

"Wouldn't know," he replied teasingly, "I feel it safer not to comment on flying animals."

The grin came and went. "And I feel it safer not to follow this line of discussion."

"Relax," said Harry. "All I'm saying is, I've stopped making faces at hearing the word squad, and I'll come back as soon as possible ..." he waved her protest off, "without ignoring any ob, if that's what's worrying you."

"What else," she muttered, "it wouldn't be some Death-Eaters out there ... I mean, who cares about them, really ..."

"Right," grinned Harry. "there are more important things ... Like, for instance, Fleur's getting me a new ball dress. Any suggestions about the colour?"

Cho took her time to follow the change of subject. Eventually she started to smile, scanning him from top to bottom. "Yes, my brave warrior ... Green."

* * *

While other students still could sit leisurely with an after-lunch cup, the squad members gathered to reach the Quidditch stadium, the place where the exam patrols would start. Ron was also involved, his job was that of a starter, protocoller, and control agent.

Harry had decided against any attempt to join them, whether in the Quidditch pit or anywhere else. True, he would use any opportunity to be inspired in his visionary quest, but this grand event struck him as more inspiration than he could stand at once.

Looking around, he saw several teachers rise. Obviously, they were scheduled as the 'bad guys'. Dumbledore was one of them, then McGonagall, Flitwick, Snape, Drilencu ... suddenly Harry's eyes widened, noticing a figure at the teacher's table he hadn't seen for a while. Lupin was here!

"Good luck," he shouted to the others and spurted through the hall. He felt like a first-grader seeing his favourite teacher, didn't care though. Coming closer, he saw sharp lines in the face of Lupin, who sat with slagged shoulders, staring mindlessly at the table.

"Professor Lupin! ... I didn't see you at first."

Lupin looked up, as though coming back from a long journey, still unaware that he had found home again. "Harry ... Hello."

Even his smile couldn't hide the traces of past efforts, or maybe hurtful experiences. Harry's mind automatically checked the time of month, which was close to new moon, so it couldn't be Lupin's *regular* problem.

"Are you okay?" It slipped Harry's mouth involuntarily, thinking about it, he wouldn't have known what to say.

Lupin made a wry face. "Your question tells me I don't need to check in the mirror ... At least, I feel better than I look - thank you for asking."

The worry in Harry's face didn't fade.

Lupin watched him. "Obviously you don't believe me, Harry - although it's more true than not ... Before you start spreading rumours of my ill state, let's have some tea in my office ... There we can talk."

Harry hadn't known he had hoped for something like that, certainly it was the best way of killing time on this particular Sunday. He followed Lupin into his office, where the teacher went through the unceremonial motions of preparing two steaming mugs with the help of tea bags, water, and his wand.

Sitting down, Lupin faced Harry. "So you were suspended from the Flying Squad, owing to the unacceptable risk of your exposure to some Death-Eaters."

"Yes."

"Which tells me a lot ... Enough to know we cannot discuss this issue any further ... I have to keep my innocent mind - if you can follow me, Harry."

Harry tried to smile, failed. "Yes, Professor Lupin."

"Vice versa it looks better ... I can tell you about my work outside, up to some point, that is ..." Lupin grinned. "For second choice, it's not too bad."

Harry learned that Lupin was operating as a mixture of travelling teacher and emergency service, using his skill in the art of fighting Dementors. The Dark Forces, so Harry was told, had started spreading fright and terror by means of threat, intimidation, and misinformation, sending out wizards, Dementors, Giants, whatever looked suitable.

As obvious as their purpose was, undermining the public morale, the method had more success than Harry liked to hear. Nobody had been hurt yet, still, the Dark Forces could extend their pressure at any moment. It was the classical technique, hollowing out the resistance of the victim before striking seriously.

Lupin's job as a teacher and trainer - surprise, surprise - had to do with the Patronus spell. This knowledge was hardly widespread, wizards and wizard families determined to withstand human opponents could quickly lose their courage when confronted with the nerve-racking coldness of Dementors.

In addition, and more often than Lupin really could afford, he was summoned to attacks in process, scenes with family houses under siege of the enemy, for a night or even a full weekend.

Lupin remained careful with his words and scarce with details, yet the general picture he drew looked bad enough.

Harry clenched his fists, imagining Lupin in some deserted street, a single house surrounded by hooded figures. "I wish I could join you," he said.

While talking, Lupin's face had smoothened a bit. At Harry's words, the creases sprung up sharper than before. "For heaven's sake, Harry, no!"

"Why not? At the train ..."

Lupin interrupted him. "Harry - at the train, that was like an open field battle ... For something like that, I wouldn't hesitate to call for your help ..." Slower, he continued, "But you're not prepared for the work I'm doing ... Simply but truly - you're too young."

Seeing Harry's face, Lupin explained. "Look, you can remember a list of events that is certainly quite remarkable for your age, Harry ... for any age, actually, but you were always thrown right into the action ... Waiting for hours, days ... not knowing whether something will happen, or what, that's a different challenge."

With a short laugh, Lupin added, "If there's any proof needed, look at yourself how you can cope with your suspension!"

"But ..." Harry stopped himself. It wasn't the squad alone, it had a lot to do with the squad members, one member, to be specific. This argument didn't exactly look like something he wanted to discuss with Lupin.

With the effect that the teacher misunderstood his silence. "You mean your Patronus is better than mine, right?"

Harry hesitated. He didn't want to lie to Lupin.

Again confusing Harry's reluctance with politeness, Lupin grinned. "If you don't say yes, I'll do it for you ... Yes, Harry, no denying that ... But ..." Lupin's expression grew challenging, "did you really think it would stay like that forever?"

The words pushed Harry's own thoughts aside. Excitement was spreading his face. "Have you ... did you ..."

"Not yet," admitted Lupin, then held two fingers apart. "But I'm not far away."

"Oh, super, that's ... great ... Wow ..." Harry beamed.

"I'm glad you're not jealous," said Lupin smiling, "because I need your help."

"Yes, sure ... of course, Professor Lupin."

"By the way, Harry, you shouldn't call me that way ... It's not true, and ..." Lupin studied his nails, "it doesn't reflect our relationship properly ... aside from the question who's teaching whom." He smiled again. "I wouldn't mind something more personal, but - for the time being, I think my new colleague has found us a solution." He looked at Harry. "It's still wrong, but so what."

Harry cleared his throat. "Yes ... Prof."

"If it won't be too close to eaves-dropping," mused Lupin, "I'd like to talk more about Drilencu ... He's quite a success for Hogwarts ... Looks as if a long-standing problem is solved for a while."

He didn't expect an answer from Harry, who felt grateful for that. Yes, Drilencu was impressive, what with his background, and appearance, and his topic ... Still, wasn't he the one who'd sent Lupin off?

"Anyway - let's come back to our own business." Lupin's eyes met Harry's. "What I need, Harry, is every tiny bit of detail you can tell me about your Patronus spell." His fingers were counting. "Scene - thought - emotion - feelings ..." His hand went up. "Somewhere in there is the key ... I can feel it!"

Harry collected his thoughts, then started to talk. His memory recalled the battle scene at the train - the first time he had, intentionally, conjured up a Golden Patronus. And also the only time. With Lupin, who kept listening with his eyes closed, as part of the scene, part of the emotions Harry had felt.

"... when the arc, that held Voldemort at bay, was there in my memory, I added my parents to the picture ... Then I remembered what they said, that they would help me escape ... hearing that, I called the spell ... and then I opened my eyes, and there it was."

Lupin remained silent, eyes still closed.

Harry checked his mind whether there was something to add, found only repetitions of what he had expressed, or wanted to.

Lupin's eyes came open. "Thank you, Harry ... I need to think this over, and then I'll try to map it to my own ..."

Harry nodded.

Lupin hesitated. "Harry - I'm well aware of me taking more from you than I'm ready to give myself ... my own memory ... Please let me keep it private still for a while."

Harry hadn't been aware. He started to shake his head, or to nod, then knew what to say. "You mean that's an ob?"

"Yes, of course."

"That's fine with me," answered Harry. "Then I have one to hold and one to await."

Lupin nodded. His expression told Harry - his teacher had misinterpreted him once more. But then again, maybe Harry's counting was wrong. Either way, Harry could - at the least - narrow down his guesses about Lupin's memory to something in the context of his werewolf transitions. Considering Lupin's age, there had to be quite a number, still, Harry couldn't shake off the feeling it had taken place in Hogwarts, and it had involved not only Snape but also his own father.

* * *

Squad and teachers returned late for lunch. As Harry learned from the stories at the Gryffindor table, the exam patrols had involved considerably more than some formal test.

The teachers, Dumbledore on top, had found tricky ways, so much so that the teams under examination quickly forgot about the simulated nature of the scene.

Stunning down port and starbord wing on the ground, with the tail watching, had been one of the simplest. In the test of the girls' team, Alicia watched how the supposed victim, waiting until Katie turned to wink her down, cursed her with what looked like the Cruciatus Curse. If not for Cho's intervention, she would have dived down to the scene. Only later she learned that the victim, Snape, had used a simple but efficient tickling charm.

The twins had touched down to examine the scene, first Fred the port wing, then George the starbord wing. When turning to rejoin Lee, their tail, the sky was empty. Dumbledore himself had been the attacker in the air, not trusting anyone else to curse Lee efficiently without risking his fall to the ground. First he had used invisibility spells for himself, then for Lee too.

Other teams encountered other scenarios. Angelina's team detected a glittery item in the ground. When Bob touched first ground and then the thing, he disappeared. A portkey, of course - back to the Quidditch pit.

While listening, Harry tried to imagine how he would have reacted. Katie's story in particular gave him a bad moment. Thinking about himself in the air, watching Cho on the ground, shaking and twisting under a curse, he realized that running for help - or flying, in this case - wasn't his strongest virtue. Lupin's remark floated in his mind, about him too young, too vehement, unable to wait patiently.

None of the stories gave him anything worth a hard thinking in the search for his vision. All teams had passed their exams, Ron's office held the new duty roster, now with four patrols per day. The pre-breakfast and the after-supper patrol had been cancelled, at least until daylight would start early enough for the first, and would hold long enough for the other.

* * *

The Gryffindors were in Astronomy, together with the Hufflepuffs, of course without those who, like Hermione, had selected another faculty. Professor Sinistra had guided them to the sceptor room, now she used the huge sphere to present star constellations. From the right distance, which meant leaving the two bottom rows free, the convex shape provided a surprisingly good approximation of the real sky. For sure, sitting in the semi-darkness of a cosy, well-heated sceptor room was far better than freezing to stone at night under the real stars. And you had a desk for your parchment.

Harry watched the sphere, on which a projection of the Orion was turning slowly. For him like for many others, Orion rated as the most beautiful constellation in the northern hemisphere. According to the myth, Orion, the great hunter, had been blinded by the gods but then, led by a small boy to the farthest east, had regained his eyesight from a sun ray. In one version, he was stung deadly by a scorpion, in another, he had been put onto the sky because he had tried to pursue the Pleiades, daughters of Atlas.

Fleur had called Harry a hunter. Well, blinded by the gods, this was pretty close to Harry's feeling about the suspension from the squad. Then where was the small boy to lead him to the farthest east? Orion had courted some woman, that's why he was blinded. Another one who might have seen too much - like himself, Harry thought. Except he wasn't ... well, you could drive an analogy too far, couldn't you?

Sinistra was talking about the stars which formed the body shape, the belt, and the sword. Alpha Orionis, the left shoulder, was also called Betelgeuse, a red giant, said the teacher. It reminded Harry of the coming visit at Lleyrin the Fist, and of the required preparation by collecting a list of questions he wanted to ask.

Ron, also red but normal-sized, sat listening with more fascination than Harry. Ron still could get excited at all those numbers, so many light years here, so many there. The red giant was two hundred and seventy light years away, some stars in Orion's belt more than thousand.

Quite a distance, thought Harry. Orion had to walk to the farthest east. He, Harry, would use a broomstick. The small boy would need another broomstick. That would mean, he had to slow down, his Firebolt was the only one - not counting Viktor's, of course.

What if the small boy was a small girl ... no, a girl of small shape ... Couldn't follow either, with that Comet of hers ...

"Professor," said Ron.

The witch stopped her sermon. Since she knew about Ron's decision to do an O.W.L. in Astronomy, Ron could have asked her the time of day, and she would show some delight. "Yes, Mr. Weasley?"

"I wonder whether I got something right ... If this red giant has blown up more than hundred years ago, it still takes another hundred years until we would know?"

"Right - although red giants do not blow up."

"Yeah, okay." Ron was interested in something else. "Now, if I would fly at light speed toward that star, I would know sooner, right?"

Before the teacher could answer, Ron added, "And the total speed would be higher than light speed ... True?"

"You cannot fly at light speed," replied Sinistra, "nothing that consists of matter can do that ... But let's say you'd fly at half of light speed, that's still good enough for your argument." She beamed. "Excellent question, Mr. Weasley, although the answer is No."

"Why?" asked Ron surprised. "That doesn't fit."

"Light speed is always the same," said Sinistra. "No matter how fast you fly, light doesn't approach you faster than before. Your own time changes to balance out the difference."

"Huh?" Ron was baffled.

Harry wasn't, he had lost track a sentence earlier.

"Mr. Weasley, this issue puts us right into Advanced Physics ... If you want, we can discuss it outside this class ..."

Harry's mind stuck at something the witch had said, applied to his own problem. Always the same speed ... Nobody can fly that fast ... Nobody could follow his Firebolt, Viktor had said ... That's why the small girl couldn't lead him to the farthest east ... not a girl, a boy - anyway, a small figure ... like a Goblin.

Harry's mind was whirling, suddenly he couldn't await the end of the class.

When he reached the library with his parchments, the idea was slowly gaining shape. He couldn't see an immediate chance to regain his eyesight, meaning squad service, but remembering Lupin's lessons had been the break-through.

A determined man walks the steps he can overlook ... What he could overlook was a squad in which nobody could follow him, that had been the official justification for his suspension. He knew some small guys that waited for him to challenge them ... so be it.

He sketched a first draft. Then he took the book about the famous requests and scanned it for help. None. He started a second version, had to interrupt for supper.

Ron was talking about light speed, dropped the issue due to lack of audience.

Hermione was talking about Fleur waiting for Ron and Harry to get measured.

"Okay," said Harry absent-mindedly, with the effect that after supper, first the two of them had to go to Fleur's office.

He was twitchy, until Fleur groaned, "My God, 'arry - do I have to stun you?"

Leaving the office, he remembered Cho's request for the colour. So he had to go back once more.

Fleur didn't like the idea and started a discussion. They agreed on a very dark green that would provide a metallic shimmer. Harry would have agreed to fluorescent stripes, as long as it could be called green and he could return to the library.

Eventually, he was back.

The next version looked better. He wished he had the letter at hand, this guy had found some pompous words. Didn't matter, it only had to be challenging, after all, should nobody confuse him with Pompous Percy.

The fourth version seemed good enough to be checked by McGonagall, Harry had no intention to send the letter without her approval - the league in which he was playing here felt a little high.

Checking the time, he swore loud enough to stir Madam Pince, the librarian - too late to ask McGonagall today. He sat down and examined the letter by himself.

Having completed the fifth version, he couldn't find anything more to improve.

* * *

The next day, Harry felt like driving at light speed - or maybe half of it, whatever, because time slowed down. He had to wait until afternoon before he could contact McGonagall.

Hermione wanted to know what they had ordered, and why hadn't he come back into the Gryffindor tower to tell her all about. Hearing of his and Fleur's compromise, she showed consternation, expressed sounds of protest.

When Ron hinted she might discuss it with Fleur directly, her face changed to resignation.

For a payback, Ron was confronted with Hermione's interest in Padma's reaction. All she could squeeze out was yes, Padma had agreed. When Hermione didn't look satisfied with this short communique, Ron offered a deal. He would report what Padma had said, and what he had said, right after Hermione's detailed description of her talk with Fleur.

Hermione decided to make do with what she had.

Probably the teachers also had said something in classes, only Harry couldn't remember. What he remembered were some glances of Parvati Patil into Ron's direction, and in his own. So Padma had talked with her sister.

Somehow, Harry had the feeling Parvati wouldn't object a second try with him. No thanks, been there ...

Time came back to normal - classes were over.

He walked to McGonagall's office, knocked, entered.

Holding up the parchment, he said, "I've prepared a letter ... Prof, if you could please check it? ... I don't want to do it wrong."

McGonagall opened it to read what Harry had written.

- *Dear Mr. Morony, answering your letter, I want to thank you and your client very much. I think I have met him recently. I did not understand everything first, but then our Headmistress helped me, and now I feel that this is a great honour.*

At first I thought that years would pass before I might have an idea how to ask for this Request, and it was good to know that you offered me help in the details. Then something happened, and I believe this is a case where I can do the right thing. I will try to explain and hope my description is understandable enough.

We have a Flight Squad at Hogwarts. It has been formed from the four Quidditch teams; our job is to do patrol flights for the defence of Hogwarts and the people around. We were put in twin teams for security, but recently, after a patrol had been attacked by the Dark Forces, the patrol has been reorganized.

I was taken off the team; the reason is that I would take too much risk outside Hogwarts (for myself and for other people, I hope you understand), and they said because only our trainer could follow me, we could not afford it. That is, I have a Firebolt broomstick which is faster than any other, and Mr. Krum is the only other one with a Firebolt. They said if they cannot follow me, they cannot protect me.

My idea is that if we had some more Firebolts, we could improve our defence quite a bit. While I am aware that this does not solve the major problem, I have also learned that one should do the possible steps even if the rest of the path is still clouded. Sir, I don't know what a Firebolt costs and these are the details in which I hope you will give me some help. So I claim my request, with due respect, as follows:

The Hogwarts School of Wizardry and Witchcraft would benefit from prime quality equipment (i.e., broomsticks), to be used for the Flight Squad which is part of the defence system. I want to claim my Request for this purpose. But please, sir, if this works out, make it appear as a help from Gringotts. Don't tell them it is from my Request because I cannot explain it, as I am sure you will understand.

To give you a picture about the Flight Squad, I have added the names of the squad members, ordered by the original teams from our four houses. Mr. Krum on top is the trainer. He is a famous Seeker who came to us after we met last year.

I do hope this letter is appropriate, and I thank you and your client again for your help.

Respectfully yours,

Harry Potter

At the bottom of the parchment, a neat list could be found, starting with the name of Viktor Krum, followed by the 28 names of the four ex-teams of Slytherin, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Gryffindor, Harry's name at the end of the list.

Harry watched his Headmistress reading. Her expression didn't tell him anything, from what he could see, she might as well have graded an essay about Transfiguration. At least, his letter passed a first test - McGonagall read it twice.

Then she looked at him. "Mr. Potter ... er, Harry, you know that this Request is a key that could open any gate in the future?"

"Yes, Prof." Harry felt like a kid reminded not to waste all his pocket money for sweets. "I think I'm trying to open a gate in the present."

McGonagall laughed. "No doubt about that ... What I need to know is - are you sure you want to spend the Request now - for this ... and you will not feel regret later - no matter how it turns out?"

"I'm absolutely sure I want to do it ... About the future - how should I know what I'll feel then? ... All I can say is, I'll never complain about my own decision."

McGonagall had to grin about that, frowned again. "Hmmm ..."

"Prof - do you think it's expensive enough? ... I've found a book about famous Requests ..." The story of that wizard and his mountain castle surely had left its mark in Harry's memory.

"Well ... I don't see a problem." McGonagall pointed at the letter. "The main aspect is the purpose, and your purpose is certainly honourable ... A Firebolt ... Mr. Krum might know the price of a Firebolt, Harry, all I know is, for thousand Galleons, those people in Quality Quidditch Supplies wouldn't even check their store."

"That expensive??"

Harry felt relief, as far as his Request was concerned, but also a late shock at realizing how much Sirius had spent for his first godfather present.

"I wouldn't be surprised if it's not far away from ten, or even above," said McGonagall. "So, ten times twenty-nine, or twenty-seven, puts us right in the quarter of a million range."

"Wait a second ..." gasped Harry, "I didn't say for *each* of them!"

McGonagall grinned. "True - except that the letter is followed by a sweet little list of all those names ... Charming ... Harry - " she looked up, "are there some merchants in your family?"

Harry shook his head. The question had raised the image of Uncle Vernon, however, he didn't count - couldn't count. So there was no need to worry about a claim too small.

Another thought came up. "What about the challenge, Prof?" Suddenly, the letter strongly resembled a shopping list of that many Firebolts, remarkable only for the expense.

"Challenge?" asked McGonagall, disbelief in her face. "Don't you think this is enough?"

"Well, it's just some broomsticks ... I mean, yes, they are expensive ..."

"Harry, are you trying to tell me it has slipped your pen quite by accident?"

"Huh? ... slipped what, Prof?"

McGonagall studied him, then put the letter at the table. "On top of it, there are some broomsticks, yes ... Underneath, you challenge them to find you a way back into the squad - nicely between the lines ... That's certainly enough to chew at, even for Goblins!"

Harry seized for the parchment. "Then I have to change it ... I didn't intend to tell them they have to reveal the secret ..."

"Wait!"

McGonagall held the letter. "You didn't say that ... You didn't imply it." She checked again. "No, it's fine - it's *them* to find out if there's a way."

"You think I can send that letter, Prof?"

"Oh yes." She smiled. "They'll love it."

Harry asked for a capsule, then climbed the tower to the Owlery.

Hedwig greeted him with some pecks. When Harry extracted the capsule, she became very excited. For her, the time in Hogwarts had been boringly uneventful.

Harry fixed the capsule at her leg, checked it again. "Do it right, Hedwig," he murmured, "we need to make an impression."

The owl's stance and her dismissive glance to the other birds sent a clear message, few owls matched Hedwig's span, none of them a snow owl.

Harry watched the powerful wings reach the exit and disappear into the early evening sky. All he could do now was waiting.

* * *

Next morning, Harry felt some expectation during breakfast, until he realized it would take Hedwig at least two days to deliver the letter and return with an answer - if there was any.

He visited McGonagall again in her office and asked which reaction he should expect.

Her answer wasn't particularly helpful. "Any ... none ..."

He asked for a realistic period after which he might expect some response.

"Mr. Potter, this is no owl order shop," came McGonagall's answer. "You've challenged them, and now they're challenging you to sit and wait ... So please do it."

He tried.

Next morning, nothing. Where was this Goblin headquarters? Had something caught Hedwig? Agreed, two days might be too short. Still ...

Next morning, nothing. He had to be careful watching the owls arrive, Ron sensed something but didn't ask him.

Hermione caused a lesser problem, her focus on deliveries was more with the Liaison Officer from Beauxbatons.

In the afternoon, Harry suddenly became aware he was expecting an answer which nobody had promised. He raced upstairs to the Owlery - no Hedwig.

Next morning, nothing. He checked the owlery again, starting to feel really nervous. Something had happened to Hedwig. The Dark Forces were intercepting post from Hogwarts. He was about to contact Dumbledore before he remembered all the owls coming in at breakfast. Still ...

Late that evening, he knew the letter was lost, lost with Hedwig. He climbed the tower once more, just to make sure.

And there sat Hedwig. A single eye, opened shortly, signaled him to get lost.

Harry felt like rejoicing - Hedwig was alive. Hedwig had done it. Coming down, his feelings were hardly better than minutes before. No answer ...

14 - Social Events

The students at Hogwarts started counting the days. Christmas drawing close, which meant the end of the term was even closer, and the Christmas Ball was closest.

They also kept Fleur busy, with her playing a kind of *postillon d'amour* between Hogwarts and Beauxbatons, trying to match singles into couples. When she stood somewhere, offering photos of the available ball partners, students gathered, pushing each other. When she offered to arrange meetings, the responses were considerably more reluctant.

The Beauxbatons quota of ball guests would be limited, less for the language barrier than for the real estate of Hogwarts' Great Hall, plus Entrance Hall, plus any adjoining room that could be used for that purpose.

Harry kept counting too, however the days since, not until. Four days had it taken until he found Hedwig back in the Owlery - that made two days since the letter's delivery. Then it made three, then four ... a week ... How long did it take to get some Firebolts? Exceeded the implied number what could be found in stock?

The stories in that book had omitted to explain specifically how long these wizards waited for a response - except the one who had waited months ... Should he count it as a bad sign, waiting?

Occasionally, Harry doubted very much whether he really should set hope in the Goblins' answer. They'll love it, McGonagall had said, yeah - only in which sense? Taking the opportunity to teach him a lesson? ... This Morony was just a name in a letter, and parchment was patient ... But no, wasn't his *client* the one that counted? Harry had seen that figure ... Had used his famous skill in reading leathery Goblin faces ... He was too impatient, everybody would tell him that, Lupin first place.

Dumbledore had sent letters to all parents. With reference to the Hogwarts Express accident, he had suggested that, over Christmas, all students should stay at Hogwarts. At the same time, he had invited all parents who "felt safe enough to travel".

For Harry, the only difference he expected would be a Hogwarts not as quiet as in previous years, with all the students around. On the other side, all of them around meant Cho around, like all the other Ravenclaw students. Almyra, for example.

It wasn't as if he had nothing to do, quite the contrary, even taking aside regular classes. High time to organize Christmas presents, for starters.

The list had grown significantly in this year, he manoeuvred with all resources available under the given restrictions, including Fleur, Charlie, help from the Weasleys, and Hedwig.

Owl order worked quite well, definitely better than orders toward Goblins ... Hedwig no longer spent her days in boredom. As a side effect, nobody found it strange when Harry checked incoming owls every morning.

He conferenced with Ron about a present for Fleur. They had taken lessons together, so it seemed only natural to find something nice together. Not having the faintest clue what to look for, they decided to discuss it with Hermione.

"Don't try to compete," said Hermione. "Find something very British."

Thoughtful advice, except Fleur detested a lot of very British things.

Then they involved Charlie, because Charlie could scan through Hogsmeade. The good news Charlie brought were yes, he had found something, the bad news, it was awfully expensive.

"Sorry," said Ron, "but that's way above my budget."

"And what if I balance out?" asked Harry.

"It would solve our problem ... Except, for me it wouldn't feel like a present from us together."

Ron hadn't said no, yet his argument held better than any other, made it impossible for Harry to discuss about the reasonable management of different financial powers. Still, with Charlie's discovery so enticing, Harry could feel how Ron was searching desperately for loopholes in his own arguing.

"What if Hermione takes part?" asked Harry.

"Let's ask her."

Even a split in three would not size it down sufficiently for Ron's financial limits. Which told Harry - Ron's suggestion clearly indicated that he would happily accept any formula, as long as it allowed him to keep his face.

They talked with Hermione. She was more than ready to contribute, as this idea solved one of her own problems. Not just the shopping alone - Hermione felt pretty sure she'd find a Christmas present from Fleur, and unbearable the thought she might be caught with empty hands. So she would join - up to a point, that was, after all, she didn't need to express her thanks for dance lessons.

It wasn't exactly back to square one, however, simple math still showed a significant gap.

"You found it," said Harry, "that counts a lot."

Ron grinned wryly. "Charlie found it - after both of us together sent him out."

"But Charlie's *your* brother ... Lupin says you must work to your strength," argued Harry. "Your strength is your family ... mine is simple money."

"Nice try, Harry." Ron looked pleased. "But not nice enough."

Luckily, Harry remembered more of what Lupin had said. "I know ... Listen - first we take off Hermione's share, we only have to deal with the rest ... Then we take off your budget times two, our shares ... What's left is split in four quarters."

Harry's fingers were counting. "First quarter - the Weasley family has found it ... Second quarter - I balance out with money ... Then I take the rest, and it gives me an ob on you - not a credit, mind, an ob."

"What's an ob?"

Harry explained.

"You mean - you can come along any day and say, hey Ron, do that for me?"

"Basically yes," corrected Harry, "except that an ob is bound by honour ... If I ask too much, it would give you an ob in return."

"And how do we agree whether it's too much?"

"Well, that's the trust." Harry made round eyes. "You trust me, don't you?"

For Ron, it still looked like a sophisticated trick to make a quantity of Galleons disappear, but the present was just too beautiful. And this solution didn't stress his short credit line.

They sent Charlie to Hogsmeade before someone else had the idea.

The second challenge in Christmas presents, of course, was Cho's. Harry went for the only help he could think of in this critical matter. Fleur.

She asked him what he had in mind.

"Nothing big," said Harry, "but special. It must be personal - not too intimate ... Something that cannot be found around the next corner ..."

"Oh, I know," said Fleur, "simple and perfect - that's what you mean."

"Exactly."

Fleur was checking her memory. "Could it be a Muggles item?"

"Is it beautiful?"

Fleur told him what she had seen.

Harry was delighted. Fleur's help in this regard alone would have been worth the difference between his and Ron's budget, provided he could trade this information - if trading was the right term. Anyway, those things were settled, Christmas could come.

The other major task ahead was his visit with Lleyrin the Fist. Dumbledore had agreed to that, although with some precautions. Harry would be escorted by a squad team on both ways. They would take off immediately after the arrival of the after-lunch patrol, assuming their report didn't show anything unusual. The pre-supper patrol would send a second team to escort him back. Depending on how long his visit would last, he might find time to chat with Hagrid.

"That's the VIP treat," called Fred after the discussion about the escorts. "V like vulnerable, I like incompetent, P for Potter."

When Harry drew his wand, George jumped to cover Fred. "No, Harry," he shouted, "it's not true, I stands for ill-disposed."

His interview draft was ready. Harry, Ron, and Hermione had worked together to prepare a list of questions. Ron's contribution offered help the Weasley way, he had played 'Ron Skeeter' in finding the most insulting formulations.

After checking with Hagrid what to expect, they realized that some more presents would be required. Giant guests were expected to bring something with them, and of course, the nature of that present would have influence on the atmosphere. Since Harry would represent all three of them, they needed three presents.

"I'll ask the house-elves for help," said Harry. "A large cake can't be wrong."

The others agreed. As good as the idea had looked, Harry found himself outperformed quickly by Ron.

"I'll ask Charlie," his friend said, "for ..." pausing dramatically, "a flask of dragon blood."

"Oh no!" cried Hermione. "And I wanted to brew a potion - one of Snape's tricky recipes."

Ron couldn't see the problem. What was wrong with this?

Hermione insisted that two presents as similar as that weren't acceptable.

Maybe she was right, although Harry couldn't help noticing her irritation about Ron's excellent idea. No question, dragon blood beat everything - particularly from a student whose Headmaster was Dumbledore, the world's most famous expert in its proper use.

Hermione fell in a frenzy, went almost hysterical, until Viktor solved the problem.

"Take this," he said, "with greetings from Bulgaria."

It was a sling, the standard weapon of a Bulgarian shepherd.

Hermione beamed at Viktor, confirming it could "stand against dragon blood - more so for a Giant." According to her voice, dragon blood came next to dishwater.

Ron just grinned.

Harry didn't grin. All of a sudden, his cake seemed the last resort of the spiritless guest. He went into the kitchen to talk with his house-elf friend.

"Dobby, I need your help." He explained the issue. A cake for a Giant chief, competing against dragon blood and a shepherd's weapon.

Dobby wasn't intimidated. "Harry Potter needs not to worry, sir," said the elf, beaming at the thought of his help being needed so desperately, "Dobby will make sure his can present the largest cake ..."

"Hold it, Dobby," shouted Harry. "We have to carry that cake on a broomstick!"

The large eyes grew even wider, then started to fill with tears. "He cannot do that, sir - Harry Potter cannot come with a tiny cake to a Giant! ... Ooohh, Dobby is too clumsy to help his great wizard ..."

Dobby was about to start the old habit of banging his head on something, be it a desk or a hot oven plate. The other elves looked horrified, not daring to come close to their unlucky fellow.

Elves and Giants ...

"Dobby!" Harry shook the trembling elf shoulders. "I know what to do!" He looked for a piece of parchment and a pen, then wrote some lines. Dobby, still sobbing, watched him. Harry held the parchment up.

*For a great Giant
from Hogwarts people
Harry, Dobby, and
the other house-elves*

"If that's written on the cake," explained Harry, "I can come with it - and with greetings from all of you ... That's a worthy present for a chief."

Dobby looked stunned. "Harry Potter would do that, sir?"

"Sure ... Isn't it great? Giant - Human - Elf ... that's as good as dragon blood."

Excitement filled the kitchen.

Harry escaped before the elves could express their thanks with more than a few shrill shouts. A moment later, and he would have come out looking like a Christmas tree, full of parcels in any size and colour. The presents were settled.

* * *

Now Harry stood at the entrance, waiting for the after-lunch patrol to return. On his back hung a knapsack, borrowed from Viktor and filled with parchments, pen, ink, dragon blood, shepherd sling, plus all the other items that might come in handy when visiting a Giant chief.

A large, disk-shaped parcel contained the cake, hanging in four strings from his left hand. In the air, the arrangement would be easier to handle than on the ground. A broomstick, realized Harry, was poorly equipped for luggage. This was true at least for his Firebolt, he remembered advertisements before the Quidditch World Cup Final for some family broomsticks which might be better suited to the task, he had never seen any.

Except for the patrol team expected back any minute, he had been offered free choice among the other teams to pick his escort. Of course, they had all volunteered for this adventure ride, although they could as well have saved it, Harry's choice was the girls' team, what else?

"Your visit's over before it has even started," George had said, "imagine - coming to a Giant chief with an escort of girls ... Ouch!"

It had been Angelina who had rewarded the argument, simply because she sat closer to George than Katie or Alicia. But the twins and Lee had scheduled themselves for the patrol that would escort Harry back to Hogwarts.

Three dots appeared in the sky across the lake. Within seconds, they grew to broomstick flyers, the triangle formation of the three Slytherin Chasers, doing their best to show off in view of the watching audience. They bolted down in front of the group, the two wings in sync, the tail a moment later.

"Air's clean," reported Adrian Pucey, the port wing, "ground too ... Good luck!"

Katie and Alicia jumped up.

Harry followed more carefully, a cake with some words written in marzipan was no Snitch.

Cho waited until he had reached some height, then followed.

It was an odd flight for Harry. Anxiousness for the visit ahead mixed with excitement about the air ride, the pleasure of flying close to Cho with the torturing knowledge that this counted as an exception, not the rule.

He waved Cho closer to ask her about Lleyrin. "You've seen him. - How is he?"

Cho shrugged, the movement hardly visible through her coat. "Well ... he's big."

Armed with this profound description, Harry saved his breath. Alone with Cho, he would have answered with a hard push of his Firebolt, leaving her for moments without a chance to follow. With the triple team around him, the same manoeuver would look like the tantrum of a spoiled child. And he had to watch for the cake - the wind was pressing against the packing, those strings seemed dangerously thin.

He tried to guess whether his skill and the Firebolt's speed together would be enough to catch the disk if the strings would tear now, couldn't come to an answer. His pride said yes but his eye told him their height over ground wasn't sufficient.

The camp appeared.

Katie and Alicia swerved down to Lleyrin's hut, dismounted, and turned, ready to catch the cake before it hit the ground.

"Have fun," shouted Cho, remaining up in the air.

Harry went down, carefully, until the two girls held the cake. He dismounted and took the parcel, shortening the grip on the strings.

"See you," said Katie, and she and Alicia went up.

Harry was alone. He moved to the door and knocked.

Steps inside, not louder than you'd expect from a human. The door opened.

Harry saw mostly legs, then Lleyrin stepped back. He seemed to know how to move in the presence of creatures as little as humans.

"Harry Potter. My home is honoured with your visit."

"Lleyrin - I feel safe as your guest."

It was the traditional welcome formula of the Giants, learned by heart from Dumbledore's instructions, which had been more accurate than Hagrid's remarks. *Good afternoon* would have been disgraceful, especially when said before the name. Giants had it with names. No titles. A sentence such as *Call me Harry* would be an insult, nobody instructed a chief how to call him.

Conversely, no Giant instructed a guest where to sit down. Figuring out the host's preferred place was a standard exercise of attention.

Harry stepped in, looked around. This was easy - Lleyrin had prepared a seat for him on which he would be able to use the desk for his writing.

Lleyrin's own place was obvious - something like an armchair, built from wood and deerskin. The distance was well chosen, Harry would be able to study his host from head to feet.

He opened the knapsack to extract the other presents. The Giants' equivalent for small talk was a careful debate of the guest present, or presents in this case.

He took Ron's flask. "Ron - Weasley is a friend of mine and the second student in our study project. He wishes you good health and sends this through me."

He had almost forgotten to say Ron's full name! Harry placed the flask carefully at the armchair's rest. He would have preferred the desk, only this was hopelessly beyond his reach.

Lleyrin took the flask and inspected it.

"As you have certainly guessed," said Harry, "it's dragon blood."

"Harry Potter, you select your friends well. This is a precious elixir."

Lleyrin's voice was resonant, the words came without an accent. Giants didn't say *Thank you*, not in these bloodless words. They didn't say *You shouldn't have done this* either - anything close to an instruction was considered impolite at the least.

Harry took the sling. "Hermione Granger is also a friend of mine and the third student in our project. She is Muggles-born, and she sends this to express her gratitude for your rescuing at the Hogwarts Express."

Lleyrin run the sling through his fingers. These big hands were pretty dexterous with such small items. "Hermione Granger has sent me a riddle," he said.

"It's a sling - the weapon of a Bulgarian shepherd," explained Harry. "It throws a stone ... here ... after wheeling it around and then dropping one end at the proper moment."

Lleyrin understood immediately. He seemed fascinated of the concept, made some tries with the empty sling. Then he held both presents up. "Dragon blood from Ron Weasley, and a shepherd weapon from Hermione Granger - Harry Potter, I would have assumed it the other way around."

"The friends of my friends are the explanation ... Charlie Weasley is one of the dragon guards and the brother of Ron - Weasley ... Viktor Krum, our squad commander who came from Bulgaria, is the - er, friend of Hermione Granger."

Lleyrin nodded, satisfied with the explanation as well as with the obvious care invested in these presents.

Harry opened the packing around the cake. The armchair rest wasn't wide enough ... The bottom was out of question ...

He walked forward and held the cake with both hands. "This is my own greeting for you, Lleyrin - and that of Dobby and his fellow house-elves in Hogwarts."

Lleyrin took the cake and read the writing, smiled. "Those funny little creatures - a good-luck charm you can eat!" He looked pleased. "Harry Potter, you are a messenger between the worlds - from Elves to Giants."

Harry felt pleased too, except that he didn't know what to answer.

Lleyrin sensed it and stored the presents away. Probably, this had been a very short small talk, maybe also the reason why the Giant started on something that sounded very much like the human version of it. "I haven't seen you passing by lately," said Lleyrin.

"This is because I was taken off the squad service ... For my own security ..."

Lleyrin seemed to wait for more.

"It's ... There's another reason," admitted Harry. "I know something - this knowledge must not fall in the hands of our enemy."

Lleyrin studied Harry's face which left no doubt about his feelings in this matter. Then he asked, "Harry Potter, do you know the Tale of the Careful Giant?"

"No - Lleyrin."

"His name was Bodragh near Waters ... But when he couldn't hear them, people called him Bodragh no Wonders, which might tell you something about his state."

Harry nodded. Nicknames among Giants - that seemed very bad.

"When Bodragh was old enough, he started to look for a wife. He found a girl who was ready to take him - must have been his personal charm." Lleyrin was chuckling, surprising Harry quite a bit.

"A young Giant in this situation has to ask the girl's family, this is an important ceremony ... So Bodragh was invited. His bad reputation wasn't unknown to himself, thinking about his future with this girl, he came to the conclusion it would be too dishonest for her to marry him. So he decided not to appear to the visit."

Lleyrin's expression made clear that this was considered the ultimate insult.

"This girl had a brother. The brother explained in public there was only one way to re-establish the family honour - by killing Bodragh. This would be no easy task because Bodragh was no weakling, just crazy."

Lleyrin paused, maybe giving Harry time to ask.

Harry waited.

"When Bodragh heard about it, he wasn't frightened. But he was very unhappy because either result would make things worse. He didn't want to die, so he would use all his skill with the Quarterstaff. This, of course, would lead to the girl's brother killed. So he decided to leave the town. He went into the forest to live as a hermit.

Bodragh had chosen a place well hidden from the town. But this place was territory of the forest people, Unicorns, Centaurs, and more. They were very upset and considered this a violation of the established balance between them and the Giants. They blamed the town and decided to punish it, raising crop failure, cattle illness, and other damage.

When Bodragh became aware of it, he realized what he had done. His own blame had led to a family blamed, which had led to the town blamed. He was very desperate, convinced his next action would certainly blame the entire Giants' community."

Harry waited for Lleyrin to continue, but the Giant kept silent.

Was it impolite to ask for the end of the story? He didn't know. Waiting still a moment, he searched for the proper words. "Lleyrin, I wonder what Bodragh did."

"What would you have done, Harry Potter?"

Harry felt trapped. Lleyrin's face expressed polite curiosity, with all the time of the world to await his guest's answer.

Harry decided to answer what he thought. "This mess, he was in ... I don't think I would have let it come that far ... Anyway, in his situation, I would have gone to the family ... Or maybe to the girl first ..."

Lleyrin nodded. After a moment, he asked, "The girl you were flying with, the cute little one, is she still in the squad?"

Harry had to grin. What would Cho say to this? "Yes, Lleyrin ... Her name is Cho Chang. She was one of the three girls that brought me here."

Lleyrin studied him again. Eventually, he said, "I have asked my questions, Harry Potter ... You came to ask yours, and those of your friends."

Harry took the parchments out, prepared pen and ink, and checked his interview list. The story of the Careful Giant was still bothering him. He felt an urge to explain the circumstances of his suspension, with some effort, he concentrated on the O.W.L. work.

"Lleyrin, you and your men decided to fight with us ... Which were your reasons?"

"The situation forced us to take side. This side is the better one."

"Why?"

"Is it by accident, Harry Potter, that you are on this side?"

"No, Lleyrin."

Harry thought of the Sorting Hat, then realized the Slytherins were *not* the other side.

"Lleyrin, what did you feel when the wizards came for help, after all the years of isolation?"

"Isolation of whom?"

Harry hadn't really expected an interview in newspaper style, with Lleyrin eager to be quoted in some parchment. He hadn't expected to be trapped by his own questions either.

It developed more to a discussion than an interview, his questions bouncing back, forcing him in the opposite position.

What did they think about the Giants of the other side? - What did the wizards think about the Death-Eaters? ... Did Lleyrin know what Voldemort had promised them? - More than they would earn, less than they could achieve by themselves ... And Dumbledore, what had he offered? - Trouble, that's why they believed him ... What did Giants think about people like Hagrid and Madame Maxime? - Lleyrin suggested to ask them, the habit of expressing other people's thoughts wasn't common among Giants.

Harry decided not to ask Lleyrin personally, with Hagrid's hut close by, the question seemed stupid.

He had stopped writing down Lleyrin's answers. He would create a summary from memory, not only because the writing under Lleyrin's eyes felt so awkward but also because he was caused to give answers by himself.

The discussion changed into a conversation. Lleyrin explained how Giants learned to fight with Quarterstaffs, Harry described Quidditch and team practice. Then he told Lleyrin how they had started the Giant O.W.L. project, and how he, Ron, and Hermione had split the work.

At some point, he had begun to use their first names only, became aware of it when Lleyrin asked, "What is your friend more, Ron or Weasley?"

"Oh ... neither," answered Harry, "because I know the Weasleys, so I can see what's him alone and what's - where he and the other Weasleys are alike."

"And Hermione Granger?"

"That's only Hermione," said Harry, "I saw her parents only once."

"So she's incomplete for you?"

"Hmm ..." He thought about the question, then grinned. "I think you're right, Lleyrin - although I wouldn't say that to Hermione ... She's a bit testy."

Lleyrin didn't smile. "Are you complete, Harry Potter?"

"I ..." He paused. "No. Voldemort has ... No, I'm not."

"Then I will call you Harry," said Lleyrin, still unsmiling. "This is the part I know better."

"Yes, Lleyrin."

Checking the time, Harry saw his escort would arrive soon. He just had time left for a short hello with Hagrid. Suppressing the reflex of a *Thank you*, he searched for a proper good-bye, then a last question popped up. "Lleyrin, does the story of Bodragh has an end?"

"Certainly, Harry - didn't you finish it?"

"Yes ... No, I only said how I would finish it."

"That's what I said."

"But ..." Harry hesitated, then said, "Lleyrin, I would like to know what happened to the real Bodragh."

The answer came with a smile. "Why? It's of no concern to you ... After all, he was Bodragh no Wonders."

Harry had the strong feeling there was no end, this was a trick story, used to play games. Lleyrin had used it to tell him something, all he had to do was figuring out what exactly it meant in his situation.

* * *

During the next days, he was busy writing a report of his visit. His first report had been verbal, given to Ron and Hermione during supper and afterwards. He didn't tell them about the tale of the Careful Giant, first he had to find out for himself what it meant.

On the surface, Lleyrin's message was clear, only it didn't fit. When Harry had talked about his suspension, Lleyrin had started with the tale - the tale of someone who would have been better off accepting the inevitable. What did it mean?

His first interpretation was, Lleyrin thought it wrong to suspend Harry only because he knew something. Then Harry became aware - it worked perfectly the other way around. Accepting the inevitable ... Did it mean live with the suspension?

It could drive him crazy ... Why didn't the Goblins respond? Giants laid mind traps, dwarfs laid soul traps, his own kind said unmistakably no ... What a mess. At least, he had the report finished.

When he told Cho about the visit, Lleyrin's remark came back to his memory. He asked, "Do you want to know what Lleyrin called you?"

Cho studied his face. "No."

Harry felt disappointed. "But ... it was funny."

"So you had fun?"

"Yes." He grinned at the memory.

"That's good ... Keep it - to yourself."

Harry felt irritated. The scene reminded him very much of the story of Bodragh, the end missing in both cases. Maybe it had to do with himself ... After all, he was still incomplete.

* * *

In the last days before the Christmas Ball, the squad was thrust to the background even in Harry's mind. End of term, Christmas, parents' visits, and - more than anything else - the ball were subjects of conversation at the Gryffindor table and in the Gryffindor tower. Ball partners in particular were good for all kinds of remarks.

Both Fred and George had made use of Fleur's *agency*, now they speculated about their partners from Beauxbatons, these girls' attributes, and language skills.

Katie and Alicia had, for once, followed Angelina's example by selecting Slytherins - squad members of course - as their partners. Harry hadn't seen nor heard details, still, somehow it felt as if Bob had played a role in the scheme.

Looking around, he suddenly noticed that one particular agreement was still unknown to him. Lowering his voice, he turned to Ron and asked, "Say, do you know who's Ginny's partner?"

"Actually, no."

It seemed to have slipped Ron's mind too. Glancing around, saw a diabolic grin spreading in Hermione's face. "You seem to know," he said, surprised.

Hermione nodded, beaming.

"What??" asked Ron incredulously, "she told *you*?"

Hermione didn't even bother to feel offended, just shook her head.

"Who told you?" asked Harry. "Her partner??"

The beaming turned left, then right.

"Fleur told you," said Ron.

Giggles erupted from Hermione. Another shaking of the head.

Which left just one possibility. "Viktor told you," said Harry.

"Yes," admitted Hermione, triumph in her eyes.

"Who is it??"

Normally, the tone of Ron's voice would have been good for cancelling any conversation until the next meal. This time, Hermione simply looked at a certain place down the table.

Following her eyes, Harry saw it had to be one of the two Bulgarian students, what's-his-name, Gregory something.

"Grigorij Sarat?" Ron, the assistant manager, was better on names than Harry.

Unfortunately, he was also louder. Ginny, not too far away, had shown some reaction. Watching her, Harry saw a lowering head and a slight pinkness.

"I have to talk with Viktor," said Ron.

It was Hermione's turn to gasp. "Don't be ridiculous!"

"I'm not ridiculous," snapped Ron. "It's my - er, responsibility."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Go and polish your badge."

Ron's eyes narrowed, a deep red climbing his cheeks.

"Sorry - I didn't mean it." Guilt and defiance were fighting in Hermione's face. "But honestly - you never played the older brother before."

Ron didn't answer, at least he no longer looked murderous. Still, his early leave was indication enough that he hadn't changed his mind.

It was Hermione who raised the subject again at the supper table. "So - did you talk with Viktor?"

Ron seemed busy with his dish. "Why don't you ask Viktor?"

"Because I'm asking you."

"Yes, I did." Ron was still playing with his knife.

But he had made Hermione apologize, nobody did this unharmed. She asked, "Was the information to your *satisfaction*, dear Ron?"

A sour grin appeared in Ron's face. "I interviewed him, and yes, dearest of all Hermiones, what I heard was fine." He turned to Harry. "Guess who interviewed me afterwards."

"Ginny."

Ron nodded. "She wanted to know everything Viktor'd said - wouldn't have objected a written report ... And if I find out more, I'm supposed to tell her."

Harry felt relief, sympathy, envy, in this order. Ginny behaving normal in his presence was a relief. Gathering information through a trusted person didn't sound wrong at all, particularly so if an older brother was employed. A big family had a lot of advantages. His closest thing to an older sister was Fleur, worlds better than nothing, still, totally different.

Maybe it was this episode that caused Harry to ask a question he wouldn't have asked otherwise. He had developed the habit of hanging around Ron's office when the girls' team was expected back from a patrol, with their schedule as familiar to him as his own time-table. Katie and Alicia used to tease him a bit, then he would have a short walk with Cho.

It was on such a walk when he asked, "By the way, who's Almyra's ball partner?"

"Nobody." It sounded irritated.

"How come?" asked Harry in surprise. Almyra didn't strike him as the neurotic type, not as much as ...

"Her own fault," said Cho. "First, she was busy all the time with that project of hers. Said she had no time, and besides ... Denied several offers."

Cho's disappointment grew stronger. "Then, when everybody started to talk nothing but Christmas Ball, Christmas Ball, she had second thoughts ... But of course, at that time, only the left-overs were hanging around."

"Nothing in Fleur's collection?"

"Might have been," said Cho grimly. "Might still be - but no, not for Almyra, Queen of the West Indies ..."

Harry suppressed a grin. For the first time in his talks with Cho, he could hear something as familiar as the little rows that came and went between him, Ron, and Hermione, in changing constellations. From his own feelings, he knew - an outsider did better not commenting on them.

The day before the ball, Ron came to lunch, sat down, and said, "We have a problem."

"What is it??" Harry's mind sprung to full alert.

"Charlie," answered Ron. "He was planned at home over Christmas ... Now the schedule has been changed - you know, his fellow guard is senior to him ... Anyway, Charlie will be here. And this means, he'd like to join the ball ... All the Weasley children there, except him - it drives him mad."

"And now he's looking for a partner," said Hermione.

"Exactly," replied Ron. "Any suggestions?"

"Ask Fleur."

"Done that," said Ron. "Beauxbatons girls rank high in the charts ... She's out of supply."

Harry knew a possibility, provided ... He refilled his cup, suddenly the food was so dry. He would go over, and he would ask ... No, if he would reveal his knowledge, Madam Pomfrey would have to deal with a severe case of injuries, and *not* from Almyra ... Chewing mechanically, he stressed his mind, preparing what to say.

"I might know more in a minute," he said to Ron after the meal, then walked to the Ravenclaw table.

"Hi, Cho, Almyra ... we need your help."

Almyra looked surprised at Harry including her in the conversation.

He explained Charlie's dilemma. "I thought you might have an idea," he finished, carefully placing words and intonation.

Cho's eyes started to glitter. Almyra's expression showed first signs of a flight reflex.

"Harry, give us a moment to ... check around," said Cho, gently pushing him away. "Say - in ten minutes' time at Ron's office?"

Harry strolled away, careful not to look back.

He informed Ron, and both of them went to the office. Harry felt it wiser not to spill any detail prematurely ... Not afterwards either, at second thought.

Fifteen minutes passed.

A figure came along the floor, alone - Cho. Reached them, said, "Hi, Ron ... I found someone whose schedule has changed too. Tell Charlie, he can arrive."

"Who is it?"

"Almyra."

"Really? I wouldn't have thought ... I mean, super, that's by far better than Charlie could have expected." Ron looked pleased.

"I'll translate that to the proper words and tell Almyra," said Cho dryly. "Right now, she's in a little frenzy, what with her dress and so ... That's why she sent me."

Ron nodded, accepted the translation offer unflinchingly.

Harry and Cho walked away. Out of earshot, Cho said, "Harry, I'm proud of you ... You managed without compromising anyone."

"Yeah," replied Harry. "One gets used to it."

It brought him a sharp glance from the side. But it was true, wasn't it? After a few minutes, he could drop the thought of the Goblins. Tomorrow evening was the ball. He had to finish something.

* * *

The preparations for the ball started after breakfast, unusually early for a Saturday. With a little charm, tasks could be performed awfully quickly, however, there was a lot to do. Students up to fourth year were pushed off, the older ones were supposed to lend a helping hand - er, wand, or to get lost.

Harry did his share moving tables and chairs, remembering a day when he had to do it with his bare hands. After a while, the difference didn't feel that big.

Lunch was a short and unceremonial affair, still shorter for Ron who paced through the corridors, parchments in his hands. Squad was at its own, for him, the assistant manager, the day offered hell come loose.

Eventually, the halls looked ready for the event, two gigantic banners hanging from the ceiling, one with the Beauxbatons' coat of arms, which showed two crossed golden wands, each of them emitting stars, the other with Hogwarts' emblem, the large 'H' in the centre of the four house signs, underlined by the ribbon-shaped school motto *Draco dormiens numquam titillandus*. There was little risk today, Charlie would put them to bed, or whatever were his duties at the fall of night, and would arrive in time to shower and dress.

With the work done, Harry and Ron were in dire need to do the same. Ron walked away to the Prefects' bathroom, which he used regularly and without any intention to share the privilege with more mundane students such as Harry.

It didn't matter, today the room's luxury would have been wasted on Harry. He dressed, checking his appearance in the mirror, grateful for not receiving any comment. His new robe looked quite dark, only at the reflection of light, flashes of green glittered on the surface. He was reminded of Fleur's suggestion to try a cologne, she already 'ad an idea, only he hadn't warmed for it.

Ron was back, dressing. His robe showed a dark grey, shimmering silkily. It looked great, Fleur had done an excellent job for a client as difficult as Ron and his hair.

"Don't forget your badge," said Harry.

Ron tensed his jaws. Yet Harry wasn't teasing, the Prefects with their partners would lead the promenade into the Great Hall, followed by the Beauxbatons guests with their partners, followed by common folks.

This proceeding sounded just fine for Harry, his last year's position on the public tray hadn't felt like something you would miss. He waited for Ron, they had the same way to the place where to expect the ladies.

Coming downstairs, Ron had to check the hall a last time. Badges probably caused this effect.

The band was settling for their performance, tuning instruments, creating sounds like a choir of moonstruck cats. It wasn't the same band as the previous year. The group of six young men and women called themselves *Skyport Convention*. From the discussions at the Gryffindor table, Harry knew they didn't rank as high in the charts as the Weird Sisters but held a broader range of styles in their repertoire.

The lead singer was a young woman, looking as unspectacular as her fellow musicians, definitely lacking the shrill fashion Harry remembered from the other band.

Ron seemed satisfied. They moved to the entrance of the Ravenclaw tower.

Padma arrived first, Prefect partners had five minutes less than the others. Harry caught a short glimpse of her light blue robe and her pleased smile at the sight of Ron, then he busied himself until the two had walked away. The couples would meet again at the table, with Ron as the assisting manager, it hadn't been a problem to find adjacent seats for the mix of Slytherin, Ravenclaw, and Gryffindor - not including the two oldest Weasleys and their partners who were seated at the *administration* table.

Ron had arranged and arranged until there was no place left for him at that table, one penalty he could avoid. Harry wondered how Almyra would feel.

A figure came down the staircase.

Cho wore a brilliant red robe, sparkling in the light, adorned with patches of gold at the neck and on the sleeves. She looked very oriental - Chinese, and very breathtaking. Her face too, it looked different - her eyes appeared more almond-shaped than usual.

Harry found his speech. "Cho - you look ... wow!"

"Thank you." She beamed, then examined his appearance, eyes shining. "That looks good ... I think we can go to the ball."

Harry seized for the small parcel he had prepared. "Before we do that, I have a little surprise ... Might come in handy."

For an instant, Cho looked startled at seeing the parcel. Recognizing its shape, curiosity grew in her face. She unwrapped it quickly. "Oohh - that's beautiful."

It was a Chinese fan, thin rice paper which, opened by Cho, showed a dragon. No doubt, the final touch to her appearance.

"Please move it," said Harry.

Cho looked questioningly but obeyed. As the fan was moved through the air, the dragon disappeared.

Cho stopped - the dragon came back. She moved again. The dragon disappeared, suddenly replaced by another shape - a phoenix.

Cho gasped. "How ..."

"Move it faster," said Harry, watching her happily.

Cho waved the fan until the phoenix was back, then quickened. The phoenix faded, on the empty surface formed a third shape, almost monochromatic, golden - a Centaur.

Cho slowly closed the fan, carefully putting the sheets together. "Where did you ... How did you ... I've never seen something like that."

"It wasn't that complicated," explained Harry, as casual as he could muster, "with dancing - cool air - a fan ... The add-ons - well, it was the specter that made me think of it."

"You did it??"

"With some help, yes." He felt no intention to tell her the details. Fleur had mentioned a fan during their dance lessons. Dean Thomas had *helped* with the painting, George with the revealing charm. The animals were his own idea.

"The dragon and the Centaur are obvious," said Cho, "but what about this bird? ... It's a phoenix, right?"

"Yes," Harry confirmed, "it's Fawkes."

Cho hadn't seen Fawkes yet. She hadn't heard the story of the Chamber of Secrets either, not in such details, at least.

This wasn't the time for details either, they had to take their position. Farther inside, the first couples formed to a column, the band was playing, pairs pushing, shuffling around them, the crowd moved forward, stopped, moved again, the hall full as never before, Harry couldn't imagine where all these people should find seats, thank God they had their own ... Passing the administration table ... Look there, Professor Trelawney, seen more often among the teachers since Drilencu was around ... Why's Hermione sitting there, smiling, looking great? - Of course, Viktor is member of the Hogwarts board ... Bill, Fleur, she looks incredible, silvery robe matching silvery hair ... There's Charlie, and Almyra, doesn't look unhappy at all ... Ron and Padma, waiting for them, their own seats across ... Done. They were sitting.

" ... more word from me is a waste of time with such a music waiting to be heard. I declare the Christmas Ball opened." Dumbledore sat down.

Ron stood up, Padma with him, the first dance was restricted to the upper classes.

Harry felt excitement, no - impatience, in a minute, they would be dancing too. He watched the couples, Ron doing well, even smiling ... Unknown faces, the Prefects from Beauxbatons or, as Fleur had told him, *etudiants elitaires*.

The music stopped, the dance hadn't been much more than an intro. The band started again.

"Let's dance."

They walked to the parquet. Cho was smaller than Fleur, Harry had to adjust. Her scent was different too, black hair in front of him, she was different altogether, but the steps were familiar, careful first, getting the rhythm, a first turn, it worked, another one too, amazing, Cho followed his moves, no earphones, the music filling the hall. They danced.

The dance floor filled rapidly. Then it was full, couldn't be, people still approaching. Their own space narrowed, leaving barely room for the basic steps.

It was impossible now to turn much, Harry realized how different this was from a training room for a single couple. It didn't matter, him getting used to it, he was dancing with Cho.

He glanced sideways, downwards, yet her face was almost hidden at his shoulder, then she looked up, their eyes met for an instant, her face - what? Examining, something else ...

The music stopped.

Now she smiled, sparkling in her eyes. "That was fine, Harry. Shall we sit down?"

"What?? ... Why ... Didn't you ..."

Before his startling could go worse, she grinned. "Only joking."

"Oh." He still felt shaky.

Cho crossed her arms over her chest, bowed. "I beg youl paldon, Hally."

The music started again. She came in his arms, they moved. At least some other couples had decided to sit, providing slightly more space for the rest.

"What was this?" asked Harry. "The mini version of the Chinese pardon ritual?"

"Hongkong English," replied Cho.

They turned, Harry's skill in parquet space economy growing.

"It reminded me of something," he said.

"Some - animal?"

Suddenly, he felt her fingers, no - nails, at his upper arm. "No, no ... of someone, I mean."

They moved, turned, moved.

"Of whom?" asked Cho.

"Dobby."

"Who's Dobby?"

Now Harry bid his time to answer. "Once I offered you an introduction, but you weren't interested."

He felt the instant when she understood. Glancing again, he saw her smile.

When the music stopped, she said, "I'll come back to that offer, and then - woe you, Harry Potter ..."

After another dance, they sat down.

Neither the space nor the pace had been enough to get heated up much, nonetheless, Cho used her fan with a childlike delight. Harry watched with pleasure.

They went through some more dances, then Cho was asked by a Ravenclaw student. Harry took this as the signal to start with what Fleur had called the *honneurs* - dances with other girls.

Padma first, because she was closest.

Hermione next. Dancing with her came close to meeting a different person. Hermione beamed, almost flirtatious, said, "Harry, you didn't look it up in the book, did you?" When their dance finished, she admitted, "Really, Fleur has done a terrific job."

When he asked Ginny for a dance, she accepted, rather pink. Somehow awkward, that, Harry had been sure this was over. Midway through the song, Ginny suddenly said, "I watched you dancing with Cho ... You two look great."

Harry stumbled and stepped on Ginny's foot.

"Ouch - sorry, my fault," said Giny. "I shouldn't talk like this while dancing, only it's the best opportunity in a while."

This sounded more like her normal self, Weasley-style, except that Ginny paused again.

"I need to put something straight." she said close to his ear. "You ... You'll always be my hero, for sure, but - you know, I've grown up a bit." The colour of her face didn't go well with the hair.

"It's okay, Ginny. I think I got the message."

After a moment, in which steps and colours steadied, Harry turned his head ostentatously to another couple including a student from Durmstrang and asked, "By the way - was it just the age?"

"Not alone," admitted Ginny, no longer embarrassed. "Anyway, shouldn't we do some dancing?"

Back at his place, Harry had an opportunity to look around while Cho was dancing with Ron. He saw Hermione with Viktor, Bill with Almyra, Charlie with Fleur. The twins certainly had no reason to complain, maybe except for the language skill. On the other hand, who if not them should be able to overcome such barriers?

He watched the band, which played more to his taste than the other one - or was it just the age? Their singer had a remarkably clear and vibrant voice, she didn't jump and twist, stood only there, the magiphone in her hand, her body moving slightly with her singing.

Cho was guided back to her seat, Ron went for some drinks.

"Those Weasleys," said Cho, "quite a family ... I'd like to know how it is with so many brothers."

Harry knew about Cho's family not more than their Muggles nature and that she was a single. Like him, only he was half-adopted by the Weasleys.

"And a sister", continued Cho, "who seemed to have a lot to tell you ... Although it looked as if she suffered from some overheating."

These blows out of nowhere ... They never failed to amaze him. This one, however, felt more tickling than hitting. "Well - I think I can summarize it by quoting the essential part. It was something like, You'll always be my hero, but ..." He grinned. "Honestly, it was the first time I heard Ginny talk to me Weasley style."

The green fire in Cho's eyes calmed down to sparkling. "Makes two of us, as long as it stops there."

Harry stopped grinning. Then it crossed his mind - this might be an opportunity to explain how unlikely something like that would be, seen from his perspective. Unfortunately, he wasn't used to skate on ice as thin as that.

Before he could find a decent answer, or declaration, the singer announced a "Special Treat" and ordered the audience to stand back and to watch a "Christmas card from Beauxbatons, presented by - Miss Fleur Delacour and Mr. Bill Weasley!"

They turned, watched as Fleur and Bill went through a remarkable performance of dance figures, as well as through several dance styles, at least that much Harry could distinguish. It showed him plenty to learn before the surface of a dance floor would be as familiar to him as the air space of a Quidditch match - or a squad patrol, although he pushed the thought quickly away.

The potpourri came to an end. The two dancers smiled and bowed to all sides, receiving a roaring applause, mixed with whistling and shouts of "More".

The singer appeared again. "After this fantastic intermezzo, it's time for our next event ... Ladies, listen, and gentlemen, watch - Ladies Choice!! ... Remember, anybody but your own partner. Our two performers here will start!"

She had barely finished when Fleur went straight to the teachers' table, curtsied in front of Dumbledore, and said something Harry could not understand.

Meanwhile, Bill had reached Ginny's table. After a slight bow to Grigorij, he guided his radiant sister to the floor.

Then a rush went through the hall as all other girls hurried to approach some target. Cho was up and off at once.

Harry saw McGonagall move to Hagrid's place. Several girls seemed to have focused on his own place when a firm hand gripped his shoulder, and a familiar voice met his ear. "Score - and hit. Just in time before those clumsies got you ... Get up, Harry, let's dance."

It was Angelina Johnson. As they went to the dance floor, she grinned, "First time I had to beat Alicia and Katie for scoring ... Ten points for me."

Her dancing style clearly favoured wild movement over artful steps. Harry was panting. "C'mon, Harry, that's your crash course for free", Angelina said. He had a feeling as if being confused him with a Quaffle. When they returned, he felt sweat prickling all over.

The band announced a longer break.

Harry listened to Cho. She told him interesting details of Chinese traditions, and Hongkong English. A different culture. He was reminded of his visit at Lleyrin the Fist.

"Lleyrin told me a story," he said suddenly.

He wasn't sure whether he really wanted to tell, the words had come out just so. There was no choice, he had to tell her. He mentioned at which point in their conversation Lleyrin had started, and repeated the story up to where the Giant chief had stopped.

"And then?"

"That's what I asked too," explained Harry. "And Lleyrin said, what would have you done?"

Cho watched him. "What have you done?"

"Writing letters." Her question, almost as expected yet totally different, had caught him off balance, stupid spy that he was.

"You're up to something," said Cho, "I can feel it ... Sitting around and writing letters while the others are in the air ... Cooking up some scheme with all those friends in strategic positions."

"I'm not cooking up something ... It's cooking all by itself." Realizing his masterpiece of an answer, he added, "And what does it mean, friends in strategic positions?"

Cho opened the fan and moved it. "Look here - Fawkes. I can hear him chirping 'Hello, Harry' when you enter Dumbledore's office."

Harry had to laugh at that. It brought him a short pause in the interrogation.

"All right," said Cho, "I don't think Dumbledore's involved - but I see others, in other offices ... Ron, for example."

"Ron - pah." Harry's irritation was raising. "Ron's not up with me on something. He has his job, and me out of the game - he doesn't object too hard ... Know what he said to me? 'Yeah, the trouble of the rich and famous' ... So much for Ron."

"Are you rich, Harry? ... Sounds good."

The sudden change of tack felt like a relief, but only for a second. He blushed. "No, I'm not ... My parents left me some money - enough to go through Hogwarts without trouble ... And Ron - well, you know, the Weasleys, they have no trouble counting what's left at the end of the month."

Harry told Cho the story with the Leprechaun gold for the Omnioculars, hoping it would lead her off the track.

Cho smiled sympathetically as Harry described Ron's touchiness with money issues. "My parents are in the trade business," she explained, "and we get along okay. But I can remember back - I mean I've seen my share of second-hand stuff."

For a moment, Cho looked much younger, a fierce determination in her face. Then, without warning, the blow. "When did Ron say that to you?"

When the Goblin letter arrived, thought Harry, feeling trapped. He looked around in the noisy hall. "There are too many people around ... Maybe in a few days - I'm not sure ..."

Cho was up. "Let's go get some fresh air." She took Harry's arm.

They went off into the park. Outside, they strode toward a bench, Cho's hand holding his ... Something Harry wasn't used to, still, he had no objections.

Looking at the trees, he remembered the Daily Prophet woman, Rita Skeeter. "Seen any bugs recently?"

"Nothing particular, outside cauldrons, that is." Cho eyed him. "Changing the subject?"

Harry giggled. "No, not at all. Just preparing ... I'll explain later - I mean, that's Hermione's story, she should tell."

They sat down on the bench, in fair distance to corners where other couples might be found.

"So you wrote letters?"

"One, actually ... I got a letter - besides, that was when Ron made his remark. And I answered that letter ... I had it checked with McGonagall. You see, I'm not playing hide and seek - not with her helping." Using McGonagall as an exoneration witness was a nice move, wasn't it?

"Very convincing," snapped Cho. "Professor McGonagall and Harry Potter in some conspiracy ... The last time I saw it happen had to do with Quidditch and the Gryffindor house."

Harry swore inwardly, reminding himself either he would share things with Cho from start, or he had to better watch his big mouth. The first option felt more appealing, if only things wouldn't happen so fast.

"Cho, please, don't press me ... You want to fly with the squad, right? ... I got a letter, and it ... It offered something. I answered to that offer, that's all I can say."

Thinking about his own words, he added, "They didn't offer a job."

"Certainly not," said Cho, "because all you're asking for is to get back to the squad."

"Yes, of course - that's what I told you ... And this letter might be a first step ... I don't expect an immediate solution, but I used what Lupin told me about walking toward a target in the mist ... I could overlook one step, and so I did."

"Helped by McGonagall?"

"Yes," said Harry, "to make sure the letter is in good order and so."

Cho's fingers were on his forehead, touched his scar, then ruffled his hair. "You're something," she said.

He sat frozen, although not feeling like ice at all.

Cho stood up, taking his arm. "I can't solve the riddle ... Let's do another step back to the hall."

For Harry, the evening could have lasted forever.

Sitting orders had been rearranged, Hermione and Viktor came over, then Charlie and Almyra.

He danced with Almyra to complete the *honneurs*. Not knowing what to say else, he asked about her work.

Almyra failed a step, gave an answer that was none, clearly she didn't want to talk about it.

This reluctance struck him as quite familiar, so he concentrated on dancing, now that there was really space on the parquet. Almyra's tenseness hadn't vanish entirely when the dance ended.

The conversation at the table was leisurely. Hermione promised to tell Cho the Skeeter story in a less crowded atmosphere. Charlie talked about his dragon-guard job, Harry about his visit at Lleyrin, keeping to the public part and to the more funny details like sitting high in the air and facing a figure of twenty feet.

The Skyport Convention adjusted their songs to the atmosphere, presenting ballads of longing and desire. When they started a new song, Harry recognized it immediately - one of those used during the dance lessons. He glanced over to Fleur and saw her looking at him. He walked to her place.

"I thought you wouldn't ask me at all," she said.

"I'm sorry ... I thought you'd prefer more experienced dancers," said Harry apologetically. "After I saw what you and Bill presented ... I didn't expect ..."

Fleur shook her head. "Dancing is *my* passion - yours is Quiddi'ch ... But as a teacher, I'm proud of my students, you and Ron."

Cho had watched them dancing. Coming back to the table, Harry found her smiling. "Something special?" he asked.

"No," answered Cho, "just some ordinary people dancing."

The singer announced the last waltz.

Harry looked at Cho, who nodded. They started to wheel around on the parquet, empty enough at this late hour and for this dance, Harry's favourite. It went round and round, down the line, across, back. A long one, after a few minutes, the hall with the tables was spinning around, leaving him and Cho as the only fixpoints, unable to stop, not willing to end.

When the music finished, they had trouble steadying, holding each other not to fall.

Harry guided Cho to the Ravenclaw tower, feeling drowsy from more than the last dance, his arm holding her, or supporting her, anyway, quite comfortably so. At the bottom of the staircase, they stopped.

"Harry - thank you for this invitation ... It was a wonderful evening."

"Yes ... with you."

Cho held the fan. "And for this. You're right, it's really handy ... Look!"

She opened the fan, came closer. Shielding their faces, fan in one hand, she took his head with the other, kissed him. "Good night."

When Harry opened the eyes to say good night, Cho was already hurrying up the stairs.

Tired as he was, it took some time before he could find sleep. Guessing by the lack of snoring sounds from Ron's direction, he wasn't the only one.

15 - Christmas Presents

Christmas morning, Harry woke with a rush of expectation. Today he would find presents and - equally important, maybe more - he would find out whether the others liked his presents as much as he hoped. He had spent a considerable amount of money on them, while this wasn't significant by itself, he would be bitterly disappointed if his efforts in finding a meaningful present were lost on the particular person.

For two presents, he hadn't found a way to place them in advance, the smallest and the most expensive ones in the collection. One was Fleur's, giving it to her would be an untroubled pleasure. He and Ron had tested it thoroughly, so to speak, delighted by its effect as much as by the thought of Fleur's reaction.

What Charlie had found, and what had required a tremendous amounts of semantics in addition to the money, was a small box. At first sight, it looked like a music box. Inside stood a small figure, a tambourine man but with several instruments. A tiny hat laid at its feet, bottom up as if waiting for coins from passers-by. You had to put a drop of some liquid into it, then the figure started to move, and a song was played.

The first they had tried was simple water, rewarding them with a shanty. Then they had used tea, receiving a menuet. With a dash of wine, a drinking-song came up. A drop of sweat brought a soldier's march song, and so forth. They had been unable to track any repetition, even at its hefty price, the box was a bargain.

The other present not yet passed over was Cho's. Fleur had delivered it only two days ago. Tiny was it, didn't move, didn't play - naturally so for a Muggles item. Harry had inspected the thing, examining the incredibly fine features, agreeing at full heart it was indeed simple and perfect. Less perfect was his imagination how to give it to Cho, or when ... Yes, today of course ... Where?. This task didn't look simple at all.

He started to unwrap the boxes that awaited him at the feet of his bed, Ron was busy the same way.

Harry opened the largest box first - from the Weasleys. As expected, it contained a cake and - surprise - a sweater. This year's sample presented itself green with light stripes down the sleeves, quite elaborate, he thought.

"Hey, Harry - been promoted to a flight lieutenant?"

It really resembled the rank stripes of a Muggles pilot, only the squad had no ranks, except for ...

"Oops - sorry, I forgot." Ron seemed only slightly contrite. "But look here ... for once, it's not maroon."

Ron's sweater showed the same pattern, its colours black with white stripes. A badge on it would look splendid - maybe better to keep the thought, Ron might not take it well.

The next parcel came from Hermione. Inside was - right, you guessed it, a book. *Magical Moves. Ritual Dances of Witchcraft and Shamanism, by Amanda W. Hopskin.*

Harry had to grin, his own present for her was a book too, about vampirism and its role in Muggles mythology. He scanned through the volume, found weird titles. Cauldron Dance ... Blocksberg Orgy ... Grass Dance ... probably nothing to try with Fleur or, hm, Cho.

Opening another wrapping, he found a collection of unfamiliar sweets and a small card.

- *Harry,
Happy Christmas to you. These are some of our latest developments.
Fred and George*

P.S. You might offer them to other people, but then again, you might not.

"Hey, Ron, listen to that." Harry read the card aloud.

"Yeah, I've got a similar one." Ron sounded sceptical. "Very unusual, them giving me a Christmas present." He pointed at the sweets. "I don't dare trying any of it ... Harry, be careful about whom to offer this stuff."

Harry watched as Ron opened the present from himself. His friend was holding it up and down, trying to figure out how it worked. It was a calendar and time organizer in book shape, very much like ordinary Muggles stuff - except for some magical tabs. The simplest opened at the present date, another one conjured a line showing the time until the next appointment, and so on.

"Wow - that's cool." Ron looked like a child with a toy wand. "Can't await to get it to work in the office ... Mind, even Myrtle might be able to use it." Next moment, a nervous flicker appeared in Ron's eyes.

Which told Harry - the thing in his hand had to be Ron's own present for him. It felt like a roll of parchments, only smoother. He opened it, found a strange fabric, like a mat. Unrolling it, he recognized what it was - a miniature carpet.

Harry flexed it, held it flat. Suddenly, the carpet straightened.

In a reflex, Harry released it, his hands twitching back. The carpet didn't drop. It rested in the air, motionless - a flying carpet!

"Put something on it," said Ron.

Harry took Hermione's present and deposited it carefully on the carpet. A slight dipping, then the carpet was motionless again. The cake came next, another dipping.

"Now touch it and say *Akh'oleth*," commanded Ron.

"Say what?"

Ron moved closer, held two fingers under the carpet, murmured, "*Akh'oleth*." Then he turned and walked away.

The carpet's edges curled slightly upward, then the thing followed Ron's steps.

Ron came back, touched the carpet. "*Eshem*" He stepped aside, the carpet stayed motionless. "Now you."

Harry laid his fingers under the carpet, feeling the raw side. "*Argolethe*." He stepped forward, checked.

The carpet didn't move.

"Pronounce it sharper," said Ron, "Cut it in two."

After some more tries, the carpet finally agreed to follow Harry. What a funny feeling, being pursued by a tablet with a book and a cake.

Harry touched it. "*Etch'em*".

The carpet wasn't impressed. Only the third attempt made it stop.

"That's marvelous, Ron ... thank you."

Ron beamed. "I thought - with Transportation and so, you know ... Be careful, though, using it in public. Remember - it's on the index! ... Would be a shame Filch confiscating it."

"How did you come across?"

"Working to my strength, Harry." Ron grinned. "In this case, the strength happens to be a brother working in Egypt."

No longer, thought Harry, then realized he didn't really know, only guessed. Fortunately, Ron hadn't seen his change of expression.

They went down for breakfast, Harry after pocketing a small parcel, Ron with Fleur's present. They were late, the carpet training had taken time.

The hall was noisy, full of laughter and shouts of surprise. Owls swooped through the air, delivering more presents.

Harry checked. Teacher's table - Fleur nowhere seen ... Gryffindor table - Hermione waiting for them ... Ravenclaw table - Cho sitting there, talking with Almyra, legions of other girls around.

At this moment, Almyra looked up, saw him, turned to Cho, said something, Cho - Cho stood up, was coming toward the entrance, passing Ron on his way to the Gryffindor table.

Reaching Harry, she greeted him, more pushed than urged him around the corner, out of sight. "Thought I'd better come over," she said, "the others are teasing me a lot ... No need for you getting it too."

"What do they say?" Harry felt startled, after the ball two days ago, it had to be something about him.

"You really want to know?"

He didn't want to know. "Yes."

"All right, might be better you hear it from me first." Cho studied the floor. "They call you *Young Potter*. Stupid brats."

Harry felt a hot rush in his face. He hadn't known what to expect, anyway, not this. His hand, shaky, grabbed into his pocket.

"You don't mind, do you?" Looking up, Cho found the answer in his face, said, "Forget it. I don't care ... For some reason or other, you get into things people think you're too young for." Her smile faded. "Like tournaments." A grin appeared. "The youngest Seeker at Hogwarts in a hundred years ... So what, I give a damn."

Harry held the small box, fingers unsteady. "Happy Christmas ... For you."

Cho took it. "Thank you ... By the way, you'll find something at your seat. It might come in handy - " a mutual smile at the familiar quote, "although here at Hogwarts, I don't expect you'll need it."

Another riddle, to think about instead of differences in age. Cho had the wrapping off, opened the box ...

"Oh my God ..." her voice came in a choaky whisper, "the Green Dragon ..."

What she held was a tiny figure, smoky glass of dark green, miniature red spots for the eyes. Small as it was, the details were perfectly carved, from the big nostrils, the ears, the claws, to the tail.

"It's so beautiful." Cho inspected the figure from all sides. "How did you find it?"

"To be honest - I had some help." From friends in strategic positions, he added in his mind.

"Thank you, Harry." Cho looked around. "Erm - I have no fan with me, so - that's all I can say now."

He was blushing again, grateful when Cho said, "Let's go get some breakfast before the others start looking for us."

Reaching his seat, he found Ron eating and Hermione smiling. His rosy face provoked no remark.

On the table in front of him laid a small parcel. He took it, examined its shape - long, thin. A toy broomstick? Opening it, he stared at two thin wooden sticks, about six inches long. There was a note.

- *Dear Harry,
Happy Christmas to you. These are Chinese foodsticks and I'd like to show you how to use them. The important thing is, they check the food for you. If the wood changes colour when picking some food,
DONT EAT!
CC*

P.S. It works on drinks too.

"Ron, look here." Harry held the sticks up. "I guess now we can test Fred's and George's sweets."

The others examined them. After making sure the card was stored safely in his pocket, Harry explained the special power in these sticks.

Hermione seemed impressed. "I read about Chinese magic ... They have a long tradition of poisoning each other in rather tricky ways ... Snape would be surprised even by some non-magical stuff they have developed there."

Ron was interested more in the practical purpose. "We have to figure out whether they work on the twins' jokes."

Fleur arrived in the hall. She came over to their table, greeted them all in the French style - cheek to cheek, twice. Harry and Ron were used to it, for a change, it was Hermione who blushed.

Fleur had a present for each of them, received hers from Ron - "It's from us three together" - and hurried to her table. Although being late, she was in no risk of finding empty dishes. Not too happy with English breakfast, Fleur had organized a constant supply of croissants from Beauxbatons. She had offered them to others, finding no one who tried more than once.

Harry glanced over to see if Fleur would open their present immediately. She seemed busy with croissants and coffee, so he opened hers.

A sandalwood frame, holding one of those magic pictures - the Beauxbatons castle, from high above. Small figures on towers, waving. Harry felt puzzled. Nice as it was, somehow it didn't match what he'd expected from Fleur. Flipping the frame, he found a note.

- *Dear Harry,
Joyeux Noel to you. This picture has more to it than meets the eye. Check the people in it more carefully. I am sure you will find out soon.
Fleur*

P.S. You might prefer to solve the riddle while nobody is watching over your shoulder.

Check the people ... He had no idea what it meant. Waving students, yes. So?

He scanned the picture again, not getting any wiser. Looking up, he saw Hermione holding something in her lap, delight in her face. Was hers the same?

Hermione sensed his stare, looked up. "The small tower at the left, Harry." Her eyes fell down again.

So she had the same, had it already deciphered - of course, she the brain champ.

Shielding the picture, Harry checked again. Then he saw what she meant.

In a window of that tower stood a waving figure whose hair was unmistakably Fleur's.

He touched the spot.

The figure curtsied. The Beauxbatons picture faded - since the ball, Harry knew this charm. On the surface, a shape appeared, formed to half-profile ... Cho!!

Harry gasped. Quickly, he scanned to find the reverse spot.

It was an awkward sensation touching all over the picture, trying to hide her again. When he touched her lips, the picture faded. Beauxbatons came back.

Exhaling deeply, he looked up. Nobody was watching him.

Noise and laughter from the teachers' table caught his attention. There was Fleur, surrounded by a small group. Harry saw her dipping a finger in a cup and dropping it at something. Heads came forward, then, after a moment, another wave of laughter. So she had found out too.

The breakfast was over, however the hall didn't empty. Students sitting with another cup, chatting, fiddling with presents, the tables full of wrappings, ribbons, boxes.

This morning's owl traffic had been remarkable, heavier than Harry could remember. It hadn't finished yet, a rushing made him look up to see another - no, two - three, four owls!

Somebody, not stopped from distance nor weight, had sent a larger present, quite large, actually ... long, like ... like ...

Heartbeat drumming in his ears, Harry watched the owls come down, swooping, to ... Viktor's place.

Viktor??

As good as he could from this distance, he examined the long box, trying to remember how his Firebolt had been packed. The shape was unmistakable, yes, still - it didn't look familiar.

The noise in the hall had faded. Heads turned to Viktor's table, watching him study the packet, ripping off some wrapping.

Another noise, from above, heads rising - more owls!!

This quartet came down to the Slytherin table, dropped an identical packet, climbed immediately.

Viktor had lost his audience, people were staring up to the ceiling, or toward the Slytherin table.

Murmuring grew, a shout - the next owls ... Also to the Slytherin table. Then the next ... Another one ... The noise in the hall was incredible, the first groups gathered where a box had come down. With eyes closed, one could have counted the quartets - each of them was accompanied by new shouts of surprise.

Around the tenth delivery, Harry identified the pattern, aware there was just one other person in the hall who could recognize it too. The order in which the packets arrived was exactly the order in which he had listed the Flying Squad members in his letter. Viktor had been on top, right, that's why ... But Viktor already owned a Firebolt, Harry felt sure he had specified that.

Thrilled to his hairs, he watched the turmoil that was heating up more with every new owl quartet. The number of groups was growing, other students spellbound, staring at boxes or watching the spectacle in the air.

Nobody noticed he wasn't joining a group.

The first boxes were open, all Harry could see was yes, broomsticks, all he could hear were sounds of astonishment, questions ... the word *Firebolt* didn't come.

Meanwhile, the owl rain had reached the Gryffindor table. Fred's sample arrived, then George's.

Harry decided to join them, desperate now to find out what exactly was in these packets.

He stood up, made a step, was stopped by a rush above his head - those four came down right on him, dropped their load at his seat. Harry's mouth fell open, his eyes following the owls disappear.

The air was empty - no more owls.

With trembling hands, he cut the box open. No watchers for him, Ron had joined the twins, Hermione at Viktor's table.

The box contained a broomstick all right, plus some other pieces Harry couldn't identify. The model was also unknown to him, totally different from a Firebolt - no glittery polish, no shining surface, the dark matter seemed to suck in the light.

There was a small plate. *Steel Wing Mk II*, and a registration number. He checked the other pieces.

Something like a belt, two others with some transparent, flexible material, a bigger, a smaller one. A booklet, *Steel Wing Mk II Rider's Manual*. A letter was folded inside. Harry saw other people reading too - also letters. He opened his own.

Two pages - no, two letters. Why two? Checking them, he saw the Gringotts emblem on both, then realized one was sent to him personally while the other addressed the receiver of the broomstick. He took the latter first.

- Dear sir or madam,
in the course of executing a client's order, we have the pleasure to provide you with a state-of-the-art tool you will find most useful. Our client, after being informed about a 'Flying Squad' at Hogwarts which would greatly benefit from a set of high-powered broomsticks, took care to have them found and delivered by the Gringotts' Technical Services team.

Certainly you might want to know more about our client's identity. Unfortunately, it is beyond our authority to reveal it. But rest assured that this sponsoring is made in the best intention, as Gringotts does not handle trustmanship without the proper care.

The Steel Wing Mk II model is not publicly available. It has been developed for the Magical Law Enforcement Squad, a task force of the Ministry of Magic. In the course of our efforts, we were able to acquire samples for you as well as for all other members of your team.

The manufacturer strongly emphasizes this precaution: Before using the full power of a Steel Wing Mk II, make sure you have made yourself familiar with the Safety Belt feature. Even for experienced fliers, this broomstick's acceleration is most unusual and may be more than can be held without the Safety Belt.

Aside from that, you will realize that the broomstick does not work until it has been individually branded. Please refer to the Rider's Manual for details.

We do hope you enjoy this very personal sponsorship, and wish you success in your duty as a Flight Squad member.

Yours sincerely
Dogan Defreak, Technical Services Director

Individual branding? Checking the groups around the earlier deliveries, Harry saw several attempts to make a broomstick behave as expected, staying in the air for the rider to mount. No success. One banged to the floor, raising an angry shout from the new owner.

He checked his own model again, then the other items in the box. With its dark surface, the broomstick emanated an aura of determination, of controlled power, seriousness. At least one piece was identified - the safety belt. It held the rider around the waist, was hooked into a ring before the saddle.

There was a large button. He pressed it - the ring opened. One feature that worked before the broomstick was - er, branded. He took the second letter.

- *Dear Mr. Potter,*
we notify you hereby that your Request has been resolved. The respective document has been removed from your vault. A protocol of the complete event has been added to our archive.

Our client wishes to express his great satisfaction with your choice. He referred to it as 'a remarkable example in the best tradition of Goblin Requests'. In particular, he was most pleased to hear the number of 29 involved which, as you may imagine, has great value for Goblins.

Your original claim was intended with Hogwarts as the formal receiver. For reasons of internal Goblins policy, this was not possible. The target recipients had to be individuals. However, as these devices need Personal Branding, this is just in coincidence with the technical matters.

As for additional conditions surrounding the technical problem, our client emphasized that it is beyond his scope or intention to meddle with internal affairs of Hogwarts. With this in first place, he felt nonetheless urged to quote the old Goblin saying, 'Why Sickles to mourn, once the Galleon is torn,' which he recommended to keep in mind.

We enjoyed having been of service to you, and await your more regular orders as one of our customers in due time.

Yours sincerely
Modragh Morony, Managing Director

So the broomsticks were assigned to the individual members. Didn't make a difference - well, it did, but not before the next year. Again this personal branding. And what was so special with the number twenty-nine? Four Quidditch teams and a squad commander made twenty-nine, wasn't his merit. At least they liked it ... Good.

Reading the quotation again, it dawned on him. Of course - twenty-nine knuts made a sickle, seventeen sickles a galleon. For the money-oriented Goblins, these would be lucky numbers, or whatever.

Sickles to mourn ... he tried to think about it, then dropped the thought - it was too much at once. This would come later, after those broomsticks had been made fly. He stored the second letter before anyone recognized he had one more.

The hall was in a frenzy. Squad members were asking Viktor, trying to receive an explanation. Viktor was discussing with Hermione, Hermione pointing to the Steel Wing in front of them, Viktor pointing to the letter in his hands.

After all the thrill, Harry almost laughed aloud at this picture, too similar to the day when his Firebolt had arrived. But the letters were signed by Gringotts - no way denying it. With a diabolic pleasure, he watched Hermione address McGonagall - for once the wrong person to support her position.

Ron came back from the twins. Harry saw them reading in the manual, exchanging comments with Lee and the girls. Maybe they knew more already, they hadn't received two letters.

"Ron - do you know what that means, branding?"

"All I know is, these broomsticks must be activated by their individual owners. Afterwards, they won't accept another rider ... Imagine, the Enforcement Squad, what they deal with ..."

"So after this thing is branded," Harry pointed to the Steel Wing on the table, "nobody but me can fly with it?"

"That's what the manual says."

Nobody else ... Twenty-nine single-minded broomsticks, for twenty-nine squad members - each of them owning another ...

"What about the old broomsticks?"

"Whatever," replied Ron. "Fred offered me his Nimbus Two-Thousand, George said his own is newer ..."

Harry stared at Ron, Ron staring back.

Harry had a Firebolt, fifteen minutes ago a top-level broomstick, and now ...

A glitter appeared in Ron's eyes.

"Ron - are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"I hope so." Ron tried to look expressionless, he wasn't as good as Bob.

"I think, I have a Firebolt to - dispose."

"Like Viktor."

"Viktor - he has Hermione to help him with that." Harry grinned. "I might need help too ... Of course, I'm not going to break into family bonds ... Which weigh a lot ..."

"Yeah, but - they can be overrated ... For example, a Nimbus Two-Thousand plus family bonds - well, I guess, that might be as good as a Two-Thousand-and-One, but still falls short of ..."

"... a Firebolt," completed Harry. "Sirius would never forgive me if it fell in the wrong hands, Ron, so ... I hope you take care of it personally."

"I promise you that, Harry ... Thank you." To Harry's surprise, Ron held out his hand.

He took it, wondering.

"I have to say something else," said Ron. "I like it around the rich and famous - contrary to what I said ... And I hope you'll be back in the squad soon."

Harry jabbed him. "Let's hear what Viktor has to say."

They walked over, only to find the path blocked by other squad members with the same desire.

Ron pushed his way through, there was no doubt he was needed to organize the next steps, and he didn't carry a Steel Wing. After a moment, Harry heard Ron's voice shouting, "Sit down, everybody ... SIT DOWN, DAMMIT!"

The members closest to the table tried to follow the command, blocked by the others who would do it in a second but first had to catch a glimpse of what was happening there.

Harry went back to his seat.

Slowly, the noise settled, the members trotting back to their places. Viktor was talking with Ron, then with McGonagall. Viktor stood up and announced a meeting in an hour, outside in the Quidditch pit, to do the branding with "all members", glancing toward Harry at these words.

Harry nodded.

When Viktor sat down, some members started once more toward his place, to discuss details, or maybe to offer a second-hand broomstick for the Hogwarts stock. Others sat reading, still others walked away to do the same somewhere else.

Harry didn't know what to do first, trying to talk with McGonagall or checking through the book.

Ron came back to collect his items. "I'm in the office ... Harry - don't burn your ass while branding." He left.

Now Harry was the only squad member still at the Gryffindor table. He caught McGonagall's eyes.

The Headmistress hesitated, then came to him. "Mr. Potter, you heard what Mr. Krum said. There will be the branding, and probably some other tests, or training flights ... I agreed with Professor Dumbledore you will be with the squad for these purposes." Her voice raised a bit. "With the squad, Mr. Potter - is this understood?"

"Yes, Prof."

McGonagall looked less sternly. "For more details, we should talk - later, and not here."

"I've got a letter," said Harry in a low voice. "I mean - another one ... Can you hold it for me?"

McGonagall nodded.

He handed the letter to her, watched her leave without a look at the parchment.

This done, he started to collect his presents and Steel Wing pieces. One hour, just time enough to go through the manual. He would read it in his dormitory, the right place to check Fleur's picture again, with nobody looking over his shoulder. With Ron in the office, he'd be alone.

That reminded him, what was in Ron's picture? Was Ron's present the ...

"Another letter, Harry?"

He jumped around. Cho! Had she seen him and McGonagall? What was no lie and still not the truth? "Yes ... And a broomstick, and a manual ... Some other things I don't know yet ..."

Cho looked excited, though not happy at all.

He tried a question. "What do you think of it? Looks strange, huh?"

"Harry, I swear," said Cho with a strangled voice, "with this thing, if we ever again have a Quidditch match against each other, I'll show you something you haven't seen yet."

"Which is?"

"How the other Seeker catches the Snitch before your eyes. You'll be surprised what a feeling this is."

He started to answer, stopped. She was right, he had lost a game but hadn't seen how the Snitch was caught. It had been Cedric ... Was it on purpose that the memory of Cedric came up right now?

Cho looked furious.

"Cho ... What ..."

"I'm mad! Mad at ..." Cho interrupted herself, too late to avoid some heads coming up from her shout. She turned round, hiding her face from Harry's alarmed glance.

After a moment, she shook her head, turned back, pointed at the Steel Wing. "What I think? - Yes, it looks strange ... Dead serious ... Enforcement Squad - right what I was looking for ... And this is the day."

Harry watched her. Cho had calmed down, although her voice still sounded bitter, her face red at her cheeks and her eyes.

She sighed, tried to grin. "What I was going to say ... I'm mad at - trying it out. I have to look into the manual, so - see you over there."

Before turning, she pointed at his box. "Don't forget *this* letter."

* * *

The manual confirmed what Ron had said. Branding had to be done sitting on the broomstick and tearing off a seal. Afterwards, the Steel Wing would revolt and buckle if any other body was trying to mount.

Studying the manual, Harry realized quickly that it didn't explain basic techniques of flying broomsticks, it was definitely written for experienced riders. What it did instead was explaining the parts and features of the Steel Wing that weren't expected from a normal broomstick, and probably didn't occur anywhere else. The Table of Contents already looked sinister - Stealth and Camouflage ... Spell Resistance ... Magic Impact Detector ... Anti-Theft Protection. On the inside of the back cover was a diagram with a legend.

He started with the unknown pieces.

The belt was already identified. The manual listed several reasons to use it, first of them the fact that *the full acceleration of the Steel Wing significantly exceeds the capacity of the mass power compensator*. In plain words, pushing too hard without being hooked to the thing could rip its rider off. Another reason was safety, even a rider knocked unconscious would be held - although not in an agreeable position.

He learned that the Steel Wing was programmed to carry its owner in this state *out of the combat zone* before it would slow down and then sink to the ground. The description created a weird image in his mind - a figure, hanging like a dead rat in the fangs of a sky terrier. Still, better than drop.

The big transparent piece was a wind shield, to be applied to the front of the Steel Wing. With the body pressed flat on the broomstick, it covered the rider quite well, allowing for higher speed and less exposure to the weather conditions. In addition, so the manual, offered the shield *a limited ability of deflecting spells*. All considered, the thing came close to an armoured broomstick.

The smaller item of the same material was an eye shield, fixed on a thin, semi-flexible helmet. Harry tried it. If he could trust the sensation in his fingers, the cap made efforts to adjust to his head. Knocking on it, he sensed a sudden hardening of the fabric. Probably not enough to hold a blow with a Quarterstaff, more designed to protect the head when crashing through underbrush. The eye shield could be flapped up and down, it covered the face from top to the nose. Water-resistant. No less.

The light-eating surface served a double purpose. One was stealth, the Steel Wing would not reflect any light in a night raid. The other was shielding, it provided a high immunity from curses attempting to malfunction.

Close to the belt ring, Harry found what the manual called a CDL - a Curse Detection Luminiscense. An attack warner - while the Steel Wing was in the focus of a spell, the spot would glow.

All very nice for an Enforcement Squad, but what about Quidditch? Harry wondered if the designers had compromised on the fine balance he was used from the Firebolt. If so, he might be forced to borrow his old broomstick from Ron for Quidditch matches, generally speaking, navigation was more important than speed. But he didn't really believe it.

The other features sounded more familiar. Shock absorber ... Self-regulating drift suspension ... He stopped - what about the instantaneous brakes? They weren't mentioned. Then he found the line. *Instant braking is provided up to about 50% of the maximum speed. Above this limit, time-to-stop grows to a maximum of five seconds.*

Harry started to itch for his first flight. He shouldered his Steel Wing and headed toward the Quidditch stadium.

* * *

The branding started unspectacular. The squad gathered in the pit, forming a half circle around Viktor. Everybody took his Steel Wing as if sitting on it, except that the broomstick had to be held with both hands, otherwise it would have dropped like dead wood.

"Seal off!" called Viktor.

Harry tightened one hand to hold the full weight, grabbed the small strip and ripped the seal off. Was there a short, tingling sensation - or had it been imagination? Anyway, the dead weight of the Steel Wing disappeared, the broomstick responded like a spring under a thin layer of softness, ready to jump.

"Hold it!" shouted Viktor. "Cross check!"

He dismounted from his own Steel Wing, which rested in the air like any other broomstick. Then he stepped to the Hufflepuff keeper next to him, said, "Let me."

He grabbed the Steel Wing and tried to mount. Next second, Viktor was lying on the frozen ground, muttering, cursing, holding the arm that had seized for the handle.

It was an impressive demonstration, not even the twins could be motivated to try the same.

Viktor's arm was badly contused. He would have to see Madam Pomfrey before joining the more advanced flight tests that were planned after lunch. For now, the squad was ordered to stay within the boundaries of careful experimenting, no show-offs, no full-speed dives.

When the first members jumped, shrieks and shouts of astonishment went through the air, indicating that Viktor's command was good advice.

Belt around the waist, Harry hooked the short rope in the ring and jumped.

Theoretically, he should get accustomed to this power device a bit quicker than others, with his Firebolt's strength as the level where to start. Even so, he decided to take it as easy as Viktor wanted. The manual had impressed him more than he had expected, the sight of some others, for moments hanging square from their Steel Wings before regaining balance, was warning enough.

He went through some manoeuvres, testing the steering control. It was fine, smooth, immediate response, nothing short of the Firebolt's accuracy. Nothing more either, but then, there had never been a reason to complain.

Nonetheless, the overall feeling was totally different, the slightest push threw him forward as if kicked by a gentle Giant, reminding him that his reflexes weren't adjusted yet, not after two years on a Firebolt which, until this morning, had been the most powerful broomstick money could buy. The jolting manoeuvres of the other squad members told him they had to fight still harder.

He drew a wide circle, intermittently pushing, stopping, pushing, slowing, gradually getting the touch for the finer scales. The bandwidth in which the Steel Wing responded with decent speeding-up seemed pretty narrow.

He swerved back, looked around. How did Cho get along? Then he saw her across the pit, exercising formation with what had to be Katie and Alicia. Well, right now, maybe the Steel Wing was improving her mood better than he himself. After lunch, when Viktor could use both arms properly, they would do a first investigation of the Steel Wing's power limit.

He wandered back into the building.

The atmosphere in the hall was different from any Christmas lunch Harry had experienced. The laziness of the breakfast had vanished, this morning's owl storm and the Steel Wings were the hot topic. When trying to prepare a strategy for the discussion that would come, the best Harry could find was to keep a low profile.

Fred was the first. "Oy, Harry, do you know more about the Steel Wings?"

"No - was a total surprise for me." True. "I never before heard of such a model." Still true.

None of the Weasleys had heard of them either. Enforcement Squad wasn't unknown to Mr. Weasley, in fact, he called them often enough, but he didn't hang around to watch. To be honest, he didn't care what they used, was more interested in Muggles cars.

Ron was next. "Who owns that much money? ... Who can spend a fortune for Hogwarts and the squad ... *And* has connections to the Ministry?"

"Don't ask *me*," said Harry, totally honest.

The sheer presence of the Steel Wings, their sinister look, their hair-raising features dominated the talk. Serious questions about the anonymous client would come later. Ron had marked the closest hit, except that the financial aspect impressed him more than the unknown identity.

Also, he had an achievement to protect - an anonymous sender wouldn't put his new Firebolt in jeopardy.

Hermione didn't ask. She looked very thoughtful.

Almost to the end of the meal, Ron already back to the office, Harry felt safe enough to do some conversation. "What's Viktor doing with his Firebolt?"

Hermione looked up. "Giving it to me, I guess."

"You don't sound very interested."

Her expression was indifferent. "Well - there are more interesting things."

"Such as?"

"Steel Wings, for example."

"Yeah, that's true." He tried a little challenge. "Were you satisfied with their origin - this time?"

Her answer told him - challenging Hermione had been a mistake. "You mean the letter from Gringotts? ... Not quite ... Okay, there isn't anything dubious with them - " a faint smile confirmed the hint hadn't been lost on her, "but it's strange ... A puzzle, a very intriguing one."

"A puzzle?"

"Yes, Harry." Hermione sounded like a patient teacher with a slow student. "Some weeks ago, there was *one* letter from Gringotts. Today, there are twenty-nine - that I know of."

Harry stared. "Are you talking about my letter? ... Hermione, that's absurd! ... I didn't get money ... I didn't order Steel Wings ... I was totally perplexed when I got mine - honestly."

"I believe you every word - that's exactly the puzzle," replied Hermione, her eyes glittering. "As you may have noticed, Harry, I was very reluctant with asking questions - and I'll tell you why."

"Why?"

"Because I had something better to do. Listening to the others. Listening to all the questions about who and why and how, and to all the wild guesses ... Listening to your comments, Harry - " her eyes met his, "which didn't come."

16 - The Raid

Hermione's words still in his ears, Harry marched to the Quidditch pit. So she was trying to solve the puzzle - without asking him ... Very unusual. When Hermione wanted to know something, she could be a pain in the ... So why not this time?

With other people, not being asked could mean they wouldn't expect a reasonable answer. Not so Hermione - such answers only made her push harder. So why else? To give him a rest? Lenience from Hermione - unlikely. There was only one reason he could think of - she felt certain she would solve it without his help.

Well, he couldn't change it. Hermione wasn't in the squad, she only had to keep it to herself, something she was much better at than keeping her nose out of other people's business. Actually, it wasn't quite correct to say she had to keep it to herself, she could discuss it with him ... Then he had to expect good advice whenever they were alone ... What a promising thought.

He was among the first students in the Quidditch pit. Probably, some squad members expected visits today, although most parents were awaited tomorrow - the Weasleys, for example.

Viktor wasn't there yet - certainly not because of some visitors ... Should he wait? Was he *with the squad* if Viktor still was missing and less than a dozen squad members hanging around? His conscience said no but didn't get a majority.

He mounted the Steel Wing.

Having shut his safety belt, he rose into the air. Some more low-speed training couldn't be wrong. He ran another circle, regaining the touch he had mastered before lunch.

The Steel Wing's reactions felt more familiar by the minute. Harry aimed at imaginary points in the air, not too far away, pushed a little, stopped. A real air target would be helpful, maybe a Quaffle - or another team member.

Checking around, he saw Viktor arrive.

Aiming alongside, so he wouldn't hurt Viktor should his calculation fail, Harry pushed harder, diving. The Giant's kick came less gentle this time, the belt tensed, relaxed again. He bolted to stop beside Viktor, came to a halt within a yard's distance from the planned spot. There had been no delay in braking, so the fifty percent level hadn't been exceeded.

"Viktor - your arm okay?"

"Yes ... Be careful with your targets."

Viktor didn't complain about Harry's actions, was obviously more interested in his own Steel Wing.

Very well then - where was the limit?

Harry started another circle, wider than before. Getting flat behind the windshield, he pushed in earnest.

It wasn't a kick, it was a blow. For seconds, he flew out of control.

He slowed down, steadied, started again, this time with more care while constantly speeding up. Was there still more? Yes - no limit yet. Bending slightly sideways, he started the arc, speeding, speeding.

The feeling of power seemed almost unbearable. A strong force pressed him in the saddle, getting stronger by the moment, the Steel Wing still accelerating. Harry felt like screaming with excitement.

After a second turn, he made a first attempt to test the brake delay. There was none, not as long as he was restricted to the space of the Quidditch stadium. Maybe if he would start from across the lake, only this was definitely not *with the squad* ...

The other members were doing similar manoeuvres, more and more reforming to teams, training formation flight.

Harry had no team - unfortunately so ... There were the girls, maybe they would invite him. He flew down.

"Harry," called Alicia, "you're jumping around like a young dog off the leash."

Katie laughed. Cho had a mischievous grin. *Young dog* - wonderful.

"What's your status?" asked Katie.

"*With the squad* was the term," answered Harry, "otherwise - to be seen. No solo, no twin ..."

"Wouldn't know with whom," said Cho, "so there's no risk."

"Uh-oh," said Katie, "poor Harry ..." Looking over his shoulder, she added, "Wrong - two twins."

Fred and George touched down. "Harry," asked Fred, "want some team practice?"

Harry glanced around. "Where's Lee?"

"He's got visitors," answered George, thumbing over his shoulder to the Hogwarts buildings. "His parents ... He won't make it today."

Harry's glance followed George's pointing. What he saw was a figure on a broomstick, approaching quickly. The broomstick looked strangely familiar, glittery - a Firebolt!

It was Ron. He came down, missing them by several yards, not looking cheerful. "Where's Viktor?"

"Running wild," replied George, his finger drawing a circle that indicated the air around the Quidditch pit.

"Dammit," hissed Ron. His eyes were scanning the air.

Something in his friend's face made Harry ask, "Ron - what's up?"

"We got an alarm owl - from the Giants."

It wiped the smiles off all faces.

"A group of them - some Giant patrol, ran into trouble ... Somewhere south of Hogsmeade ... Other Giants ... That's all we know." Ron scanned the air again.

Other Giants - and what else? Another thought struck Harry. "Ron - where's Hagrid?"

"Not in the school." The concern in Ron's face was disquieting. "In the camp - I hope."

Or with the group, thought Harry. Attacked by Giants ... Only Giants?? What if this was a combined attack like at the train? Dementors ... Hagrid and Dementors! The thought brought the decision.

"I'm going south ..." He moved. "Fred, George - ready?"

Ron's head turned sharply, Cho's too. "You're not!" she shouted, her voice thick.

Ron looked uneasy but didn't protest. Obviously, he had done the same speculations as Harry.

"Cho - Hagrid's our friend." Harry was pleading. "If there are Dementors ... Hagrid's been in Azkaban for two months ... If they catch him ..."

"You stupid fool! Are you crazy? You don't know what's awaiting you!" Cho's face was almost white.

Maybe so. There wasn't time to argue. Harry looked at the twins. "Now?"

"You're tail," replied Fred, hooking his belt. "Let's go!"

Harry mounted, hooked. Glancing sideways, he saw Cho snapping her belt. Then he was in the air.

Some distance to the left, a rider was returning to the pit, another squad member - no, Viktor. Too late for interventions.

Harry pushed, climbing, weight pressing him in the saddle. He remembered the eye-shield that was still up, flapped it down. He almost had reached formation distance to the twins, too close a moment later ... Why didn't they speed up? The Steel Wing could do better than that.

Fred turned, saw Harry behind them, looked past Harry. His right hand closed over his right eye, rested there for a second, then Fred turned back.

What was that? ... After an instant, Harry remembered, now grateful for Katie's lessons in the new tactical signs of the squad. Fred had signaled him to check his back.

Harry turned around, with difficulties holding the course. The girls were following! They were still behind, closing in.

Was it for support? - or to stop them? Cho's face had been a mask of rage ... There was always a point where she stopped arguing, then, it was make or break. And if it was break, here and now?

Fred had accelerated. Harry followed, shortening the distance. Fred's hand swung sideways, upwards, made a fist, touched his head - once, twice.

Another sign. It meant - what? ... Yes - of course, head!! Fred was telling him to change from tail to head - switching the formation from a triangle pointing backward to the opposite. It also meant passing the command from Fred, the port wing, to Harry.

Without hesitation, he pushed, pushed, pushed, as fast as he dared without losing control. Strong forces kept pressing, tensing the belt, trying to rip his arms off the handles.

The twins whooshed past, certainly following, pushing too, he couldn't check, not at this speed, flat on the Steel Wing ... a rear-view mirror, that's what's missing, he thought ... The rush of the passing air growing, no longer a whistling, now a steady rumble, surprisingly deep ... His body inside a narrow sphere of calmness, no sound could pass through the cover of compressed air ... What would happen if he tried to raise his head? ... So this was full speed on a Steel Wing.

He roared across Hogsmeade - not alone, hopefully. Figures in the streets, looking up and waving. No, not alone, he could see it from the way they were watching the spectacle.

The streets looked crowded, many parents had announced their visits in Hogwarts. Within seconds, the town was passed.

He slowed down, braking. Yes, now he could feel it, the momentum more than the brakes could handle at once. Turning, he saw the twins, pretty close, if they had been farther behind, the second until they recognized his braking had been enough to close the distance. They would need another sign to announce braking from high speed, what could it be, something close to the body, maybe a hand flat at the back.

Three more points arrived in the air, growing, slowing - the girls.

Harry held the Steel Wing with his knees only, moved both arms, outstretched, in a half circle upward to shoulder height, back to the handles. It was the signal for the others to close in and spread - scan formation.

At low speed, careful not to let the wind cover other noises, they scouted over trees, plains, bushes, trees again, more trees.

Nothing. Nobody in sight, whether human or Giant, no unusual sound.

The trees condensed to a forest, slightly climbing uphill. They reached the hilltop, descended again.

Somewhere, somebody was cutting wood, stopped ... Started again - knock knock knock, too rapid for the blows of an axe ... Quarterstuffs!! It came from somewhere to the left.

Bending sideways, Harry changed course. The others had heard the sounds too, the girls, having formed the left side of their scanning line, were in front now.

They slowed down more, he adjusted, suppressing the strong desire to push forward, to be on top.

The sounds had stopped. According to their last bearing, it had to be somewhere ahead of them. Another sequence of banging ... four, five - silence.

Cho, in head position, stopped dead. Her arms moved, elbows outstretched, then held to the body - 'Gather', meant this sign.

Harry pushed forward, slowed. Reaching her position, he saw an opening in the trees, widening to a plain that was fully enclosed by the forest. Banging again ... A movement, then he saw it - a dreadful picture.

Close to the middle of the plain, some Giants stood back to back, forming a circle, Quarterstuffs in combat stance - four, no, five, a sixth Giant sitting on the ground in their midst. Around them, other Giants, apparently more than twice as much, also in combat position.

There was no constant fighting, which explained the intermittent sounds, those in the middle were defending, those around attacking, stopping, feinting, attacking again.

Harry recalled the playing of the Giants' duel in the sceptor, the scene below looked similar, except there were many more Giants, and it wasn't sport he saw, this was a deadly fight. Two - no, three figures on the ground, motionless, between the fighters, the defenders in the middle - Lleyrin's patrol - were using them as a barrier that kept the attackers some more inches away.

The Giants hadn't noticed them.

Cho retreated out of sight from the ground, waited for the others. Her gaze met Harry's, then the twins'. "Okay, you heroes," she said thin-lipped, "what now?"

"We have to inform Lleyrin," said Harry, "and quickly ... His men down there need help badly."

"That's what I think too - although I wouldn't have been surprised to hear some half-brained idea about a broomstick attack ..." Cho pointed down. "At least, there's no Hagrid around."

Broomstick attack - Harry didn't intend anything as foolish as sending a Patronus - or any other spell - toward the ring of fighting Giants down there. Stunning a Giant took several wizards, aside from that, these Giant weapons ...

"If we had our bats, we could give them a run ... These sticks don't come faster at you than a Bludger."

Heads turned toward Fred, faces in disbelief. Cho's expression made clear what she thought - Crazy Harry had found his master. Katie and Alicia seemed glad they had come without the bats.

George seized in his pockets. His hand came up, he turned to Fred, eyes glittering. "Look here - what about them?"

Harry couldn't recognize instantly what George was holding. He saw Fred's eyes going wide, a grinning spread in his face. Then he saw it - Firecrackers!

Cho's arm made a slow movement in front of her face - the twins had lost their mind, couldn't distinguish joke from reality.

"Wait - " said Katie.

"Listen," said George, "we know what we're doing ... One pass - not more ... The surprise is on our side. For those down there - knowing that we've found them, it might make the difference they need."

Without earning more protest, the twins flew some distance back, gaining the range required to reach sufficient speed for the ride down.

Harry lurched a few yards forward to have a better look at their target.

What followed was a scene to keep in memory forever. No one else could have tried it with any hope for success, nobody than the twins, acting in perfect harmony, with years of experience in throwing and hitting at high speed.

They reached the turning point, came around. A nod from both, the Steel Wings kicked forward, accelerating incredibly fast, the twins side by side, ducked, their inner arms free, touching each other. Just before the others, they separated, passing, faces ahead, eyes narrowed, diving, almost crushing through the branches.

Harry's head spun around.

The Steel Wings swerved down, targeting the outline of the combat ring, one at each side, aiming alongside the attacking row ... down, close ... The defenders seeing them a split second earlier, gaining the crucial instant to prepare ... The twins, like a ballet, sharing one mind, throwing the crackers, immediately bending outwards sideways upwards ... out of reach before the explosions burst up, spreading arcs of colour and noise.

The attackers closest to the explosions jumped, turned in midair, twisting, desperately trying to balance between the new enemy and their opponents ... Turning back fast when they saw only sparks ... Too late, for some of them.

The defenders, using the instant of advance, lunged forward, Quarterstaff straight ... hit - and back. Two figures collapsing, a third staggering, gaining balance just in time before the next hit, stepping back.

One defender, darting forward, grabbed the Quarterstaff of his downstruck opponent, jumped back ... without turning, held the Quarterstaff behind - the sitting figure taking it, getting up, joining the circle!

Harry had counted. Seconds before, there had been eleven attackers against five defenders and the one in the middle - obviously unhurt, handicapped only by a broken Quarterstaff. Now it was eight to six, as different as day and night, not even taking into account the severe blow against the morale of the attackers.

The twins came back, beaming, hands empty, fists up, pumping the air.

"Brilliant!" shouted Harry. "You two ... Incredible!"

Katie and Alicia were shouting, waving, trying to hug the twins in mid-air.

Cho was smiling, her eyes shining, head shaking slowly. When the twins arrived, she called, "Beware of the Weasleys!"

"At your service, madam," replied George, trying a bow. Fred added, "No greater compliment ever, my lady."

"That's it?" asked Cho, ready to leave.

"Almost," replied Fred. "We have to split. Two for the Giants' camp, two for Hogwarts ... George and I will stay and hold contact here."

It was obviously the best plan. Whatever happened next, wherever the Giants moved, the twins would serve as a living relais station, easily detectable - assuming the other two riders would accompany the rescuing Giants in the air.

Katie nodded. "Harry - you should return to Hogwarts. Let Alicia and me go for the camp ... I think it's better that way."

Probably so - considering the fact that he wasn't supposed to be here at all. But he hadn't seen Hagrid yet, and wasn't it him who knew Lleyrin best ...

"True," called Cho to him, only she meant Katie's argument. "Get going!" She was already turning, so Harry would have no choice other than to follow.

"Okay, OKAY! ... Just a second."

Cho stopped, turned, her face telling him, *No more*.

"Back - yes," said Harry, "with a last circle around ... If we don't feel some cold like from Dementors, we can push."

"All right." It made sense, even for Cho.

Katie and Alicia were already off, gaining speed, heading toward the Giants' camp.

The twins went around to dive again, showing themselves, steering clear from the group in the center of the plain.

Close above tree level, Harry and Cho drove a wide turn. Eyes toward the ground, Harry tried to stretch his senses. He had still another reason for this final check, hadn't explained it, but perhaps Cho had thought the same. If the Giant patrol had been attacked right in the plain, they had seen all casualties, Giants - no Hagrid. But what if ...

Nothing on the ground. No figure, lying or upright, no traces of fighting, cold only the air, not his senses.

Harry shouted, "Okay - let's go."

Passing Hogsmeade in the east, they returned to Hogwarts, keeping the old patrol formation, Cho head, Harry tail. Cho kept slightly below maximum speed, leaving the top range for Harry to close in if required.

Harry's mind was still on the battle scene. Five figures in the grass ... he didn't know of which side.

Hogwarts came into sight - Steel Wing flights at full speed were pretty short. The Quidditch pit looked empty. Viktor stood waiting in the Entrance Hall, some squad teams with him. Harry and Cho walked over.

"Report!" growled Viktor - a very angry Viktor.

Harry obeyed. "We've found them - Giants only ... Six of ours, eight of the other side ... These were the numbers when we left ... The twins are there, hold contact ... Katie and Alicia went for the camp." Remembering the initial reason, he added, "No Hagrid - no Dementors."

"Sign off with Ron," said Viktor, "then join your Headmistress ... She's waiting for you." He made a face. "I haff got some words by that woman - I don't want to hear thiss again."

Which explained why Viktor sounded so upset. Harry could imagine the scene with McGonagall and Viktor, shouting at each other. Well, it hadn't been Viktor's fault - or had it? He had arrived too late for a quick decision ... Maybe Viktor was angry at Harry as much as at himself ... All this had started with him testing someone else's Steel Wing. Why not believe the book?

Because going by the book wasn't exactly Viktor's strength ... Not Harry's either, and a few seconds from now he was going to face McGonagall.

Ron seemed very relieved to see them. When he heard the story of his brothers' performance, a smile lighted his worried face, brightening when Harry told him about the resulting balance of powers.

"Good, good," said Ron, "and now for the serious part - Harry, McGonagall's waiting for you."

"I know ... I'll see her right away - the sooner, the better."

Outside, he turned to Cho. "I think it's only me she's waiting for - you don't have to come with me."

"Wrong," said Cho. "Badly wrong."

Harry didn't understand exactly what she meant, however, he didn't object. McGonagall's full rage, spread over him and Cho, might be slightly more acceptable than undivided.

The reached the office, knocked.

"Come in."

McGonagall looked grim. Seeing Harry didn't relieve her, more to the contrary. Seeing Cho didn't confuse her.

Harry reported again. The story of the twins' dive could stir no muscle in the Headmistress' face, certainly no smile.

"Mr. Potter, I remember giving you very clear orders about your outside service ... This morning, only hours ago. Please explain to me how this uncoordinated action fits to my orders - and to squad orders."

"It was because of Hagrid," answered Harry, his eyes at the table. "The alarm message wasn't quite clear ... Could have been Dementors, and Hagrid within their reach ... After his two months ..."

McGonagall interrupted him. "Mr. Potter, as good as your reasons might have been, it's unacceptable how you are acting ... There haven't been any Dementors, Hagrid's safe in the camp - while at the same time, there's more at stake ..."

She stopped herself, turned to Cho. "Miss Chang, I'm not your Headmistress, so I don't need to figure out whether your following was an act of responsibility or recklessness. Anyway ... if you would leave us alone ..."

Cho didn't move. "To discuss your little secret? ... Why?"

McGonagall stared at her, Harry too.

"I think I know it already," said Cho, "so you could suspend me too ... Except, in a few days, the entire squad will know."

"Why ... What are you talking about?" McGonagall seemed closer to stammering than Harry had ever heard. At least, she had found her speech quicker than he himself.

"What I'm talking about?" Cho sounded impatient. "You know pretty well what I mean. - How I know it? ... Because I had time for some clear thinking ... And talked with Harry a little more than the others."

McGonagall looked at Harry. "Did you ..."

He shook his head, while Cho answered already. "No, he didn't - Professor McGonagall. All I know from Harry is about some letter ... and then, this morning, I saw him handing a letter to you ... But as I said, this was just confirmation - by then, I had solved the puzzle."

Solved the puzzle ... oh God, thought Harry, Hermione will be next. He couldn't imagine how Cho had found out - *if* she had found out. Not that he felt much doubt ...

McGonagall had regained her balance. "Miss Chang, Mr. Potter, we have to talk with the Headmaster ... Please follow me."

They marched to the staircase, McGonagall first, Cho following, Harry trailing, a formation unused in the squad - which suddenly looked far away.

But then, they really would have to suspend Cho. Was she right? In a few days, the entire squad would ... He didn't think so, probably he was too much involved to look at it from the outside.

McGonagall opened the Gargoyle with the password. They climbed upstairs. The Headmistress knocked, opened the door.

Dumbledore looked surprised. "My dear Minerva - an unexpected visit ... And some more guests I'm glad to see safely back in Hogwarts." He didn't look as furious as McGonagall, didn't smile either.

Another resident of the room obviously was taking more joy from this arrival - Fawkes. Seeing Harry, the phoenix issued a sweet sound, fluttered through the room, and landed on Harry's shoulder. Harry felt a gentle nibbling at his ear.

Cho had watched, looked into Harry's eyes. "See what I mean?"

McGonagall seemed confused by Cho's remark.

Dumbledore said, "Miss Chang, it seems Mr. Potter has told you something - at least Fawkes is not unknown to you." He motioned them to sit down.

"Albus," started McGonagall, "Miss Chang has - has solved a puzzle, as she said ... I think we should listen to her explanation - and why she believes that in a few days the entire squad would know."

Dumbledore looked at Cho. "Miss Chang?"

"Harry told me about Fawkes, yes - but this has nothing to do with - with the reason why we're here. He didn't tell me anything else ... Didn't need to ... Everybody in the squad can figure it out ... I was a bit quicker, that's all."

"What did you find out?" asked Dumbledore.

"What - well, why Harry isn't supposed to fly around, why we've got these Steel Wings ... That's about it."

"Please show us your solution." Dumbledore's face was expressionless.

"Well - the first thing was Harry's suspension ... We got the information about the Death Eaters from you," she looked at Dumbledore, "and that Professor Snape is at risk, and that Harry is at risk ... And so he was suspended ... For obvious reasons, wasn't it? ... Too risky - nobody could follow his Firebolt ... It was the natural consequence, right?"

Dumbledore didn't nod.

"It was crap."

This time, Dumbledore reacted, a faint glimmer in his eyes. "I think I know what you're trying to express, Miss Chang, but out of curiosity, what is *crap*?"

"A Muggles term ... It means - er, an incoherent conglomerate of non-matching things ... In this case, arguments."

"Yes, what I thought," said Dumbledore. "And why were these reasons so - crappy?"

Cho's face was heated. "Voldemort wants Harry - that's nothing new at all. We know that since the tournament, since Cedric - was killed ... He had him, he couldn't hold him - certainly not a reason to change his mind ... So he wants him all the time - the time in which you, Professor Dumbledore, sent him against a bunch of Dementors - in which he was a squad member all right ... With his Firebolt nobody could follow but Viktor."

Dumbledore asked, "Is this a reproach, Miss Chang?"

Cho shook her head. "No ... Yes, a bit - although I'm certainly the wrong person to blame you ... Anyway, all I'm saying is just - there had to be another reason for your sudden change of mind ... The Firebolt - okay, that was an official justification, not more."

Dumbledore nodded. "Please go ahead."

"So, something was new. I didn't know what ... All I knew was Harry now had twenty-four hours a day to think of a way back into the squad - minus some classes, yes ... But for everybody knowing him better, it was no question Harry wouldn't sit back and just say, well - what a pity."

At these words, Cho's face looked slightly more heated.

She continued quickly. "So I thought for myself - what had changed? What made Harry so precious, all of a sudden, that he couldn't be exposed any longer? His person alone wasn't enough - I think I've pointed this out sufficiently."

Dumbledore nodded.

"The other events at that time gave me the clue," explained Cho. "A team was caught by Death-Eaters, and we became aware information is an important factor ... Then we heard about the information we got from outside, from an *espionage network* - your words, Professor Dumbledore - and then it was clear to me ... Harry knew something that was even more important than he himself, and it had to be about this network."

"Was this purely conclusion, Miss Chang?"

"More or less," answered Cho. "To get confirmation, I asked Harry a question and watched his face ... that's what I'm ahead of the others."

"Certainly," said Dumbledore.

Cho blushed a bit. "So Harry was suspended - out of the game, safely and snugly in Hogwarts ... Only there was this tiny little problem - he just couldn't stand it - was happy as a cat in the rain ... Everybody could see it, everybody could hear the wheels clicking in his head. He told me he was looking for a way back, but once more, this was just confirmation ... Anyway, for quite a while, nothing did happen."

Cho hesitated a moment, certainly not searching for words, more for what to reveal or in which sequence.

"And then ... comes Christmas - time for presents. And out of the blue comes this hail of owls and broomsticks ... the fastest you've seen ever, one for each member of the squad ... Where they come from, who has sent them - big mystery. But doesn't it just so happen they solve one of Harry's problems, that of the slower broomsticks? Whatever he did, his fingers had been in the plot."

With a calmer voice, Cho added, "I know from Harry that he received a letter, and answered it. This morning, I saw him handing a letter to Professor McGonagall. So for me it's not a guess - *I know*."

McGonagall twisted a bit.

"The interesting question is," continued Cho, "who has sent them. We all got a letter to tell us the news, and this letter comes from - Gringotts! ... Of course, a bank is just where you would ask for a broomstick, or a hobnail, or a nice set of cauldrons ..."

Listening, Harry grinned. Meanwhile, he felt very relaxed, a phoenix nibbling at your ears has this effect.

"... run by Goblins, further, it is well-known that Gringotts is used as the Goblins' public gate for business of all kinds ..."

Dumbledore interrupted. "This is *not* well-known, Miss Chang."

"Really?" Cho was genuinely surprised. "I thought it was - my parents do import-export business, for me, it's a known fact ... Anyway, we can safely assume this client should be searched within the Goblins."

Dumbledore nodded.

"So far, it was just a chain of fairly simple conclusions ... The next part is a bit more tricky, but not too much. Why would the Goblins send broomsticks to the Flying Squad - more, why Steel Wings? I don't think you can buy them anywhere ... I wouldn't be surprised if the Enforcement Squad never saw them, if they were prototypes ... Anyway, I see three possible reasons."

Cho's finger came up. "First - the Goblins do what they can to get Harry out into fresh air, so a passing Death-Eater can catch him ... No matter what the letter says, this could be a reason ... A weak point is, how do they know? But we'll come to that."

The next finger. "Second - the Goblins do just the opposite - they try to protect Harry as strongly as they can ... Of course, this requires that they don't know about his suspension - but I could imagine a letter that just says, 'Dear Goblins, it's pretty risky with the squad because they're all so slow. Any idea? Yours, Harry.' ... Not quite his style, but for the squad ..."

Harry didn't move. Indeed, his letter had been different, still, Cho was only listing possibilities.

"Third - the Goblins don't give a damn this way or the other. All they do is to send what Harry has asked for ... In this case, Harry could have written anything, as long as there's a line saying 'We need fast broomsticks' ... These are the possible reasons I can see ... Did I miss something?"

Dumbledore ignored the question. "Please go ahead."

"Now, let's check them ... The first version can be dismissed pretty quickly. One reason is its weak point - how do the Goblins know? It could only be Harry's letter, but why would Harry write them if not for good reason? ... But there is a better proof. If these Steel Wings had come unexpected - that is unexpected by *everybody*, you two - " Cho looked at Dumbledore and McGonagall, "would have intervened immediately ... But you didn't. So you *knew*. Looking at you this morning, seeing you smile happily, was enough to drop the first option."

"Did I?" Dumbledore was smiling now.

"Well - so-to-speak." Cho hastened to continue. "The second version doesn't raise any such conflict. The Goblins want to protect Harry because he's precious to them ... Why's that? Because he himself, or his knowledge, has to be kept away from Voldemort ... If that's true, we've found the mysterious network - the Goblins."

Cho waited a moment, watching Dumbledore and McGonagall. No reaction, while Harry himself was too fascinated by far to produce any treacherous sound or movement.

"Still," said Cho, "there is a weak spot. Why don't they send a letter saying, 'Dear Harry, please keep inside, do it for us.', or why don't they send a Firebolt or two? ... Twenty-nine Steel Wings leave a dent in every budget ... So let's look at number three. They send them because Harry wants them ... I mean, he was as surprised about them as everybody else - the point is, they spent a fortune. Why? ... There's just one possible reason - Harry did something for them, and they felt obliged to do it."

Harry hadn't really followed Cho's chain of logic. So it was a real surprise hearing Cho come as close to the Request as this statement.

"But then - what was it what Harry did, or at which opportunity? ... Sure, he has this knack for the rich and mighty ..."

It was Harry's turn to blush.

"... and somehow he's always found in the middle of the action, but I couldn't imagine anything in the rank of twenty-nine Steel Wings ... Then, thinking about the weak spots in versions two and three, I saw it ... Put both together and - bingo - the weak spots disappear! So my final interpretation is this ..."

She had everybody's full attention.

"... Harry did something for the Goblins. In the course of doing this, he came to know about their role in our fight. They had an obligation, and they had reason to protect him. Harry asked them for broomsticks, and they sent the Steel Wings." Cho turned to Harry, exhaled. "I really would like to know what you did for them."

Harry looked at Dumbledore.

Dumbledore said, "Remarkable, Miss Chang. Except for minor details, your conclusions are correct. So you deserve the truth - that's why I'll answer your questions ... With some Goblins as my guests, I asked Harry to give an eye-witness report of the evening in the Wizard Tournament. This was important in our - meeting. I intended to let him do it blindfolded, hiding the nature of his audience ... It didn't work this way - Mr. Potter will certainly tell you the details. So we decided to let him see, in order to receive his report. As a result of that, he knew about the Goblins. The final conclusion was obvious - on the day I informed the squad ... In return, the Goblins awarded him a Goblins Request ..."

Cho's flat hand hit her forehead. "Of course - a Request! ... Stupid of me not to think of it!" She looked at Dumbledore. "Which category?"

"Privileged."

"Holy dragon ..." Cho's voice was a whisper. After a moment, her eyes narrowed. "Wait a second ... You're trying to tell me Harry's got a Privileged for telling this story?? ... Try again."

"Miss Chang," answered Dumbledore, "if you agree, I'll follow your free style of conversation and call you Cho."

Cho reddened. "Sorry, Professor Dumbledore ... er - yes, of course, I'd like it ..."

"Thank you, Cho." Dumbledore smiled broader, became serious again at his next words. "A Goblins Request for a story tale, however sad and bad, is certainly inappropriate. On the other hand, if you look at the Request as an award for the story itself - for its outcome, what do you see? - Aside from saving himself, from returning with Cedric's body, Harry informed us within minutes about Voldemort's revival - giving us time to react immediately."

Harry stared at Dumbledore. He hadn't thought of it that way.

Cho nodded slowly.

"But it's even more than that ... A privileged Request is a mutual bond, binding both sides forever." Dumbledore looked at Harry. "You have claimed your Request, Harry, and you have received what you wanted, but it doesn't stop there."

Harry considered the Headmaster's words. "You mean - this is a permanent ob for both sides?"

"An obligation? ... Yes, that is exactly the term for it. They are bound to help you now and later, you are bound to what is awarded - keeping the secret is a temporary issue, the bond holds you in the fight against Voldemort - for me, this is the essence of the award."

"That's okay," said Harry, "for as much choice as I have ..."

Cho looked at him. He couldn't decipher her glance.

"The Request also influences our decision what to do with both of you and your knowledge," said Dumbledore, making Harry's eyes widen. "The Steel Wings are a clear message - toward me, for example. What the Goblins are saying is obvious ..."

"They want us to use them - me included," said Harry, his heart beating faster.

"Yes," confirmed Dumbledore. "And for everybody not getting the clue, there is this quote in Harry's letter," he looked at Cho, "the ominous letter of this morning."

He took a parchment from his desk. Harry recognized the Gringotts' emblem.

"The unknown client," said Dumbledore, "recommends to remember this Goblins' saying, *Why Sickles to mourn, once the Galleon is torn.*" He looked up. "Harry, how do you interpret this?"

"I don't know," confessed Harry. "I didn't find time ..."

"Cho?"

She didn't hesitate long. "If something happens to Harry, their least worry is the revealing of their role as an espionage network."

"That's my interpretation too," said Dumbledore, "as well as that of Professor McGonagall."

Cho didn't look pleased. "I could sign that statement - any time, but ... Why do they everything to get him exposed?"

"To understand Goblins," said Dumbledore, "a look at history is quite helpful. The Goblins' history is full of rebellion, fierceness, fight. Goblins are warriors at heart. I understand the message this way - Harry is already exposed, has been since the day he survived Voldemort's first attack. Protecting him in Hogwarts is a natural act, while hiding him in the building for twenty-four hours a day is the wrong move. They send this message - in the form of the best equipment you can find in the wizarding world to protect a squad member."

Harry's grin tried to reach his ears.

Dumbledore saw it. "But - there is a big *but*. As before, we have the obligation to keep their secret and - of course - to protect Harry against the risks we are supposed to confront him with. That brings us to the question how to balance you, Cho, and you, Harry, with your knowledge and with the squad?"

Dumbledore looked thoughtful at Cho. "I do not agree with your statement that the other squad members will find out soon by themselves ... I think you had a few advantages."

Harry's mind was torn between the image of himself back in the squad, and the image of Hermione who was close behind Cho in her thinking process, or maybe she had figured it out already. Should he tell Dumbledore? He returned to the conversation.

"... force that made you see, the same force that is more often referred to as blinding."

What had Dumbledore said? And why was Cho blushing so deeply?

"So the first conclusion is, a team with you two alone would nicely separate the knowing from the non-knowing ..."

Suddenly, Harry could calculate again. "It would also reduce the risk for the Goblins," he said. "It would be only one team that's - er, critical."

Dumbledore smiled. "Numerically correct, Harry ... Playing with more numbers, this would imply a second twin team - " he looked at Cho, "your current partners."

"Katie and Alicia."

"Yes. This is of course a violation of the squad rule which says a patrol team consists of three members ... But I'm sure everybody will agree - the Steel Wings have fixed the number of squad people to twenty-nine. So, leaving aside Mr. Krum, we simply cannot form twenty-eight members into triple teams only ... What I have in mind is to establish these two twin teams, which have to be restricted in their flight routine a little more than the others ..."

Harry looked anxious. Did it start again?

"It could be specified like this, the twin teams are allowed for regular patrol, except that they are not allowed to investigate unusual findings closer ... On the other side, if both teams agree, they may form a quad team any time which then is sufficiently equipped, better than the others."

Harry beamed.

Cho looked already more interested than sceptical.

"Harry," said Dumbledore, "every attempt to keep you out of the action fails miserably - if this is the right term, looking at the results ... I would have many comments on that flight to save Hagrid - some of them with Professor McGonagall, some different - but I can make it shorter. I will hook you to a security chain of three links."

Now what was this, thought Harry. Could he fly, could he not ...

"The first link is your team partner, Cho. Whichever flight you want to do, she has to agree. I believe this is the best control we can make work."

Cho beamed.

Harry looked still more interested than sceptical.

"The second link is an extension to a standard rule. Mr. Weasley - Ron - will work as your *anchor*. It simply means you sign off from him when leaving, and you sign on to him when returning."

"Sure," said Harry, "that's the standard rule."

"No," corrected Dumbledore. "The standard rule says you sign off in a list which is found in Ron's office. Ron may or may not be around. This is the rule for the others. For you, the signing must be personally."

"A-ha."

"I'm not going to talk about what-if's, Harry. Just remember, this is how we fulfill the bond with the Goblins - yours as well as mine."

"Yes," said Harry, sobering up. "I see."

It wasn't quite true. In his lessons with Lupin, he had been supported in the concept of fighting a necessary fight, once the decision was taken, even against rules and agreements. It had been something like that what had made him gather the twins and rush south of Hogsmeade. The result gave him right ... or, hm, barely justified it ... Or was it pure luck?

And now this bond, in a way more flexible than any rule but, in contrast, unbreakable. It was easy to recognize the moment when a rule was broken. It was considerably more difficult to decide whether an action was in the sense of, or against, the bond. Assuming he had one of those inspirations, and they were in some conflict with the standards, what then? ... The Goblins were warriors, said Dumbledore ... So?

"The third link is, like the second, an extension to the standard," said Dumbledore. "In contrast to all other team members, you didn't pass an exam yet, Harry. Before this organization with the two twin teams takes effect, you will do an exam patrol with Cho ... right after the Christmas visits, the sooner the better."

"Okay," said Harry.

Dumbledore looked him in the eyes. "Your exam, Harry, will be different from the others. To return to the squad, you have to pass it ... that means, you have to complete the patrol on your Steel Wing and sign on with Ron."

That sounded very bad. Harry asked, "How different?"

"It will be more than just one single test scenario. We - that is the same team as for the squad tests - will try to catch you, to get you off your broomstick ... with the only restriction that you have to survive unhurt ... Harry, we will play Death-Eaters - for them, the restriction is the same!"

Oh God ... Snape, Drilencu, McGonagall ... worst of all, Dumbledore himself ...

"Cho," asked Dumbledore, "you are not under test, but you will of course be affected. Do you agree?"

"Oh yes ... if Harry comes through, I know it's not a bloody foolish idea to fly patrol with him ... If he doesn't, he has to admit it is."

Harry stared at her. "You think I'll fail - right?"

Cho stared back. "I'm your team partner - I won't cheat ... There's no doubt, the odds are against you - us, I mean ..." She shook her head. "No - I think you'll come back - with or without me."

17 - Family Matters

The raid was the hot topic during lunch at the Gryffindor table, with the twins and their story in the focus of attention.

Katie and Alicia came next, not only were they witnesses to confirm yes, it was true what Fred and George said, they also could offer their own story about the flight to the camp, the scouting for the group of Giants Lleyrin had gathered within seconds, and the final rejoining with the twins - closer to the camp than where they had left them.

After recognizing the broomstick riders, the hostile Giants had realized quickly - pretty soon, they'd be surrounded by a larger troop with only one thought - to let them know how it felt defending against a majority. They had stopped fighting, to retreat, to gather, to disappear in the forest.

Fred and George, as they confessed, had been tempted to follow but decided to stay with their own group. These Giants, tired as they were, made no attempt to pursue the defeated attackers.

Some time later, Lleyrin and his men had arrived. After hearing about the events, Lleyrin had invited the twins for another day, then had sent them home. The Giants had to take care of the three bodies on the ground - two comrades, one enemy, as Fred and George learned - duties for which the squad members were neither required nor welcome.

Harry appeared as a minor figure in this drama, which was just fine with him. He had enough to think about, aside from listening to the details of what had happened after his and Cho's flight back to Hogwarts. His contribution became the subject of discussion only shortly when Lee, pretty mad at his bad luck, was quarreling his parents had found the worst day in the year to visit him.

Harry thought about Cho's last words in Dumbledore's office, about the exam patrol, about the bond with the Goblins, about Hermione, sitting opposite him and ...

"What did McGonagall say?" interrupted Ron his musing.

"Oh - she was furious ... But then - well, we went to Dumbledore, and - to make a long story short, I have to do an exam patrol ..."

"What a pity," said Hermione.

"What?"

"To make a long story short."

Harry studied her face, forcing himself not to look over to the Ravenclaw table. Hermione's expression was blank, not revealing how far she had come in her own thinking.

"And then?" asked Ron. "Once you've passed the exam?"

"Then I'm with the squad ... Either in a twin team with Cho, or in a quad team that includes Katie and Alicia."

Hermione looked surprised.

Study history, thought Harry ... or was it a hint she hadn't figured out yet? Whatever, as long as Ron kept hanging around, Hermione wouldn't tell him, wouldn't ask him. According to his own preferences, this could hold for a while.

How to save this state? ... It was Christmas, he remembered, and there had been more presents than a Steel Wing.

"Hey, Ron, shall we test our sweets?"

"More adventures, at the same day? ... Why not?"

They decided to give them a try in the Gryffindor tower, hoping to find some volunteers, whether in the full knowledge these were twins' sweets, or without this information.

In his dormitory, Harry loaded all sweets, his and Ron's, onto the servant carpet, added the Chinese foodsticks, and led the small convoy with him on top into the Gryffindor common room.

The carpet found admiration from the other students. However, when he and Ron offered a treat of sweets, the reaction was disappointing.

"Where do they come from?" asked Seamus Finnigan. "I bet it's a present from Fred and George."

True, as they had to admit.

The result was, everybody would accept a sample only after witnessing somebody else eating them - *and* after watching the effect.

"Fred, George," called Harry, "give us a hint!" He hoped their glory of today would ease them enough to tell the truth - or at least not to lie. Hadn't it been him who had caused ...

"No need to worry," said Fred, "these are candidates for serious business ... I'll tell you that much - the effects fade without a counter spell."

"I'll tell you more," added George grinning. "What you see there includes *Fred's Funny-Talks* and *George's Glorious Goggles* ... Then there are *Star-Spangled Sugar Pearls* and - yes, *Calamity Candies*."

"What's what?" asked Harry. *Calamity Candies* - no thanks.

George looked surprised. "Didn't we mark them? ... Must have slipped our mind - anyway, you'll find out."

Harry and Ron checked their combined collection.

Four types - provided the twins had told the truth. Then why could everybody see so many more shapes and colours?

After a while, they agreed these were indeed four types, one of them in several shapes, another in several colours, including blue, green, red, brown, yellow, and white.

The door opened. In came Angelina - followed by Bob.

There was a hello, welcoming Bob together with some teasing, then Angelina announced she had promised Bob to hear today's story from first hand or, better still, mouth.

Harry and Ron were on their own with the sweets, leisurely watched by Hermione.

"Okay," said Harry, "let's see what the sticks can tell us." He took the Chinese foodsticks and tried to hold them single-handed, so he could pick a sweet. It didn't work.

Hermione offered to show him.

He declined - this had to be Cho's privilege. After several tries, he found an arrangement which was probably still wrong but good enough for the time being. He picked a piece which, from the outside, looked like a small triangular cake, covered by a light frosting. It belonged to what he and Ron had identified as one type in several shapes.

The sticks, ivory-coloured while in quiet state, paled.

Harry was still holding the cake when suddenly the sticks returned to their original colour.

"What does it mean?" asked Ron.

Harry didn't know. "This stuff is certainly jinxed - but that's nothing new ... I guess Fred said the truth - the effect fades by itself after some time."

Ron remained suspicious. "Sure ... And how long is some time?"

Harry dropped the piece and took one of those which appeared in various colours, a red one.

The sticks reddened, not very intensive.

He waited to see if the colour would fade again. It did, only it took longer than before.

He picked a green piece - the sticks greened. He took a white one and, yes, the sticks paled.

The third type of sweets looked like ordinary peppermint pills - small, white, hard surface. Harry picked one.

A rapid stream of colours moved over the sticks, from one end to the other, then the sticks returned to normal.

"Looks nice," said Ron.

"Yeah ... on the sticks." Harry offered a pill to Ron. "Want to try?"

"No need to haste ... Check the other."

The fourth type looked very much like a Chocoball. Harry picked one.

The sticks - did they look different? He dropped it, took it again. No reaction.

"That's my first try," said Ron.

"Go ahead."

Harry felt more suspicious. He was ready to believe that none of these sweets really hurt. Under these premises, what did it mean if the others created strong colour effects and this one nothing? ... Well, they would know soon - Ron was already eating. He watched him.

Ron didn't change, didn't choke, or cough ...

"Do you feel something?"

Ron swallowed, opened his mouth to answer. There came no sound from him - rather, two bubbles formed, hanging in the air, milky on the surface.

"Hey, Ron - is this a bubble gum?"

Ron opened his mouth again, his lips moved like speaking, only what he produced was a rapid sequence of bubbles, smaller ones and bigger ones.

Harry stared.

Ron's eyes had widened considerably. He opened his mouth, as though speaking slowly and pointedly. Out came a single bubble.

Harry watched him. "Are you okay?"

Ron nodded, not daring to speak - or to try.

Suddenly, with an almost inaudible sound, the first two bubbles popped. "Not," said the first bubble. "Yet," said the second.

Harry gasped.

Ron looked as if understanding, had calmed a little.

Then Harry understood it too. He asked, "Did you say that?"

Ron nodded.

They watched the other bubbles. Ron's hand grabbed the last one. The bubble burst ... "Something".

Seconds later, the other bubbles popped by themselves, the smallest first, the largest last. What came out sounded like nonsense, especially because the intonations were at the wrong places.

"No - an - not - it's - this - like - ball - stuff - choco - tastes - ordinary."

Harry giggled.

The twins had noticed. "Oh," said George, "Ron has found Fred's Funny-Talk ... Ron - say something."

Ron looked angrily at his brother. An instant later, a new chain of bubbles erupted from his mouth, smaller and bigger ones.

"I know," said Hermione. "The shortest words pop first."

"That's correct," said Fred. "that's the funny part."

They waited, watching the bubbles.

The other students had noticed too. For a moment, the room fell silent. Then the popping started.

"I - it - how - can - long - does - take - until - speak - again - normal."

"In a minute, it will be over," said Fred. "We're still trying to make it last a little longer ... Ten minutes sounds right."

Waiting a moment, he looked at Ron. "Try it."

"Bubble."

Ron could speak. He used it immediately, swearing at his brothers, who reacted quite as if these were the nicest compliments.

Ron had relaxed. "Well - it's more fun for the others ... At least, I'm one ahead - Harry, your turn."

Harry felt trapped. Of course, Ron was right, he had to test the next type. Only - some minutes ago, the colour effects in the sticks had looked less dangerous than the missing reaction with Fred's Funny-Talks, having wised up a bit, he wasn't sure any longer.

Even so - Ron's look left no doubt what was expected of him. If he wouldn't eat one of these sweets quickly, the Gryffindor tower would resound from bad remarks about *elephant* students, ready to confront a Giant but trembling at the sight of sweet little sweets ...

Harry inspected the collection again. The type with the various colours ... Maybe it wasn't that bad - something the others would laugh about ... Which colour? Blue - no, not blue.

He took a yellow one ... shoved the whole thing in and chewed. Excellent - so far.

Could he still speak?

"Oy, Fred!" Yes, it worked. "How did you make them? ... They're delicious."

Fred grinned. "You should know the answer, Harry ... Can you spell *house-elf*?"

Harry didn't feel anything - normal, a little edgy from the expectation.

Ron was watching him.

Harry checked his own body. "Nothing so far ... Ron - can you see something."

"Hmm - no." Ron examined Harry. Suddenly, his eyes grew wide, then a grin appeared on his face.

Watching it, Harry recognized something like appreciation.

"Have a look, all!" shouted Ron. "Look at Harry!"

Harry could have strangled him. "WHAT IS IT??"

"Harry the cat!" Ron had fun - oh yes. "Harry, you have cat's eyes."

Harry darted to the mirror at the wall, checked his face. These eyes - oh no, big, shining, yellow eyes, sparkling ...

"Harry, let's see!" The others came around.

Katie grabbed him, turned him. "Wow ... Harry the tiger."

Hermione came, looked, grinned diabolically. "No - Harry the Goblin!"

Harry's twisting looked quite naturally.

Yes, the others agreed, Goblins had yellow eyes too, but 'Harry the Tiger' found more supporters. Except for Hermione, the girls found it great, wanted to try for themselves.

Katie, hands over the servant carpet, stopped. "Fred - how long does it hold?"

"Ask George - these are George's Glorious Goggles."

George was beaming. "Should be gone by tomorrow."

"Should be ... Or will be?" Katie's glance remained suspicious.

Ginny was quicker. "Gimme a red one! ... Red eyes and red hair ... must look terrific."

They watched Ginny. After a moment, shrieks and shouts, Ginny running to the mirror, squeaking, more delight than desperation.

Harry studied her face. Terrific wasn't the term he'd used ... nightmarish came closer to it.

The other girls surrounded the carpet. "Harry - a blue one, please." That was Katie.

Alicia, having blue eyes, asked for a brown one.

Angelina pushed through. "Is there still ... yes, can I have it?" She wanted yellow eyes like Harry, in her dark face, the effect was a real show-stopper.

"Bob," said Angelina, "give it a try."

Bob stopped admiring Angelina's eyes. Smiling, he took a sample - a white one. "Let's see - white to white." He put it in his mouth, chewed.

"White??" George came over. "There are no white ones ... Bob, what did you eat - a triangular one?"

Bob nodded.

"Oops - Bob, you've caught a Calamity Cake."

Bob's eyes narrowed. "What ..." He stopped, his hand flew to his mouth. For a second, it looked as if he tried to spit out the cake, except it was already eaten.

Angelina pulled Bob's hand aside, studied his face. Her yellow eyes widened, her expression not scared at all - thrilled, yes ... "Bob, you look ... I could ..."

The others, including Harry, came looking.

Bob opened his mouth, made a snarling sound - two sharp, long eye-teeth protruding, giving him the appearance of a vampire.

Alicia said, playfully, "Bob - bite me!"

Angelina wheeled around. "No! ... He's *my* vampire."

"What an egoistic girl." Alicia looked disappointed, maybe only half-playing. She turned to check the new faces. "Hermione - you still have your own eyes! C'mon, don't be shy!"

Challenging Hermione ... Harry watched expectantly.

Hermione stepped to the carpet, examined the sweets left. "Nice Googles are out ... I have brown eyes by myself ... I'll try those." She took one of the sweets resembling a peppermint pill, started to suck it.

"Courageous girl," said Katie.

Hermione shrugged. "Not at all ... These must be the Star-Spangled Sugar Pearls, the only ones left - except they're a little strong in taste."

She exhaled to create a peppermint wave. What came out was a sparkling stream of miniature stars, glittering in all colours of the rainbow, disappearing quickly.

"Look!" cried Ron, "Hermione - the fire-breathing dragon!"

Hermione's head snapped around, her glare at Ron. "You ..." Her words drowned in a new stream of stars erupting from her mouth.

The others watched in admiration. After a moment, they applauded, shouting, "Do it again," and, "Hermione - through the nose!"

Hermione had calmed down.

Fred came to her. "Five minutes - at the maximum."

And really, about three minutes later, Hermione's breathing became invisible again.

This was the signal for the others to grab the pills Harry and Ron offered. Within minutes, the Star-Spangled Sugar Pearls were gone. Nobody wanted brown eyes, nobody wanted to find out what the other shapes of the Calamity Cakes meant, Angelina would have been interested in triangular white ones, however there weren't more. Later that evening, Harry dropped the left-overs into the waste basket.

* * *

Parents' visits started early the next day. Most parents had announced themselves for the afternoon, while some of them came before lunch, intending to treat their children in Hogsmeade.

Dumbledore had agreed to it, quite hesitantly, and the Headmaster's reluctance had little to do with the fact that Hogwarts' food quality would be hard to beat. As Harry knew from Viktor, Dumbledore had asked the Giants to run guard patrols around the town while Viktor, together with some teams formed by students without visiting parents, would fly frequent patrols up and down the way to Hogsmeade.

After lunch, Harry escaped into his dormitory. The Great Hall was full, the Gryffindor tower was full, parents everywhere, so he decided to stay out of the way. Lying on his bed, he tried to imagine his exam patrol, scheduled for the next weekend.

With or without Cho ... He didn't like the thought at all, although such a situation seemed more than likely - stunning a team partner had been one of the standard attacks in the other exams. He concentrated on the Steel Wings, his mind examining each of their remarkable features and the possibilities they might offer. After a while, he fell asleep.

A rattling at his shoulder brought him awake, pulled out of a dream in which Goblins were wandering through Hogwarts.

It was Ron. "Harry, get up - Mum and Dad are downstairs."

Still drowsy, Harry asked, "You sure I'd come?"

Ron looked incredulous. "What d'you mean, sure? ... Mum would give me hell if I'd come back without you ... Get moving."

Harry felt a rush of joy. He would always wonder how easily and naturally the Weasleys had *adopted* him, this wasn't something he could ever think of as obvious. He tried to imagine the Dursleys in Hogwarts. The picture made him giggle.

Ron muttered, "It's not funny, Mum getting at you."

Harry giggled more, then quickly explained the misunderstanding. The last thing he needed was Ron feeling teased about his mother.

Discussing ways how to drive Dudley into craziness, they went downstairs, found Ginny and the twins sitting at a table. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were nowhere seen.

"Where are Mum and Dad?" asked Ron.

"Upstairs with Dumbledore," answered Fred. Toward Harry, he added, "They are waiting for you. Something to talk about."

"Uargh."

Harry had a feeling unfamiliar but easily recognizable. Being the subject of a discussion between teacher and parents, whether natural or by habit, was rarely good news.

He headed for Dumbledore's office. The gargoyle was open. Reaching the door to the office, he heard the voice of Arthur Weasley.

"... can't put him on a leash. Besides, it would be no good. In the tournament, we couldn't intervene. The fact that we can do it now ..."

Harry knocked. The last time he had tried eavesdropping, the false Moody had sensed him immediately. In addition, what he heard convinced him he should participate in this discussion immediately.

"Come in."

Stepping in, he found Dumbledore sitting with the Weasley parents.

Still before Fawkes had a chance, Mrs. Weasley came rushing. "Harry, my dear. How good to see you." She looked disturbed.

Arthur Weasley, looking tired but friendly, shook Harry's hand.

Dumbledore's face was neutral. "Please sit down, Harry. I just spoke with Mr. and Mrs. Weasley about our Flying Squad, in which three of their children are involved, this way or the other. Then we came to talk about you ..."

Dumbledore hesitated, then continued. "It is my natural interest as well as my obligation to discuss the situation in Hogwarts with all parents - more so with those whose sons or daughters are in the squad ... In your case, Harry, this would mean talking with your relatives, which didn't seem appropriate."

"Not at all," confirmed Harry, grinning at the idea.

"Mr. and Mrs. Weasley volunteered to take over this role. For me, this seems a good idea. What is your opinion?"

Harry's opinion was very clear. He had no intention to discuss his position in the squad any further. For him, the issue was settled - an exam patrol would decide yes or no. He remembered the year when a written permission was required to make the trip to Hogsmeade - at that time, the Weasleys hadn't counted.

But he also remembered other visits of the Weasleys in Hogwarts, at occasions when he'd been grateful for the comfort from Mrs. Weasley. And there was no doubt - reading her face, it was obvious what she thought about him out with the squad.

"Yes," he said, "sure - except I thought my role in the squad was already set." With some uneasiness, he realized that his answer hadn't sounded very polite. Though honest.

Dumbledore smiled. "I explained the current situation, with the new broomsticks from the unknown but trustworthy sponsor ... Mrs. Weasley is quite concerned at the thought of you flying patrol. Mr Weasley suggests a calculated risk, mainly because he thinks this is the only agreement you would truly support."

"If I'll pass the exam - " Harry looked at the Weasleys. "Do you know about the exam I have to pass before it starts?"

Mr. Weasley nodded.

"I think this should give the answer," said Harry. "Professor Dumbledore said it will be much more difficult than the others ... I don't want to be treated specially - I mean, aside from the special test. Everybody takes risks ... The twins ... Charlie is good with dragons, I'm good with a broomstick."

"But, Harry, you could be killed!" Mrs. Weasley's voice was shrill. "Charlie is much older than you."

"It didn't help ..." Harry stopped himself.

Their age hadn't protected his parents, he had intended to say before thinking better of it. Even so, the other faces made clear they had understood.

He said quickly, "Professor Dumbledore specified a three-link chain for my security. My partner's the first control element, Ron's the second, and the exam is the prerequisite ... That will do." The sooner this discussion would be killed, the better.

"Who is this partner?" asked Mrs. Weasley.

Before Harry could speak, Dumbledore answered, "Miss Chang, the Ravenclaw Seeker."

Mrs. Weasley shot a glance toward Harry.

Dumbledore saw it. "Miss Chang is in her sixth year and quite competent ... By the way, she is the oldest of the four students with Muggles parents only."

This information seemed to have a quieting effect on Mrs. Weasley.

Harry tried to look nowhere.

After some more words, the issue was settled. Mr. Weasley considered the exam and the highly protective Steel Wings as enough security and convinced his wife to give it a rest.

Harry and the Weasleys went down to join the others. Reaching the table, Mr. Weasley announced that Harry's squad membership would be handled as planned. Fred and George gave Harry the thumbs-up.

"Ron," said Mrs. Weasley, "you're responsible for him keeping to the rules."

Ron rolled his eyes. "Yes, Mum." To Harry, he added, "Blimey, I think Hermione would be better suited to that job ... Reminds me how I had to watch after Ginny."

"That's long ago," protested his sister.

A moment earlier, she had been busy answering her mother's question whether she knew Harry's team partner. Maybe this explained why she looked more grateful than angry about Ron's remark.

"Yeah, true," said George. "Now she's a big girl, also very committed to our common efforts - 'specially when it's about integrating students from Durmstrang."

Ginny blushed.

Mr. Weasley looked uncomprehending. His wife demanded to know what George was talking about. Hearing who had invited whom to the Christmas Ball, Mrs. Weasley looked perplexed. "But ..." She glanced at Ginny, then at Harry.

Ginny seemed unable to speak, Harry wasn't sure whether he should explain.

Ron came to help. "Calm down, Mum. We interviewed Viktor about Grigorij. He's okay. You can ask Hermione, she's with Viktor all the time."

Harry suppressed a grin. Ron had, certainly not by accident, blocked the subject. It seemed very unlikely that Mrs. Weasley would ask Hermione, not after she had been misled so badly by Rita Skeeter's article in the *Daily Prophet*. Harry knew such moves from Ron's style in playing chess, new was only that his friend did the same with living people. Quite funny, somehow - not so long ago, the same Ron had nearly exploded when Grigorij's name came up first.

To shift the conversation into another direction, Fred asked about the work in the Ministry of Magic.

Mr. Weasley explained that it was "just a mess." Cornelius Fudge still in charge, everybody wondering how much longer. This minister was simply "unable to steer the ship through rough water", as Mr. Weasley put it.

Percy had sobered up, after suffering a severe shock in his trust of authority and administration. Crouch's department was officially led by someone else while, de facto, Percy was doing the job. As bad as Crouch's failure had been, it would speed up Percy's career significantly.

But somehow, the friendly family atmosphere felt shattered.

Mrs. Weasley kept silent, following her own thoughts, looking up only when Ginny or Harry spoke.

Harry sensed a mutual agreement among the others to ignore her unusual quietness. He and Ginny had exchanged glances. Ginny had shrugged her shoulders, as if to say, *I had a kid's dream, and she had a mother's dream.*

He felt a little tense, thinking about his future relations with the Weasleys. A polite but cool Mrs. Weasley seemed worse than the Dursleys, held at wand's distance. Mr. Weasley looked the same as before, however, Harry wasn't sure if Arthur Weasley knew about everything that went on in his family.

* * *

The Weasley parents were about to leave when Harry became aware of Cho. Standing nearby, was she obviously trying to catch his attention without intruding in the circle. She looked a bit tight-lipped.

If Mrs. Weasley noticed her, found out this was ... Harry decided to say good-bye to the Weasleys.

Mr. Weasley was the easier part. "Harry, watch yourself. We'll stay in touch."

Mrs. Weasley managed a smile, although a miserable one. She didn't hug Harry, he told himself it was because of the people around. Then he walked some distance away, Cho following.

"Sorry to interrupt your conversation, Harry." Cho's cheeks were red spots.

"No, it's okay. We were done ... What's wrong?"

"Erm ..." Cho seemed unable to speak, astonishing Harry considerably.

Only when he looked really alarmed, she could answer. "Nothing's wrong ... My parents are here, and ... That is, my father asks whether you'd like to have a cup of tea?"

"Oh."

Her words had come out like pressed by force. Harry didn't know what to expect. Right now, Christmas without parents looked a lot better than it really had been. Anyway - there was just one answer. "Yes, of course."

Cho marched ahead, Harry followed.

Looking where she aimed, first he saw what had to be Cho's mother. The similarity was significant, in size, colour of the hair, in the features. Mrs. Chang wore a robe that was certainly Chinese. Different from anything Harry had seen before, here in Hogwarts, where wizard robes set the norm, it appeared quite natural. And it looked beautiful.

They reached the table.

A man stood up. So this was Cho's father. Black hair, sharp features, something in the eyes familiar. He was of medium size, wore an elegant suit in Muggles style. For an instant, he looked at Harry, then at his daughter.

Cho, cheeks red as before, said, "Harry, I want to introduce you to my parents ... Dad, Mummy, this is Harry Potter."

Mr. Chang bowed.

Mrs. Chang, sitting, did something similar, very gracefully.

Harry bowed in response.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Potter. It is very kind of you to follow our invitation at such short notice." Mr. Chang's voice was clear, polite, no audible accent. Still, somehow different. He didn't speak slowly, only with a slightly longer pause between the words than usual.

Harry said, "It's a pleasure for me." Well - maybe so.

"Please have a seat," said Mr. Chang.

Harry sat down, then Cho. Mr. Chang last. Cho's mother was pouring tea.

Mr. Chang waited silently until she had finished. "Each time we come to Hogwarts, we feel admiration for these buildings and for the spirit in which they were built ... We are proud of our daughter being a student here."

Harry glanced at Cho, who didn't stir at these words. So this was the Chinese small talk ritual, size or version to be seen, or heard.

After his training for the visit of Lleyrin, Harry felt well prepared for this type of conversation. "Yes - this is the best school I can imagine. And Professor Dumbledore is the best Headmaster in a long time."

Mr. Chang praised the landscape around.

Harry replied that the squad members felt privileged, currently being the only ones with a chance to see more of it.

Mr. Chang mentioned the careful preparations which made Hogwarts safe against the Dark Forces.

Harry agreed, slightly wondering. There was only Mr. Chang talking, while Cho's mother sat there silently, listening. Occasionally, Harry spoke in her direction, not raising more reaction than a short glance.

"We came from China to England," explained Mr. Chang, "which certainly brought a significant change in many aspects. But this was minor, compared to what has changed since our daughter showed magical power ... How was it with you, Mr. Potter?"

Did this question mark the end of the small talk? Maybe the entire tea would be an exchange of pleasantries.

"It came as a total surprise for me ... I didn't know until I got this letter for the first year." Harry had no intention to go into details of the dreadful events at that time, and how Hagrid had rescued him.

However, Mr. Chang didn't let go. "How was it for your parents to learn about their son being a - ah, wizard, and about this parallel world?"

"My parents are dead. I was raised by relatives ... For them, it was quite a shock."

Harry's astonishment grew rapidly. For pleasantries, these questions were a bit too precise. Actually, they felt more like an exam. It took him a moment to realize why Mr. Chang's style of conversation seemed so familiar - at occasions, Cho used the same technique.

Mr. Chang revealed that he was in trade business - and asked about Harry's relatives.

Harry gave an outline of Uncle Dursley's machine business.

Mr. Chang explained that Cho was their only child, for once something Harry knew already. Surely enough, this statement was followed by the question about Harry's own status.

Harry reported he was an only child too, barely avoiding a remark that his parents were killed before they had time for other children. This mix of confession and examination was getting on his nerves.

"But certainly you live with your relatives like in a big family?"

"They have one son, Dursley. He is a Muggle, and we couldn't be more different."

Mr. Chang seemed perplexed.

After a moment, it became clear why. Cho's father had confused the Weasleys with Harry's relatives. Which meant - Harry had been examined even before arriving here at this table.

He explained that the Weasleys were some kind of step parents to him. "The Dursleys are horrified by magic. They would die before coming to Hogwarts ... Which is just fine with me." The last remark hadn't exactly slipped, it came on full purpose.

"Does it mean, Mr. Potter, you value witchcraft higher than family?"

Before Harry could answer, Cho said something very fast, in a language unknown to Harry - obviously Chinese. She sounded like an angry bird.

Mr. Chang listened. Without answering her, he turned to Harry again. "I apologize for my daughter talking in a language you don't understand, Mr. Potter. I take it you don't know Chinese."

Harry had reached a state in which he no longer cared what Mr. Chang thought of him. Only Cho was his concern, he didn't like the way her father had compromised her, regardless of any cultural differences. He searched for the rudest reply without being openly hostile.

"That's true ... Aside from English, all I know is Parseltongue. For all good it did to me."

He wasn't sure which reaction to expect. Cho had sucked audibly, however, this might still have been from her father's remark.

Mr Chang's answer, given with a faint smile after a moment of silence, illustrated his knowledge of wizard habits. "The serpents' language, indeed. - In China, Mr. Potter, this ability would be valued high ... Understanding other cultures is treated as a gift of the gods - like patience, for example. Or like respect to the ancestors."

Harry blushed, from irritation as much as from shame. Being accused of lacking respect for his parents was more than he felt ready to tolerate, except that Cho's father was so different from people he knew. Arguing with Snape had been simple in comparison.

Before he could find an answer, Mrs. Chang spoke for the first time. Not looking to anyone in particular, she said, "Patience is held as a virtue of the serpents. It is sometimes confused with indolence, or sufferance. This does not happen when it occurs in its purest form, which is tolerance."

Her voice was quiet, also without accent, more fluid than her husband's. She waited a moment.

Mr. Chang had turned to her in a movement that seemed to end in the slightest indication of a bow.

Mrs. Chang asked, "How did you learn it, Harry?"

Harry hadn't caught the full meaning of her statement, only the effect it had toward her husband. And her question's effect on him was even stronger - her words, her addressing him by his name, had disarmed him entirely. His fury was gone in an instant.

"I didn't learn it ... Actually, I cannot speak it at will."

He told the story of the snake in the Potions class, when his weird skill had become obvious. He explained how this had illuminated his encounter with the boa constrictor in the zoo. "Professor Dumbledore thinks I received it when - when I got this scar."

He pointed to his forehead, his audience either knew or didn't ask. "When I arrived here in Hogwarts, the Sorting Hat would have placed me in Slytherin. But I talked him out of it."

The three Changs were listening with full attention, most visibly Cho. At Harry's last remark, she looked perplexed. "You did what??"

Harry explained how the Sorting Hat had pondered between Slytherin and Gryffindor. "The only thing I knew, Draco Malfoy was Slytherin. I wasn't going to be in the same house."

Mrs. Chang said, "In Chinese tradition, serpents are respected high ... If they have wings, the word for them here would be dragon."

Harry looked surprised. A link between serpents and dragons was new to him.

"Your affinity to dragons is remarkable," Cho's mother said. "We heard about your career as a Seeker - for us, this is the closest human equivalent to a dragon ... And Cho showed me the Green Dragon, very uncommon."

Harry blushed again, deeper than before but didn't care. It seemed impossible to feel uneasy when talking with Mrs. Chang. "I didn't look at it that way," he said. "If it's about affinity with dragons, you should know Hagrid. Once he ..."

Just in time, he realized what he'd almost done - reveal the secret of Norbert, the Norwegian Ridgeback. His mind raced for an exit from this trap.

"... he tried to deal with our dragon guards. But he couldn't because of the Giants."

Nothing in the expression of the Changs had changed at his stumbling, only Cho had shot a glance.

"Mr. Dumbledore has informed us about the event with the Giants."

It was the first time in a while that Mr. Chang spoke. Harry registered how very different this was from conversations between Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, not to mention the Dursleys.

"We will honour the memory of those who died in the defence of our children. It is comforting to know about the powerful forces protecting Hogwarts."

This was another hint how much Mr. Chang knew about the reputations and prejudices in the wizarding world. Harry remembered Cho's knowledge of Goblin habits, probably Mr. Chang was doing business between the Muggles and the wizarding world. His explanations had not been specific in any way, also, his last remark didn't give the slightest indication whether he knew about his daughter having been so close to fighting Giants and, if so, what he thought of it.

Harry wasn't sure whether it was impolite to leave or to stay. He felt relieved when Mrs. Chang, sensing his uncertainty, stood up and touched his arm. "It is so entertaining - listening to stories about Hogwarts. Tales and gossip are a very Chinese habit ... Thank you, Harry, for your time. Please excuse us, we will leave soon."

He managed a goodbye and a thanks for the tea. Then he bowed, first to Mrs. Chang, who smiled in response, then to Mr. Chang, who smiled and bowed. It felt quite natural to do this.

With a "See you" toward Cho, he left the table.

The hall had cleared. The Changs were among the last parents to leave. Somehow, it was funny how darkness influenced the behaviour of people at dangerous times - in spite of the fact that the Dark Forces had performed most of their attacks in broad daylight.

Harry found a place where Cho could find him, or pass by without himself noticing. He was imagining a trade meeting between Mr. Chang and Uncle Vernon when someone touched his head.

"Hi, storyteller." It was Cho. "Recovering from the shock?"

"No, there's no need." Harry hesitated. "You know, when your mother ... I mean, yes, I was angry, but the next moment I just felt good."

Cho nodded. "Yes, she can do that."

"Your parents are fantastic ... I think your father knows everything about wizards."

Cho beamed. "That's very kind of you, Harry."

"No, I mean it ... He has squeezed me a lot but, you know, as if it was a business between equals. No playing big. And your mother ... first she's all mute, and then, when she spoke, it was like ..."

Harry couldn't find the word. "She looks totally different, and of course she's older, but she reminds me ..." He stopped, unable to finish the sentence.

Cho waited a moment, suddenly seemed to realize what he had tried to say. She looked away. "I do love her," she said after another pause. Then her grin came back. "Seems to be quite unusual between mother and daughter."

Harry didn't know what was usual.

"I like my father too. You know, in China, having just a daughter is considered bad luck. He never made me feel like it ... He's just challenging."

"Yeah," replied Harry, "that I believe right away ... What did you say to him when he asked me this question?"

Cho's grin deepened. "Harry, if I'd wanted to let you know, I'd used English."

18 - Friends to Help

Christmas was over. Harry, who had been counting backward when everybody else numbered the days until the feast, now had reason to count forward ... Exam day minus three.

He gritted his teeth at the thought, swaying between fierce determination and wild despair. *You'll come back*, Cho had said ... But she had just thought of his duel with Voldemort from which he had come back - with a dead Cedric. Her last words had made it clear. He wanted to come back, no question about that - with her, with Cho on her Steel Wing. He needed help ... All the help he could get.

Lupin wasn't there. Which meant his favourite teacher couldn't help him, on the other side, it also meant this werewolf wasn't going to be part of the opposition. Some relief, that.

Lupin had taught him how to prepare for a fight. Some meditation was due, if not for the ease of mind, then at least for clear thinking. Where was a good place for that? Not in the hall, not in the Gryffindor tower ... His dormitory? He would be interrupted too. Then he knew - the room of the dance lessons and of the milestones.

He reached it unnoticed, sat down on the floor.

Was he willing to fight? - Yes, absolutely. Was he ready for the fight? - Not quite, that's why he was sitting here. What was missing? - The activation of all power he could muster, that would come in the air. The collecting of all help he could find, he had to ask just everybody. Three days left - he had to set up a project plan. A milestone every day.

What was the strength of the - no, not enemy, opposition. Their magical power, what else? What could he do against it? Standing a curse, avoiding a curse, counteracting a curse ... Preventing a curse. Preventing meant disarming them, he would do a training session with Ron for the Disarming spell. And what if they did the same to him? He would tie his wand to his arm, this had to be tested, with Ron in the same session.

What else could they do to him? Imperius curse - he would stand it. Maybe another session with Snape, or Viktor. Cruciatius curse - would they do that? A real Death-Eater wouldn't hesitate, so they weren't likely to shy off either. How could he defend? Jump aside, fly fast enough ... Snape's painkillers crossed his mind. Was there a protecting potion? He would ask around.

What was the weakness of the others? - None. No, couldn't be ... Try again. They wouldn't kill him, they wouldn't perform attacks which implied this risk. Did that mean, flying high was safe? Next moment, he remembered his safety belt which allowed them to stun him in mid-air ... But the Steel Wing would carry him out of the combat zone.

He almost missed the obvious weakness - he *knew* they would await him. Where would they be? - All along the course. Even plain ground wasn't secure, they might use Invisibility Cloaks. He had one too ... He wouldn't wear it but would have it ready.

His mind was flying along the course. Take off at Hogwarts ... Crossing the lake, careful at the other lakeside, a good place for an attack ... Across plain ground, some trees ... Giants' camp next ... After that, more trees, excellent hide ... Somebody speaking. To him?

"... doing here?"

He opened his eyes. It was Myrtle, floating some yards apart.

"Hallo, Myrtle ... I didn't hear you, I was far away."

"I found you just by accident." Myrtle looked curious. "Have you been dreaming?"

"No - I was flying patrol ... You know, I'll have my exam three days from now ... Myrtle, I need all help I can get. Do you know something that could help me?"

"Hmm ..." Myrtle giggled. "I could listen to the teachers."

For a moment, the thought was seducing.

"No," decided Harry, "this would be cheating ... I'd turn red whenever I'd think of it ... Besides, I *know* they'll be there, and I can imagine what they'll do."

"Shall I come with you?" Myrtle's face showed hope, a glimmer of some deep longing.

A thought struck Harry - Myrtle as the third teammate! What would Cho say to that? Then he realized it was technically impossible. "Are you fast enough for a Steel Wing?"

Sadly, Myrtle shook her head.

"And you cannot hold yourself on the broomstick ... what a pity, you'd have made our third teammate."

A weak comfort for sure, still, Myrtle's face looked pleased.

"I was thinking of some clever ghost trick I could use," explained Harry. "For example, do you know something that helps against the Cruciatus curse?"

"No," said Myrtle, "it's not a problem of ghosts ... Why don't you ask Dobby?"

Yes, indeed. Dobby had saved him in the second contest of the tournament - and he, Harry, had omitted to set him on the list of people to ask!

"You're right," he said, "Dobby might know something ... And what about invisibility? - I mean, is there a trick how I can see wizards under an Invisibility Cloak?"

"I know that powerful wizards can see through, but I don't know how they do that ... Otherwise ..." Myrtle shrugged. "All that comes to my mind is fairy dust."

"Fairy dust???"

"Yes ... It's just a means to mark an invisible wizard. You throw it, some of the dust sticks, and you see a shape ... Of course, you have to know where to throw ..."

"Then what's so different from normal dust?" asked Harry.

"Oh - lots of differences." Suddenly, Myrtle sounded very much like Hermione. "Fairy dust sticks ... Fairy dust sparkles, so you really can see it ... Believe me, it's far better for this purpose."

"Sounds promising," said Harry, more enthusiastically than he really felt. "So where can I find this fairy dust?"

"Same as before," replied Myrtle, "ask Dobby. I'm sure he can give you some."

She didn't know of anything else that might be helpful in the task. Almost none of the expected attacks would have caused a problem for her, or for any other ghost. They had, as Harry realized, a lot of advantages, still, it didn't feel as if changing roles would be an improvement.

He decided to see Dobby. This had been enough meditation.

Dobby was there, Dobby was pleased to see Harry, Dobby was delighted to hear Harry needed his help.

After all, thought Harry, it seemed nearly impossible to overrate the usefulness of house-elves. He explained his need for all kinds of tricks in general, something against the Cruciatus curse in particular and, most especially, fairy dust.

"Harry Potter needs fairy dust, sir?" asked Dobby with astonishment. "Please, sir, would his great wizard explain to Dobby what Harry Potter wants do to with that?"

Harry explained this was a clever trick to mark an invisible wizard when thrown from a fast-flying broomstick.

Dobby looked horrified. "Oh no, sir, no - Harry Potter must not do this, my-oh-my ... This is a very bad idea, believe this your house-elf ..." Dobby's wailing stopped, a suspicious expression appeared on his face. "Sir, who gave this bad advice to Harry Potter?"

"Why ... Myrtle."

Dobby's arms flung in the air. "Myrtle!! ... Moaning Myrtle - stupid Myrtle, to tell Dobby's great wizard such a nonsense ... Oh this unlucky girl, is been a ghost for so long and still not wiser than the day she was killed ..."

"She sent me to you."

Dobby calmed down. "This was the only good advice Harry Potter did have got from this ignorant creature, sir, so Dobby can help his wizard not to make a mistake ..."

Once more, Harry realized that discussions with house-elves tended to be somewhat time-consuming. "Dobby," he cut in, "what's WRONG with the idea?"

"Harry Potter will need him all his senses for this frightening patrol," explained Dobby. "Fairy dust makes one dream - so, if Harry Potter catches a tiny bit, his will do all wrong things, Harry Potter will dream, not watch ... Dobby is grateful, him, to save his wizard from this mistake!"

For a moment, Harry couldn't help thinking there was a little disappointment in Dobby's voice, about his great wizard not knowing such simple facts of life.

"Dobby - provided I do *not* catch some dust, does it do what Myrtle said? ... Stick, sparkle - mark the invisible wizard?"

Reluctantly, Dobby confirmed yes, it did, except that Harry Potter ...

"Okay," said Harry, "I'll find a way to protect myself, and you'll find some fairy dust for me."

Dobby agreed, delighted of this obvious proof that Harry Potter was truly a great wizard, greater than Dobby had known only moments ago.

"And what about the Cruciatus curse?"

No, there was no plant, brew, or powder which could protect against this, explained Dobby. His delight was gone, however, as it was a known fact that this spell had no counter-cure, he found the spirit to manage his sorrow.

* * *

How to throw fairy dust without dusting yourself? Harry could imagine several techniques on a fast Steel Wing, but all of them had a significant weakness - he didn't know in which situation he would need it, and these manoeuvres might turn out impossible. He had to throw it, and he had to be somewhere else when doing that ... Sounded like a contradiction in itself.

Really? Throwing and ... Suddenly he had an idea.

The Great Hall showed no sign of what he was searching for. Up to Ron's office - no, not on patrol either. Down again, up into the Gryffindor tower. Nothing. Back into the hall - over there!

He ran to the other side. "Fred - George - I need your help."

"Sure, Harry, any time. What's up?"

The twins didn't even hesitate. True, this was Harry, who had found their start-up capital in a tournament, yet more important, the same Harry had to be navigated through a tricky patrol exam - no doubt it had to do with this.

"Let's find a quiet place," said Harry.

They found an empty classroom. When the door was closed, Harry explained that he intended to arm himself with fairy dust.

George wanted to know whether Harry suffered from sleeplessness, not too surprising these days.

No, said Harry, he would use it to mark an invisible wizard.

"You'll see him for just a second," argued Fred, "then both of you'll fall asleep."

"Not if I use your trick."

They didn't understand. "Which trick?"

"Firecrackers."

Fred and George looked at each other, said, almost in unison, "Why didn't we never think of it??"

Fred turned to Harry. "Do you have some dust?"

"Not yet ... Tomorrow." Hopefully so.

"Okay - Harry, leave the production to us. Deliver the stuff as soon as you've got it ... Check with Viktor for a short training in the Quidditch pit - day after tomorrow."

Which meant, the day before the exam.

George said, "We're going to build a collection of crackers for your patrol, some with and some without coating. And what's more, we should do a few with sugar powder coating - you know, for the training in the pit ... Harry, count it as done."

What next? Training session for the Disarming Spell? No - first he had to prepare his wand with a sling that would tie it to his arm. What held best? Tape ... cord ... When in doubt, ask Hermione.

He found her in the library. "Hermione - do you have time for me?"

She looked expectantly. "To do what?"

Harry explained his problem.

At his first words, Hermione seemed a bit disappointed, Harry suspected she had hoped for a private conversation about puzzles and other interesting problems. Then the challenge of the task caught her spirit. "I'll see you in our meeting room ... Gimme ten minutes."

She arrived with various cords, spellotape, other utensils. They prepared a first sling, using cord like for a parcel.

Hermione stood up. "Get ready."

Harry walked to a spot ten yards apart, turned.

Hermione's wand pointed. "*EXPELLIARMUS!*"

Harry's wand broke the grip of his hand. It flew up, carrying his arm with it. A sharp yank, then his arm was free. The wand flew into Hermione's hand, showing a broken sling.

They tried a thicker cord. Harry walked to his spot.

"EXPELLIARMUS!"

The grip broke. The wand went up, his arm too. A gentle yank, then the wand was off. The sling, unbroken, no longer holding a wand either, hung around Harry's wrist.

He stared at this failure. "How can we fix the cord, so the wand doesn't slip?"

"Let's try spellotape," said Hermione.

They prepared a sling of multiple stripes. It was a sticky mess. But if it would hold ... Harry moved to his spot.

"EXPELLIARMUS!"

The wand pulled up. For an instant, there was a pulling at Harry's arm, not as hard as before, while the spellotape was stretching, then it broke.

"Gah ..." said Hermione, tearing the remnants off Harry's wand.

"An elastic matter that holds - that would be best ... If the sling doesn't stretch, the shock in the arm's too hard."

Hermione was thinking aloud. "Serpent skin ... no, too dry ... Dragon skin - except we haven't any ..." She looked at Harry. "Wait here."

Harry waited. Five minutes, nothing. Ten minutes, no Hermione. When he was ready to believe she had walked to the dragons' nests for some skin, Hermione came back, something long, thin, dark over her hands. Closer, it looked like hair.

"What's this?"

"Mane hair of Bulgarian broncos," explained Hermione. "Viktor had it on the ship."

"Looks a little thin."

"Really?" Hermione was already sitting down. "That's why we have to plait it - three thin plaits first, then a ticker one from the thin ones ... Here, hold that ... I'll plait, Harry, and you - aside from holding, maybe you can tell me stories."

Harry stared at her.

Hermione didn't look up, kept her hands busy with the first three strands of fine hair, which quickly developed into a thin plait. Her voice was sweet. "One little story, Harry."

He had the strong feeling to be the target of a blackmailing in progress. "About what?"

"Oooh - maybe a fairy tale ..."

Probably not.

"... or a story about dwarfs ..."

A last try. "House-elves?"

Hermione's hands wheeled, he saw her smile. "No ... more like - er, Goblin size."

Alarmed, Harry looked around. The room was of course empty, except for himself and Hermione. "That's a story I'm not supposed to tell."

"I know, Harry." This time, she looked up, her face happy. "That's why you were suspended from the squad. Because you know about the Goblins and their role in the game."

Her expression shifted from joyful to malicious. "All I know so far is - a wild guess, let's say ... something that might be discussed with others during lunch ... On the other hand, if I knew all details, I had to keep the secret."

He was beaten. "From everybody - including Viktor."

"And Ron, and whomever ... Yes." She hadn't flinched, hadn't hesitated.

Harry told her everything, from the evening with the Goblins, to the letter, to his answer, to the arrival of the Steel Wings.

Hermione listened, her hands not slowing, interrupting only for the next plait. She hadn't known about Goblin Requests as much as Cho, hearing about his Privileged request, a slight whistle came from her lips.

When he had finished, Hermione asked, "Does Cho know?"

"She found out, like you ... Most of the meeting with Dumbledore was her telling what she'd figured out."

"Clever girl ..." Hermione wasn't disappointed to be second. "Of course, she had some advantages."

Harry decided not to discuss this aspect in more detail.

"What I don't understand completely," said Hermione, "is why you'll be allowed to fly again - provided you pass the exam."

"Dumbledore says the Goblins are warriors ... He says this is another challenge - using the Steel Wings without losing the secret - or me."

Ron would have jumped to that opportunity for a bad joke. Hermione just nodded. "What do you think - will Dumbledore try to beat you in the exam?"

Harry had asked this question himself. "Dunno ... My feeling is, it's an open issue. He'll play fair - but seriously. The challenge is on me to come through."

"I guess you're right ... You know, I would bid money on you - except there's nobody to hold the other side."

"Thank you." Harry felt slightly better, until he remembered it was him to make the odds come true.

"All right, here we go." Hermione had finished the triple plait. "Now let's fix it." She formed the sling around the wand. "Check the position, Harry ... here?"

He tried. "Seems okay."

Hermione seized for a small flask. "Muggles stuff - used in dental laboratories ... The best glue I know."

She extracted a miniature cauldron, poured some rosy powder into it. Then she added liquid from the flask and started to stir with a small stick. Within seconds, the stuff was pasty. Using the stick, Hermione smeared it around the wand, along the edges of the plait.

"Give it ten minutes, Harry."

Waiting for the glue to dry, they discussed the attacks that might be expected from the teachers.

"Remember the traps that protected the philosopher's stone," said Hermione, "and expect another collection of that kind ... For example, McGonagall would do something with Transfiguration."

The glue had dried. It looked funny - a gum-coloured ring on a holly wand with a dark plait of hairs. The plait felt worlds better than cord or tape - smooth, nice to touch. It only had to hold.

Harry took his wand, tested how to hold it at the moment of the attack, in order not to lose the sling from his wrist. Then he took position at the same spot as before.

Hermione had her wand up. "Ready?"

"Yes."

"EXPELLIARMUS!"

The grip broke. The wand flew up, pulling his arm. In a reflex, Harry's hand grabbed the sling. It hardened, stretched - held!! An instant later, the wand dropped, caught by the sling, so Harry could grab it easily, whether here in this room or on a Steel Wing in the air.

"IT WORKS!" Harry felt a wild joy. "Hermione - you're a genius!"

"True." She grinned. "If I weren't paid already with a nice story, I'd let you quote this every breakfast till Easter."

* * *

Exam day minus two. At breakfast, Hermione asked Harry whether she could help him. He said yes, with a training session of the Disarming Spell, this time with her as the target - but only after giving him time for another business that might take no longer than a quarter of an hour.

He went into the kitchen.

Dobby had the stuff ready, handed him a small flask, reminded him this dust was really strong, sir, Harry Potter could put half of Hogwarts asleep.

Harry promised to be careful and to tell the kitchen elves all details of his patrol, then hurried back to the table, where the twins sat waiting for him.

"Here," said Harry, "that's wat I got."

George examined the flask. "Should be good for a few of those pills ... Okay, Harry - see you later."

As eager as the twins were to help, they didn't intend to show him the finer tricks of firecracker craftsmanship. Anyway, Harry had enough to do.

He turned to Hermione. "I'm ready."

They headed for the training room. When they were out of the hall and alone in the corridor, Hermione asked, "What was that?"

"Fairy dust."

Rather than asking, she tried to think of an obvious, or even reasonable, usage by herself - unsuccessfully so. "I give up - Harry, what are you doing with fairy dust ... Or the twins?"

"They build a few dust bombs for me - with firecrackers."

Hermione giggled. "Maybe you should tell Viktor - this might become a standard equipment for the entire squad."

"Once the exam is over," said Harry, "I'm open for any kind of discussion. Until then, this should remain confidential."

They trained the disarming spell. As expected, Harry had no trouble disarming Hermione at leisure - provided he was fast enough. The wizard who placed his command first was the winner, invariably.

This changed dramatically when Harry changed his grip to hold his wand with the hand in the bronco hair sling. Even with Hermione's spell coming first, he could disarm her as soon as he had grabbed his wand again. It changed once more, as dramatically as before, when Hermione used first the disarming spell and then, before Harry had his wand ready again, a stunning charm.

The lesson was obvious - if the sling didn't come as a surprise, it offered no help. Careful not to stress the bronco hair too much, Harry ended the training with this result.

He visited Viktor in his office, with the intention to get next day's training in the Quidditch pit organized.

Viktor had no objections - as long as Harry could find two squad teams as guards.

Harry didn't expect a problem. The twins and Lee would be the first team, the girls the second - after all, Cho should train with him together. There was just one more aspect that had to be cleared. "Viktor - can you make sure no teachers are hanging around in the pit?"

Viktor studied him. "What do you have in mind, Harry - secret weapons?"

"Whatever - okay, say it's secret weapons."

"Sounds only fair," said Viktor, "the others don't tell you what they have in mind ... What I can offer is, I join your training, then I can declare it as squad-only. Is this okay with you?"

Harry looked at Viktor. "Do you know what the teachers are planning?"

"Harry," answered Viktor, his eyebrows up, "if you want to know on which side I am, the answer is, yours ... If you want to know what to expect - don't ask me. They don't tell me ... And if I know something, I'm not telling you."

Harry grinned. "There was little doubt, anyway I like to hear it though ... No, I was going to ask you for an Imperius training, and for this ... I didn't want to cheat, so - if you know something, we cannot train together."

"No problem, Harry, we can train ... The others know which side I'm on."

They agreed to perform the training in the afternoon, before supper.

Harry proceeded to the next office - Fleur's. She was pleased to have a visitor for a change.

"Fleur, I'm collecting help," he said. "You know - tips and tricks, useful little charms to disarm teachers, stuff like that ..."

Fleur laughed. "Why are you asking me for that, 'arry?" Her smile was teasing. "You know, Veela have a built-in disarming charm."

Harry could smile back without blushing. "Yeah - at close distance ... not from one end of a room to the other."

"Shall I try?" She looked challenging.

"NO! ... please." He didn't know whether it was possible, at any rate, this didn't feel like the right time to find out.

Fleur was thinking. "There's just one thing that comes to my mind ... It's not here ... Tomorrow I'll be in Beauxbatons ... If I can find it, I'll give it to you day after tomorrow."

"What is it?"

"First let me find it, 'arry." It sounded as if Fleur had a large and unordered collection of things in Beauxbatons, or maybe at home.

"Do I have to train it?"

"No, not at all." She smiled again. "It works by itself."

Fleur had been the last on Harry's list. He descended the staircase into the hall, hoping he could find Cho to discuss tomorrow's training with her.

Nothing.

He would have asked Almyra to notify Cho, except Almyra wasn't seen either, not surprisingly if Cho wasn't around. He saw other Ravenclaw students but decided to wait till lunch.

During the meal, he asked Katie and Alicia if they would run guard for him in the Quidditch pit. They agreed immediately, wanted to know what he had in mind. "Some training," answered Harry evasively, raising their interest even more. He didn't hint anything, and the twins weren't there to be asked.

The twins weren't there??

This was disquieting.

Until the end of the meal, it was very disquieting. He asked Lee.

Lee didn't know.

Harry climbed into the Gryffindor tower, asked Ron. Nothing - nobody had seen them since breakfast. Well, building dust bombs was probably a complicated task - he, Harry, wouldn't know where to start. Still, not even lunch?

From all this searching for the twins, he had omitted to ask Cho. So he went into the hall again, of course, nothing. He would do it at supper, anyway, as long as the twins didn't come over with some firecrackers, there was no sense in wheezing through the pit.

What to do with the afternoon until his training with Viktor was due? When in doubt, read a book ... the Cruciatus curse was still a weak spot, a real surprise, wasn't it? He went to the library.

Look there, Cho and Almyra.

He walked over. "Hi, there."

Cho looked up, surprised, an expression as if caught with the fingers in the sugarbox.

Almyra - what was with Almyra? Turning deep red, she rested her arms on the book they had been reading.

Harry looked at Cho. "I wanted to talk about tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?? ... Let's have a walk."

For once, Harry wouldn't have objected discussing the issue with Almyra listening, and now it was Cho who seemed to prefer privacy. Fine with him ...

"What's about tomorrow?"

"I arranged a training in the Quidditch pit with Viktor, without teachers around ... Right, you don't know yet - the twins are building a few dust bombs for - for us ... Fairy dust."

Cho looked at him, a glance not quite incredulous, not far from that either. "Shall I wear my dragon-hide coat?"

"Sure, why not?"

Only her reaction told him he had been teased. Well, how would he know what those Chinese tailors were used to?

"At first, I just wanted to have something to use against invisible wizards," he began to explain. "Myrtle told me - fairy dust sticks and glitters, so you can mark them nicely - if you throw in the right direction, that is ... Then Dobby told me about the dream effect, and I realized I had to be out of the way when it hits ... Yes, and then I had the idea with the firecrackers, and talked with the twins."

"Dobby, huh?"

"Yes, he's the one who gave me the fairy dust."

"Quite a resourceful guy," said Cho. "I really should make his acquaintance ... So we're going to zoom through the pit and throw dust bombs, right?"

"Yep ... Except, for the training, we'll use sugar powder ... Fairy dust's a bit expensive."

"Oh, really? - So even Dobby's resources are limited? ... Ts, ts."

"I like it when you have fun." Which was the truth. "It's far better than ... I thought about what you said in Dumbledore's office ... It's my ... I'm not going to come back alone."

"My brave knight." Yet her voice wasn't teasing.

After a moment of silence, Cho said, "I like to hear that - although it's against squad policy ... Okay, we'll give them hell with fairy dust. - For now, I have to go back to the library."

It certainly would have been interesting to hear what she and Almyra were working on, this scene in the library had looked strange. But why ask questions that weren't going to be answered at all?

Then Harry remembered - he had intended to do a little research on the Cruciatus curse. Going back now didn't feel right. Anyway, he trusted Dobby's knowledge, it had been just an attempt to kill time.

The training with Viktor didn't yield any surprise. Harry could shake off Viktor's spell easily. Still, another question would be how the first moment of paralyzed willpower might be on a Steel Wing at high speed.

Viktor, on the other hand, had difficulties breaking Harry's curse. Without Harry giving him some command, he couldn't manage a break at all.

On the surface, the training was about breaking the Imperius curse. For Harry, though, the more important aspect was to *train* it. Dumbledore had announced to play hard, well then, he wouldn't fall short on that.

Coming to the supper table, Harry felt much relief seeing Fred and George. When they spotted him, they came over to his place.

"Where have you been?" he asked. "I was worrying a lot."

"Well ..." said Fred, "we had - er, a little accident."

"Are you hurt??"

"No, no, nothing serious," said George. "Guess what happens if you're fumbling with firecrackers and fairy dust the wrong way ... Right - you fall asleep."

* * *

Exam day minus one. The twins had delivered - two fairy dust bombs, four training bombs with sugar powder, a bunch of simple firecrackers, considerably heavier than the usual size.

Dust bombs, as it turned out, required a remarkable quantity of fairy dust. Of course - without the twins' accident, Dobby's supply might have been good for one or two more bombs, but then, as Harry knew not only from Ron's droning on organization and project management, a certain loss was inevitable. As long as it kept to fairy dust, rather than squad members ...

They wandered to the Quidditch pit - Harry, the two teams, Viktor. They could have used the broomsticks, only the twins were busy explaining how to ignite a firecracker single-handedly while, at the same time, Katie and Alicia tried to provide a crash course in Chaser techniques - throwing an item onto a target.

"It's the thumbnail that rips the fuse," said George, "so make sure you're not breaking your nail till tomorrow."

"From then on, you have two seconds," explained Fred. "If you hit your target, the last second doesn't matter - nobody's going to catch a thrown firecracker that quickly ... If you miss, or if you throw alongside, these two seconds must have passed when the cracker is closest to the target."

Suddenly, the twins' attack toward the Giants looked still more impressive, even if they had years of experience in blowing firecrackers.

"Throwing something," said Katie, "isn't that complicated at all. The tricky part is - your body movement of course affects your broomstick. So when your arm is throwing, the rest of your body has to compensate in order to keep the broomstick on course."

"You don't have to catch," instructed Alicia, "you just have to throw ... makes life a lot easier ... Don't forget - the Quaffle - er, the cracker is flying as fast as yourself. That means, not throwing at all, just letting go, can do the job as well."

"Right," said Katie, "that's Alicia's specialty ... drives the goalkeepers mad."

"A firecracker is light - in comparison," reminded Fred, "which means it'll lose speed quickly ... If you're going to use Alicia's trick, make sure you're fast - I mean *fast*."

Ground training came first which, in this case, meant igniting firecrackers with a thumbnail.

Cho managed almost immediately, her nails were longer than Harry's, and sharper.

Harry had trouble. According to Fred and George, he had to snip his thumb up, away from the hand. This way, it didn't work at all. He could ignite a cracker when snipping into the hand - with the effect that the complete motion was too awkward.

Viktor came on his Steel Wing. "Look," he said.

They watched as Viktor took a firecracker and, leaning slightly backward to tense his security belt, scratched the fuse over the fabric and threw the cracker. A second later, it blew.

"Clever guys, those Bulgarians," said George. "That will do, Harry - if you're not on your Steel Wing, you have two hands."

Harry felt grateful, for Viktor's trick as well as for the fact that the next step would be less noisy. Some more blows, he thought, and the first students would have arrived to watch the spectacle.

Phase two was a demo, presented by Katie, Alicia, and the twins. Harry and Cho stood on the ground, watching the others closing in on them with frightening speed, throwing firecrackers - *without* igniting them, of course, while studying body stance, arm motion, clear-off manoeuvring.

Then it was their own turn.

Harry started badly, his crackers landed anywhere but on Viktor, the target. Cho's first attempts were somewhere close.

Harry improved a bit, Cho improved rapidly. Harry threw firecrackers somewhere around Viktor when Cho had mastered the art to pass them into Viktor's hand - after two seconds of air travel. It was frustrating.

Viktor stopped him. "Harry - do you want to use these bombs?"

"What a stupid question ..."

He was interrupted by a fierce-looking Viktor. "Okay, you stupid snitch-catcher - you haff three more chances." Viktor handed him three firecrackers. "I'll curse you on your first attack ... I'll curse you worse on your second ... I'll stun you in mid-air if the third one doesn't hit ... Up with you!"

"Okay then, you ... Try it!"

Shocked silence among the others, but then, they hadn't witnessed the Imperius training with Snape.

Harry jumped up, held the firecracker ready, dived.

Ahead and below, a figure, pointing a wand on him. His face started to burn. He ducked behind the wind shield, his face calmed but his legs started to hurt. Harry ignored the pain and concentrated on his attack.

Arm ready, burning immediately, aim, aaand - now!

An instant too early, he knew it as the cracker left his hand.

Passing Viktor and turning in an arc, a blow hit his back, burning on his head, steady through the full arc while his unprotected flank was exposed to Viktor's curse.

Second run.

Flat behind the wind shield. Nice broomstick, that, very protective, did its job better than he himself. Legs hurting like in the grip of a Giant, this Viktor was crazy, he would teach him. Arm ready - ouch, that didn't feel good at all, aim, aim - now!

Dammit, too far!!

His body crooked from the pain, relaxed, almost cramped from the white-hot burning, this bloody Bulgarian would pay for that, stunning would feel like heaven but THIS PIECE OF MUD WASN'T GOING TO WIN!.

Some endless seconds to the turning point, bolt, around, aaahh, protection, this was the run.

He pushed, pushed, more than before, one thought in his mind, HIT THAT FACE, somewhere pain, arm out, surprising how much more pain, but he was coming, was there, there - that!

An instant longer he saw the hated face, jaws clenched, in the last split second before passing, he saw the cracker trundling through the air, right into the visage of this berserk ... No blow, pain fading ... Turning around, he saw an arm in the air, holding something - Viktor had caught the cracker!

He swerved down, bolted, dismounted. Viktor was walking to him, now wait just a second ...

"Harry - your cracker." Viktor's hand just in front of him.

Trembling, Harry seized for it, took Viktor's fist instead, nudged it. "Don't expect my thanks, you ... cracker-catcher."

The others came closer, carefully, unsure what to expect, examining him. His face looked still red, but the pain was almost over.

Alicia glared at Viktor furiously. "Are you mad? - Look at him, how do you think does that feel?"

Harry laughed, almost hysterically. "He knows how that feels ... And more."

Alicia's expression made clear - for her, Harry and Viktor were two of a kind, to be avoided.

Cho hadn't said anything. Now she looked at him. "You okay?"

"Yes." Well, almost.

"Why did it work now?"

"Before, I was too slow ... Then, I really wanted that thing right in his face."

The rest was easy play, compared to the previous attempts. Harry flew some more attacks, uncursed, hitting two out of three while Viktor's wand was pointing at him, stirring the memory by the picture.

The final tests were the attacks with the powder bombs. For them, a tree was selected as target. Viktor would have been ready to serve as target, arms protecting his face, only Harry didn't want him seen with any trace of something a sharp brain might identify as a projectile.

Cho powdered the tree in her first run - and herself too, she had been too close.

Harry powdered the tree a bit, at least, he himself was clean.

Before using the last powder bomb for each of them, they performed some more tests to train the earliest side-turn possible. Then came the second serious test, after a little charm from Viktor's wand had cleaned the tree as well as Cho's coat.

Cho's bomb powdered the tree at front, Harry's did the same at the side, passing the tree but exploding at the right moment. Their own coats were clean.

After lunch, Fleur came to the Gryffindor table. "Harry, can you come with me for a minute?"

He followed into her office.

Fleur opened a drawer, took something out that looked like a shawl, silvery, almost perfectly matching her hair.

"What's that?"

Fleur smoothed the fabric. "It's a Veela scarf - some kind of tranquilizer because it 'as Veela power knitted in ... You can use it for various purposes - for example, when you're hurt ... But be careful, Harry - it affects your thinking ... When wearing it, you may find it difficult to take a decision."

Harry stared at the silvery thing. "You mean, this is some emergency kit?"

"It's not a band-aid ..." Fleur smiled. "It wasn't designed for a specific use ... It wasn't designed for exam patrols at all, but that's the only thing I could think of ... At least, it doesn't make your mind powerless, so - if it 'ampers more than it 'elps, take it off."

Could it smoothe a Cruciatus curse? Harry would prefer an exam in which he didn't have to find out.

"Thank you, Fleur ... I hope I won't need it."

Fleur wrapped the scarf in a neutral cloth. "So do I, my little 'unter ... Please bring it back, if that's possible."

* * *

Exam day, patrol time minus five hours - breakfast table. Harry ate mechanically, chewed some tasteless stuff, gulped some hot liquid.

Glancing over to the teacher's table, he saw the *other team*, caught himself at feeling anger when hearing them laugh. True, they laughed on other days too, except today it felt personal.

Glancing to the Ravenclaw table, he saw the rest of his own team, talking with Almyra. Cho looked up, noticed him, made a gesture as if he should eat as much as he could. Well, he'd done it already.

Cho came over. "Harry, this is a special day, right?"

What a team partner, could only think of her cake. "Now??"

"No - some minutes before we start."

"That's cool ... I'll have trouble moving my tongue, and you ..."

"Dummy!" Her voice wasn't too gentle. "Did nobody tell you that a sugar shot speeds up your brain? ... Make sure it's ready."

Patrol time minus four hours and a bit - what to do?

Hermione came, grabbed him. "Harry, before your mind's going to burn out - come with me."

She led him to the training room. "Okay - Giants O.W.L., a review ... Mr. Potter, please start your presentation."

No doubt, his ears played jokes with him. "Come again?"

"You heard me all right - Talk!"

It was unbelievable. Hermione undeniably serious, she waited for him to summarize their Giants' paper, or papers.

Ten minutes later, Harry felt grateful, registering how the patrol faded to the background of his mind. It worked surprisingly well, Hermione called it *chasing a devil using a demon*, banning one exam with another.

When they finished, with Hermione looking quite pleased at his performance, Harry realized it was already patrol time minus two hours.

Lunch was something for the others. He couldn't eat. Hermione said he needed his strength. She was probably right, still it didn't work.

Ron said, "Harry - if someone can do it, it's you ... You know it, do you?"

Did he? Anyway, he nodded.

Angelina came over, Bob with her. Angelina said, "Harry, you have to come through - I've got a bid running says ten Galleons you'll make it."

"Against whom?"

Bob's finger was pointing toward himself. "Me."

"You??"

"It's an insurance, Harry ... I really hope you make it, but - if not, at least I win ten Galleons."

These Slytherins ...

Viktor came over. "Harry - haff a minute?"

They walked aside. "Some news?"

"No ... I want to giff you something - think of it as a lucky charm." Viktor presented a small bundle.

Examining it, Harry recognized a thin rope, several yards long, a ring at one end. "What's this?"

"The second item a Bulgarian shepherd never forgets when going out, besides a sling ... It's a family piece, Harry - it always brought me luck."

Harry took the rope. It felt thin, strong, flexible, smooth. "Thank you, Viktor ... It's my strong will to bring it back to you."

Suddenly he was armed with a lot of family inheritances, plus some other pieces that hadn't existed yet two days ago. He went into the kitchen for Cho's cake. Looking around, he felt hungry, asked the elves to double it.

In the entrance hall, he found Cho with Almyra. "Here ... Keep something for me, I'll be back soon."

He hurried upstairs to get packed and armed. No - first the toilet, it would be too bad, being caught in the ground just for that ... Garments, scarf, rope, Invisibility Cloak, bombs ... Everything within reach? Steel Wing, down again.

Cho was eating, slowly, tiny pieces.

"Sugar shot, huh?" He took a piece, realized it really had taste.

"Yup." Cho pointed from Almyra to Harry. "Tell him."

Almyra rattled, "Sugar's a quick-burning energizer ... Doesn't hold long - good for efforts of a limited time span."

Her nervousness calmed Harry down. "That's good," he said, seizing for another piece, "'cause I'm a quick-eating patrolyzer."

Cho glanced at him. "Did you take lessons with Ron?"

"With everybody and his uncle, though not with Ron ... Talking of the devil ..."

Ron arrived. "Harry, Cho - it's time ... Good luck!"

Almyra grabbed Cho's shoulders and - it looked as if she was spitting. Harry mounted, jumped up. Should he hold his wand through the sling? Not yet ...

Cho was at his side.

Harry said, "I'm head first - okay?"

Cho nodded.

He turned, accelerated, checked back, saw Cho following, felt a fierce determination - either that, or him flying tail. He wasn't going to come back *without her*.

19 - Exam Patrol

It was patrol time plus ten seconds. Weather calm, slow breeze, not too cold, sun behind hazy clouds. Luck - no blinding, whichever course they'd fly.

Harry and Cho crossed the lake, not too high, normal patrol speed. The surface was flat, calm, looking dark. This was no area in which Harry expected an attack, since hiding in the water seemed so much more complicated than somewhere else ... Besides, what would the merpeople think of it?

Or had they been hired? ... But then, how could they attack him? The first reasonable place would be over there where the other lakeside was coming clo ... A fiery spur flashed across the water, hitting the top of his Steel Wing, splashing off.

Harry pushed, trying to gain height.

Another flash, barely missing. Another one, very close. His left leg below the knee felt numb ... Someone was shooting a rapid fire of stunning charms.

The next flash, a hit, except Harry had directed the Steel Wing toward the spot where the flashes came from, lying flat on his broomstick, moving slowly, carefully ... God bless the curse-deflecting front shield, only - how to escape? As soon as he was going to expose some part of his body, the hit would be just a matter of seconds.

Using quick, short movements, Harry manoeuvred in a semi-circle, losing height for better protection, not to expose his legs again, trying to bypass the origin of these flashes, what a slow moving, he would remain in the focus for quite a while, another hit, his eyes could see again, there was something black - no, not coming toward him, approaching that spot, whooshed past, a blow!

The flashes had stopped.

Flying a wide arc, Cho reached him, shouted, "Dust bomb! ... He's sleeping."

Harry's fist, thumb up, was in the air. "Could you see him?"

"Looked like Flitwick, but I'm not sure."

This tiny wizard, fainting at the least opportunity? Then what should they expect from people like Snape?

"Cho!" Harry gestured toward his left leg. "Can you de-stun me?"

Cho came closer, her wand pointing. "*ENERVATE!*"

Harry's leg felt normal again. One done ... How many to go?

They passed the lakeside. A double post, thought Harry, hundred yards apart - that would have plucked him out of the sky while the students back in Hogwarts still could watch them. Why hadn't it been a double?

Simple answer - because they had something better.

His eyes scanned the ground, left to right, back, left to right, again ... from experience, they knew it worked better this way than a continuous scan. The short moment of mind-relaxing, when the head moved back to the other side, was essential to hold the level of attention. Nothing on the ground, time for - a choked cry, pained ...

"HARRY!!!"

He wheeled around.

Cho, sitting crooked, her left arm holding the right, pointing ... a Bludger!! ... Wheezing in an arc, awfully fast, time enough to scan the air - where was the second ... Was there a second?

The Bludger closed in.

Harry jumped up, the Bludger hissing through under his feet.

Turning, he watched it go into another arc ... Would be Cho again, time to scan, a spot over there, growing, couldn't be the second Bludger - too big for that ... A broomstick rider! But no light spot where the face should be ... Hooded?

Coming toward him, fast.

Harry pushed, hard as possible, was kicked, held by the belt, pulled forward, speeding incredibly, somehow he had to check back without losing speed and course ... Flat on the Steel Wing, he bent forward, diving, his head down, along his body, saw the other rider, still approaching, but slowly, one more push, Steel Wing straight again, and he would be out of reach ... And then?

This somebody would turn, attack Cho, or hunt them all along the patrol ... So it had to be stopped ... by - yes, that would do!

He straightened the Steel Wing, slowed a bit, waiting a few seconds, then jerked his body upward, backward.

The Steel Wing went up like a prancing horse, only much faster, driving a loop, Harry was pressed into the saddle, view darkening, still holding, keep conscious, this must be fast, he reached the summit, view lighting again, and down, round, the figure ahead, hadn't followed, couldn't follow, had no Steel Wing, twisted, desperate to see him how he broke out of the arc, diving, hand on his wand, there's the sling, wand ready,

Steel Wing straight, speed okay, at the last possible moment ... braaake.

"*IMPERIO!!!*"

The figure was slumping ... in a second, it would be off his ...

"Hold your broomstick!!!"

The hands were on the handles again, still unsteady, Harry yards away, ready to grab.

"Slow down! ... Go down!"

At lower speed, they reached the ground.

"Dismount! ... Gimme your wand!"

Harry's wand was ready, pointing, but of course, there was no resistance, the wand came out, almost dropped, he had it.

He stepped back. A look around, was there any Bludger?

Some distance away, up in the air, Cho held her position, outjumping a Bludger that came buzzing about twice a minute.

He turned back to the motionless figure before him. "Recorrigo!"

The figure came awake.

"Who are you?"

The right hand grabbed the hood and pulled it up. Madam Hooch!!

She didn't smile. "All right, Mr. Potter - I'm out of the game ... Can I have my wand?"

Harry eyed her suspiciously. "What means out of the game - er, Professor?"

"I won't do anything else against you." Her hand stretched out. "My wand, please."

When Harry gave it to her, she didn't thank him, didn't look friendly at all - well, who'd like an Imperius curse ...

He asked, "What about this Bludger?"

Madam Hooch's lips were thin. "That's your problem ... Remember - I'm out of the game."

Bloody witch ... Harry jumped up without another word, pushed, not as hard as before, reached Cho within seconds.

Cho's eyes didn't leave the Bludger. Her left arm was at the handle, the right arm limp at her side.

"Are you hurt?"

"Right arm - can't use it ... And you?"

"I'm okay."

The Bludger was there, Cho ducked, found time to look at Harry. "Where's the other guy?"

"On the ground, neutralized ... it's Hooch."

Cho grinned. "Did she like it?"

"We didn't part as friends ... Anyway, this Bludger isn't stopped yet." In a few seconds, they would have to jump again.

"Sorry," said Cho, "I forgot my club."

Club ... Maybe on the ... no - something better! "Cho - speed up ... Lleyrin has a club!"

Could a Steel Wing outperform a Bludger? Yes it could, except that it was better to stay below maximum speed, as they found out while dodging the relentless attacks of that stupid ball.

Close to the Giants' camp, Harry left Cho alone with the Bludger and pushed forward. Reaching the camp, he swerved to Lleyrin's hut, stopped, kept the Steel Wing in the air - useful tool to talk with a Giant.

"LLEYRIN!!"

Steps ... The Giant chief was there!

The door opened, the huge figure in the frame, seeing him, stepping out.

"Harry - you called me."

"Lleyrin, we need your help." He pointed toward Cho who was approaching fast. "A ball's chasing us ... you have a Quarterstaff ..."

Lleyrin turned, didn't even disappear in the hut, then he had the long wood in his hands, walked to a spot with more space around, Quarterstaff ready, thick end in the air.

Cho had watched him. She pushed, slowed, checked around. When the Bludger drove another arc, she pushed again, reached Lleyrin, stopped, and pushed away.

The Bludger closed in.

Lleyrin's Quarterstaff moved at half height. The club end went up, slowly, then whipped through the air, a loud clank, the Bludger was hit backward, downward, touched the ground, bounced up.

With a jump, Lleyrin was at it, grabbed it before the Bludger had found time to gain speed again. The Giant returned to his hut, a twisting Bludger in one big hand. "Harry, can you tell me how to calm this ball?"

"No - Lleyrin. It must be jinxed, anyway, even a normal Bludger needs a box to be put into."

Lleyrin disappeared behind his hut. Harry heard some sounds, another clank, then Lleyrin appeared again, hands empty.

Cho came back.

Lleyrin looked at her. "Cho Chang - you were the little cute one for me until Harry gave me your name."

"Lleyrin ... Thank you for your help." Cho's face showed pain.

The Giant chief noticed her expression. "You are hurt. Come in for more help."

Both Harry and Cho dismounted, followed Lleyrin into the hut.

Inside, Lleyrin turned, said, "Watch your arm," then took Cho at her hips and put her on the table. A second later, Harry followed the same way.

"Let me see your arm," said the Giant.

Harry helped Cho with her coat and with the sleeves. Cho's teeth were clenched, once her breath came hissing, then the arm was free. It looked swollen, showed a dark bruise immediately above the elbow.

"Let me feel it," said Lleyrin. His fingers touched her arm, probed, pressed gently. Cho groaned once, was quiet again.

"The arm isn't broken," he explained. "Cho Chang, do you have time to cure it?"

"No."

"So I thought ... It will take me a moment to prepare what we need. - Harry, do you want to tell me what you and Cho Chang are doing?"

Harry explained the purpose of their exam patrol, and how they had come across a set of Steel Wings. Meanwhile, Lleyrin busied himself with some dried plant, some powder, some water, preparing a liniment.

When Harry had finished, Lleyrin smiled. "So you have found your solution, Harry."

"Yes, Lleyrin - provided we pass this exam."

While stirring the semi-liquid mass, the Giant said casually, "Harry, I wasn't entirely honest with you ... The story of Bodragh no Wonders has of course and end."

Harry stared at him, feeling tricked again, more so as Lleyrin showed no intention to say another word.

"Lleyrin ... will you tell me the end of the story?"

The Giant looked at him. "Yes, Harry - *after* your patrol."

Lleyrin took something out of a drawer. Harry recognized it - the flask with the dragon blood. Holding Cho's arm with one hand, the Giant poured some of the dark fluid onto the bruise, spread it carefully with his thumb. After a moment, Cho's face relaxed.

Now Lleyrin took a piece of fabric that looked like linen but was obviously smoother, put the liniment into it, and fixed it around Cho's arm. He didn't ask Harry for help on the finer details, didn't need it. This done, he said, "Cho Chang, try to move your arm."

Cho's arm moved, tried to bend. It came up a bit, dropped down again. "Better," she said. "A lot better than a minute ago, but that's all I can manage."

Lleyrin had watched the movement. "If you want, Cho Chang, I can make it move. It will be painful for twenty seconds, or I can make you faint first, so you won't feel pain."

"Twenty seconds? ... Do it, Lleyrin."

The Giant nodded. "Harry, hold Cho at the other arm."

Harry took Cho's left hand in his own. His right hand held her upper arm.

Lleyrin's hands took Cho's right arm. "What needs to be done is to move it up and down ..." Still at his first words, he had started to bend Cho's arm rapidly up and down.

Harry felt her grip tighten in his hand, her face going white, eyes closed, air hissing between clenched teeth ... Then she relaxed.

Lleyrin continued to move and bend her arm, slower now, still for a minute. When he sensed her own muscles tensing, he let go. "Cho Chang, now you can do your patrol."

"Thank you, Lleyrin." Cho's voice sounded shaky.

Lleyrin had another powder, poured it into a cup, small for a Giant, still big for humans, filled some water, came to Harry.

"Harry, this is a potion Giants sometimes use for dangerous tasks. It stimulates clear thinking and suppresses pain ... When the effect is gone, you will feel as if you had worked two days in a row ... Cho Chang cannot have it, it doesn't go well with her own cure."

Suppresses pain? Harry took it, drank it, smelling the bitter taste.

"You will feel the effect in less than a minute." Two hands took Harry and put him on the ground. A moment later, Cho was moved the same way.

Lleyrin said, "We'll see each other again, Harry and Cho Chang. I owe you the end of a story - both of you." The door closed.

They mounted their Steel Wings. Cho's movements looked almost normal.

"How's your arm?" asked Harry.

"Better by the second ... How's your brain?"

"Nothing yet."

Suddenly, Harry remembered Fleur's scarf. Why hadn't he thought of it during Cho's treatment? Clear thinking ... Was this the first effect, to realize how stupid one could be?

"So I was the little cute one, huh?" Cho stared at him. "No longer ... Why doesn't he call you Harry Potter?"

"Because I'm incomplete."

"Clever people, those Giants ... Let's go."

The blood was singing in Harry's veins. He felt brilliant, sharp, strong, he could hear the faintest sound in the distance, see the duller shade of colour on the ground or in the sky. His vision was focused to all sides at once, the slightest movement would be recognized.

Trees, bushes, a street ahead, a figure on it, walking, almost in their direction. Seemed to big for a human, so it had to be a Giant, however seemed quite small for a Giant, looked somehow familiar ... looked like Hagrid!

What was Hagrid doing here? ... Walking back to the camp? If so, where from?

The figure had noticed them, waved.

On which side was Hagrid? Certainly not with the others, couldn't be ... Could it? Had Hagrid positioned himself to meet them on their route? If so, he had taken the best place - clear view wide around, easily detectable, everything right ... Untypical for Hagrid, come to think of it.

Diving down, a memory resurfaced in Harry's mind, something someone had said, had ... Hermione had said it.

Harry's hand seized in his coat, had his wand, had it ready, had it up when the Steel Wing bolted right before the huge shape.

"Harry - bin hopin' ter see yer."

Hagrid's left arm was up for a greeting, the right hand at his pocket ...

"DON'T MOVE!!"

Hagrid froze. "Harry - what's wrong with yer?"

Would Hagrid have reacted the same? Harry's wand pointed at the figure, his other arm gestured, giving Cho the sign to close in. "Hagrid, just for the ease of mind - what did we eat on that island where you picked me up for Hogwarts?"

"Wha ... gallopin' gargoyles, Harry, what kinda question's that?" Hagrid hadn't moved.

Harry hadn't either. "Just tell me, Hagrid."

"Yer serious? - A meal years ago? ... Dunno, might'a bin sausages."

Had been ... Something more specific. "And what did you take away from my uncle?"

Hagrid's expression showed utter disbelief. "Harry - what ... Yer! I took yer 'way from that pig-headed muggle ..."

True, except it was the wrong answer. "Hagrid - one last question."

Hagrid's face expressed hope this weird examination might be over soon.

"Who's Norbert?"

Relief was spreading on Hagrid's face. "Which one, Harry? ... I know some of them ..."

Without his eyes leaving the figure, Harry shouted, "CHO! IT'S MACGONAGALL!" Toward Hagrid's figure, he said, "Move slowly, Prof ... You won't like it otherwise ... Where's your wand?"

The Hagrid figure held its arms to both sides. Suddenly, it shrunk, changed colour, hair, features ... Professor McGonagall appeared in front of Harry's eyes.

In the first split second, he had almost shot a stunning spell, now he watched for her arms, watched also whether she would shrink even more - into a cat, trying to escape.

McGonagall stood quietly. "That's it, Mr. Potter, Miss Chang ... I'm out of the game." Her arms slowly folded over her chest, the slightest touch of a smile in her face. "You can continue your patrol."

Harry's wand didn't move. "Cho, jump ... I'll count to ten."

He heard rushing behind him. For ten more seconds, his stare was fixed on McGonagall, who didn't move, didn't speak, didn't change her expression.

"See you, Prof." He was up, quickly gaining height.

He checked around. Cho's arm went up, once, showing a fist. He stored his wand and accelerated.

Three done ... How many more to go? Harry's senses were vibrating, the push of the encounter, in combination with Lleyrin's drink, almost too much to bear.

Back to the scanning routine, left ... rightward ... back. Less trees than before, plain ground, nowhere to hide ... Soon, they would reach the first tree groups, which then would grow together, finally forming the Forbidden Forest.

They had passed west of Hogsmeade. Somewhere ahead a spot came into view, different colour than the surrounding. Harry's eyes focused on it, then he felt a buzz in the Steel Wing. Surprised, he looked down at the broomstick.

The luminiscense was glowing.

He aimed the Steel Wing to the left side, then to the other. Was there a change in intensity? If so, what did it mean? Assuming the impact was stronger when hitting the Steel Wing from the side, the source of the invisible cursing had to be somewhere ahead.

He signaled Cho to come closer, keeping his Steel Wing in slight movements.

"Harry - what's wrong?"

"My Steel Wing is under attack ... What about yours?"

"Nothing on mine ... What's the effect?"

"Nothing that I can feel, just the attack warner ... I guess it's ahead of us - see that spot? ... I'll check closer, don't worry when I'm reeling or rolling - just pretending."

Moving awkwardly, Harry flew forward, used the yawing to check the attack warner in different angles toward the suspected source. Now the difference in intensity grew more visible, even so, all reeling of the Steel Wing was the result of his own careful feigning. Nothing in his control felt wrong. A short push to check, power control also immaculate.

Nearer to the spot, Harry thought he could see some garment, lying flat on the ground, clearly visible from far off.

Why so blatant, catching a patrol's eye from far? If his suspicion was right, if the attacker was an invisible wizard trying to put the Steel Wing under his control, why didn't he ...

Because it was a trap!!

Harry pushed, aiming upward. At the same instant, a wave of pain hit him, twisting his body, white hot burning in his head, vision narrowing, in a few seconds, he would lose control completely, only the Giants' dope kept the little remnants of his senses that were still working, kept his mind in order. Escape ... Too long, wouldn't make it ... any moment now, he would ... Light darkening ... in a reflex, he swung around, pointed the Steel Wing toward the spot, some light coming back ... Only solution - Viktor's game, pushing, need enough speed ...

His mind isolated the pain, forced his body flat on the Steel Wing, pushing, pushing, hand into the coat, there it was, which end, here, where's the belt, WHERE'S THE ... here, point, scratch, arm out, a white iron, not now, just a ... aaand ... go!!

Sidefall upward outward a blow in his head lights going out a blow in his ears would the belt ... still light, steady, more light, only sky ... STEADY YOUR COURSE, body forward, every inch a torture, ground coming into view ... Straight now, fading - did he faint? - No, pain was fading, slowing, turning around, not as bad as before ... Where was that spot ... There.

His body was trembling uncontrollably. At low speed, Harry flew back to the spot.

Glittering on the garment, a circle in which a section seemed missing, in the center of that section a shape, lying on the garment, fetus position ... then he saw, the eye-catcher was a quilt.

Cho arrived. "Harry - are you okay?"

No I'm not. "In a minute ..."

"Was it the ..." Registering his nod, Cho studied the shape, careful not to come too close to the glitter. "Who is it?"

"Who's left?" Thinking still felt difficult for Harry. "Must be Snape."

The thought woke some spirit in him. He dismounted, walked a few steps, moved his arms, bent his knees. He felt thoroughly beaten, however he was the one standing upright!

Cho asked, "Can we leave him like that?"

"We're not going to touch him," said Harry. "No time to sleep yet ... When we find someone, we'll tell him to check here."

If they would find someone, this would be another wizard that had to be fought down first ... Four done, and the dust bombs gone. From now on, it would be wands only. Or running for hide.

"From here," said Cho, "I'm head ... Ready?"

He nodded, walked back to his waiting Steel Wing.

Cho jumped, holding until he had mounted his broomstick, then pushed forward.

Harry no longer felt brilliant. The pain was gone, only his body felt as the day he had moved furniture, trading for some pieces and a lift. Lleyrin's drink ran still through his mind, otherwise, the effect had faded. Another attack of that kind would do him off.

Was it fair, this system? Had this been a normal patrol, they would have stopped and returned after the first attack - Flitwick's storm of stunning spells.

The sky was darkening, showing the first signs of dusk coming soon. Their patrol lasted already longer than two normal ones. And one attack was still to be awaited - that of Dumbledore.

What would he try? Without surprise, Harry registered inside himself the bad feeling this would be the end of the patrol. He could consider this outcome without a sense of desperation. Maybe he was too tired, or maybe because they had won four duels already.

Anyway, two thirds of the patrol lay behind them. Ahead, Harry could see the dragons camp, light in the window of Charlie's hut. No hidden corner between his position and the camp, so Dumbledore would be somewhere in the Forbidden Forest, or above, or between forest and school. How likely was another air attack? ... Not much, not against a Steel Wing.

Cho dived down and stopped. She dismounted, walked to the hut. Harry could hear her calling.

A shadow appeared on the window, opened it. A flash hit Cho.

She twisted, crooked, arms up on her head, broke to her knees ...

In a reflex, Harry had started pushing, without thinking. He pushed still harder, flat on the broomstick, his mind racing with the Steel Wing, faster, ahead. There wasn't much room behind the hut, not enough to turn a loop, anyway he didn't plan it that way.

The picture zoomed in at incredible speed - the light through the window, Cho kneeling, the curse now broken. Harry's hand was in his coat, had the firecracker, no fairy dust this time, fairy dust's out, for compensation, he didn't need to be out of the way, didn't need exact timing, what he needed was a bang, a deafening bang, and here he was, window big, here weee GO ...

At the instant of the firecracker sent flying, he braked with full force.

A loud explosion - in the hut, it had doubled and tripled.

The Steel Wing stopped, just a little delay yet enough to carry him ten, twelve yards past the hut. He dismounted, arm already in his garments. There it was ... thin, silky, spreading, over him, covered - the Invisibility Cloak.

Wand ready, he tripped, careful now, careful, no dry branches, no loud step, noise is more important than time, how good that the dragon guards had flattened, hardened the ground, not too close around the corner ... Slowly ... tiptoe ... Sound from a voice.

He reached the corner, could see Cho, could see him, bending over her - Drilencu! His left arm at her shoulder, right arm holding the wand, head turning ...

"EXPELLIARMUS!!!"

The wand broke from Drilencu's grip and flew through the air to Harry. He took it, threw off his Invisibility Cloak, stored the wand in the place of his own.

"Mr. Potter - with an Invisibility Cloak ... I didn't know that. Anyway ..."

In Harry's mind was white hot rage. "You cruciated her!!!"

"Sorry - but this is ..."

"YOU CRUCIATED HER!!!" Harry moved closer. "You're sorry?? ... You'll be really sorry in a second, tasting your own medicine ..." His wand pointing, he registered Drilencu's face hardening, the teacher's gaze at Harry's wand ...

"HARRY!! HE'S A TEACHER!"

So what. In a moment, he'd be a dancing teacher ...

"HE'S DISARMED!"

Cho, still kneeling, obviously had trouble coming up. She stared at him, eyes wide open, arms up, as though she was trying to protect Drilencu ... The moment broke.

Harry moved another step. "You're lucky, *Professor* ..." The words came like spitting. "But I'll remember that ... I'll make you remember it too - some day."

"Mr. Potter - my role's that of a Death-Eater. You knew what to expect."

"I did ... got it already - from Snape." Harry's eyes met Drilencu's. "Hitting me - that's one thing, I'm on exam ... But you hit *her*, and that I'll never forget."

Cho came up, groaning.

Harry waited for her to leave Drilencu's reach, he himself wouldn't come within wrangling distance of this gorilla on legs, definitely not.

"Anyway," said Drilencu, "I'm out of the game. Mr. Potter, can I have my wand?"

"No."

Drilencu's eyes widened, then narrowed. "Mr. Potter, this ..."

Harry interrupted him. "I don't trust you ... Back in the school - not here."

It was as if a blow had hit Drilencu's face. He paled, reddened, made a step.

Harry's wand came up, stopped him.

After a second, Drilencu turned, walked into the hut. The door banged.

"Cho?" He glanced at her only for an instant, then his eyes were back at the hut.

"I'm okay, Harry ... No I'm not, but let's get off from here."

He waited until Cho had jumped. Watching the hut, he retreated to the spot where he had dropped his cloak, crushed it, put it into the coat. Repeatedly glancing backwards, he reached his Steel Wing, mounted, jumped.

He followed Cho, closer than before. It was almost dark, the forest under their feet black, though not menacing. The Forbidden Forest held no risk for them today, dangerous were only places with their own people, the ever caring teachers of Hogwarts.

One of them wouldn't be too caring the next time, not after the insult of returning to the school without his wand. He, Harry, would make sure of this news passing round.

He tried to imagine how the next Defence against the Dark Arts classes would be, couldn't. He tried to find an idea how to pay Drilencu back, found none. He would ask Ron, or the twins ... He wouldn't ask Cho, she really might stop him.

So he concentrated on the flight again - wouldn't this be the greatest joke of all if suddenly a real Death-Eater would appear, recognized only by its unknown face? ... Provided they came that close. Come to think of it, the face might not be unknown at all - he had seen them, would probably remember.

A bank of faint mist came into view, lying over the tree tops ahead.

Cho didn't change course, the mist too light, straight back to Hogwarts was all that mattered now. Now he reached the first whirls, could still recognize Cho, saw her bending forward, diving, with undiminished speed crashing into a tree.

Almost the same instant, Harry's stomach revolted as the world turned upside down, sky under his feet, trees hanging above his head.

In a reflex, he stopped.

This trick ... The trick from the maze - no, not the same, he could feel himself sitting upright, only the world had turned.

Carefully, he inched forward, then he saw Cho - above him!! She was hanging in a tree, motionless, held by her belt as much as by the branches around, her Steel Wing stopped, holding its position.

Harry's mind whirled. Cho wasn't above him, he *knew* it, she had crashed into a tree, yes, and that's why she hung in that tree, except the tree stood above him.

Inching closer, he reached the tree, still beyond grabbing range, what was right, up or down? Lifting up in the tiniest steps, Harry stretched his hand, felt the tree top hanging down into the sky below. So it was really Cho what he saw, not some mirror image. He had to take her out of the tree.

Gently pressing against the branches, he moved his Steel Wing toward the trunk.

Lifting Cho was impossible. Then what? If he could pull the Steel Wing out of the tree, the broomstick would carry her and the belt would hold her, to the next opening where they could reach the ground.

His arm outstretched, stopped he just in time. If he touched the Steel Wing, it would buckle, probably break his arm. How to ... An idea.

He took Fleur's shawl out and wound it around his hand. Carefully, he touched Cho's Steel Wing at its side, shrinking back at the same instant.

The broomstick twisted a bit, by far not as hard as the reaction at Viktor's test.

Viktor ... of course!

Harry seized again, found the rope, threw one end over the cross-bar at Cho's Steel Wing, tried to grab it from the underside. He failed once, again, then took it immediately under the main bar. This had caused a short touch of the broomstick, another twist but no blow in his arm.

Seconds later, with the rope through its own ring, the Steel Wing was tied to the leash.

He unwrapped his hand and took the rope around his wrist, pulled. A slight movement, not more. He was too weak, so his own Steel Wing had to do the work. He fixed the free end through his safety belt ring, checked the knot.

Inching backward, downward into the sky, he pulled again. Pushing harder, he felt how Cho's Steel Wing was coming free, Cho dangling at her belt. He went a bit farther down into the sky, all manoeuvres slowly, carefully.

Cho was free, hanging in the air, some angle between upright and lying.

Harry moved, gaining a bit more speed. He had to reach an opening quickly, his senses already used to the inverse world. Seconds later, another twisting in his stomach, then the world appeared normal again.

Checking back, he saw a Steel Wing follow like a dog, carrying a Cho who seemed to move a bit. Speeding up some more, Harry looked around for an opening in the trees, found one, to the left of their course.

Moments later, their convoy arrived there. Slowly, he descended.

Immediately above ground, he saw Cho's arms move, fending her slow fall. She was on the ground, then he himself.

He dismounted, walked to her Steel Wing and, hand protected again, deactivated it. A hit on the button, Cho's belt was off. He knelt at her side. "Cho, Cho - how are you?"

"Dunno ... what happened, Harry? I can't remember ... I feel dizzy, and - I'm getting sick." An instant later, Cho was vomiting.

Harry guided her some yards away. Cho slumped down. "My head's hurting like hell ... Harry, tell me, what happened?"

"You crashed into a tree, in that trick cloud which turned everything upside down ... Don't you remember??"

"No. What do you mean, upside down? ... Ouch." Cho held her hand before her eyes, something dark at her fingers.

Harry took his wand, said, "Lumos," and stuck it into the soft ground. Then he examined Cho's head.

A cut, bleeding, bruises, nothing serious on the surface, only the disquieting lack of memory.

"Not ... it hurts." Cho's voice sounded weak. "And I'm so cold."

"Wait a second," said Harry, "I have something." He took Fleur's shawl and draped it around Cho's neck. "Here ... It'll warm you, and it'll ease the pain."

"Hold me, Harry."

He sat down at her side, took her in his arm. "Okay, let's have a rest ... You know - we're through, that cloud, that's been Dumbledore's trick."

Cho wasn't interested in patrols and tricks. "It really works," she said suddenly, "the pain's not too bad ... I'm still dizzy, but not the same as a minute ago, it's something else ... Feels good."

She giggled.

It alarmed Harry, the head injury had to be worse than he thought.

Cho's arm came around his head, her head followed, next second, her body came around, lying in his lap. She smiled up at him. "Harry ... kiss me."

Oh, no - the Veela shawl! Without it, Cho head-sick, with, lovesick.

"Please, Harry ..." Her arm tried to pull his head down.

Stomping, branches crashing.

Harry's head jerked up, his hand seized for his wand, a shadow almost over him, then he relaxed. A Centaur.

He couldn't recognize the face, blinded by his own light. Gently, he put Cho down to stand up.

"Harry Potter, why are you coming here?"

The voice ... "Is this you, Firenze?"

"Yes - who else would talk with you?"

His eyes adjusting, Harry could see the light hair. "We had an accident," he said. "Cho here - she's injured."

"The forest is not a good place for humans, the least for yourself." Firenze's head pointed in the direction where Hogwarts had to be. "There you'll find one of your own people, not too far away."

"Is he old - silvery hair, long beard?"

Firenze nodded. "Yes. He'll help you ... Go now, I'll show you the way."

So the cloud hadn't been Dumbledore's only trick. The Headmaster was waiting for them. So close to Hogwarts ... Cho injured ...

No, thought Harry, not yet. "Firenze - please, we need your help. Can you guide us around this man? ... Can you - can you take her on your back? She's too weak."

Firenze's hooves stomped the ground. "Harry Potter, you're straining my patience beyond tolerance. My brothers already think I'm crazy ..."

Cho got up. "Harry, who - oooh, that's your Centaur ... He's so beautiful."

The situation was getting out of Hand. "Cho," said Harry, "this is Firenze. - Firenze, this is Cho Chang."

Cho was on her feet, unsteady. "Firenze, I have a picture of you ..." She staggered toward the Centaur. "Firenze ... fiere Firenze, fair-haired fairy horse ..." She giggled.

Firenze looked at her, then at Harry, who hastened to explain. "It's the shawl to ease her pain ... a Veela shawl."

The Centaur made a gesture. "Cho Chang's charming chatter." His front legs bent, then he lowered himself. "Heave her hips, Harry."

Harry moved Cho onto the back of the Centaur. Her hands grabbed his mane, her head close to his neck.

Harry took his wand, hand through the sling, ran to their broomsticks, grabbed Cho's, now only dead weight, mounted his own.

Firenze was already trotting forward, getting faster. Harry followed, keeping the pace he couldn't have mastered on his feet.

Firenze followed paths, crossed under trees, avoiding underbrush. Harry heard Cho murmuring, laughing, seemingly happy with her ride. The Centaur was pretty fast, within minutes, they reached what first looked like another opening, then Harry recognized it was the exit. They could see the lights from the school buildings.

Firenze stopped, knelt down. Harry ran over, took Cho, moved her off the back. "Thank you, Firenze ... Without you ..."

Firenze no longer looked angry. "You are in luck, Harry Potter." With a jump, he was gone.

Harry took Cho's hand. "Come, Cho, one last ride, and we're back ..."

A voice said, "The patrol ends here, Harry."

He wheeled around, arm coming up, registered Dumbledore's figure, the Headmaster's wand ready, heard him shouting, "*EXPELLIARMUS!*"

Harry's arm jerked up, the grip already broken, a sharp pulling, much sharper than during the tests with Hermione, the sling tensing, stretching ... relaxing. His hand caught the wand again which pointed toward Dumbledore ...

"EXPELLIARMUS!!"

Dumbledore's wand twisted, steadied.

"Allow me to keep my wand, Harry." Dumbledore smiled. "It's a different technique than yours - imagine, the Headmaster disarmed by a student ... That wouldn't do."

Harry slackened, shrunk. So close ...

"Anyway - as a real Death-Eater, I would be defeated now. So - I guess, I'm out of the game, Harry, what do you think?"

He stared, unable to speak.

Dumbledore came over. "Harry, Cho - you have won. Mount your Steel Wings and finish the exam." His hand was pointing toward the buildings.

"Yes, Professor Dumbledore," murmured Harry. He tried to store his wand, found the slot blocked. "Professor - here ... Can you take it? I think it's better you give it back."

Dumbledore inspected the wand. "Drilencu?"

"Yes."

The smile deepened. "I'm not sure whether he'll like it more from me than from you. Didn't he declare himself out?"

"Yes, he did," admitted Harry.

Dumbledore examined him for another moment, then, without asking further, he took Drilencu's wand - and disappeared.

Harry turned back to Cho. She stood waiting, passively, caught in her Veela dream. Would she be able to fly the short distance? He decided to take the shawl off, better a safe flight with a headache than some weird actions.

Cho didn't like it. "No ... That isn't nice, Harry." After a few seconds, something like clarity appeared in her eyes. Then she recognized the lights from the school buildings. "Oh - Hogwarts."

"Yes," said Harry. "C'mon, in a moment we're there. Keep it slow." He watched Cho mounting, hooking her belt, then followed.

They reached the entrance. Nobody outside.

Cho moved slowly, like under a shock. He put his arm around her shoulder. They walked the stairs up to the Entrance Hall.

Opening, he recognized three figures sitting inside - Ron, framed by Hermione at one side and Almyra at the other. They sent a glance, then their heads snapped up, followed by their bodies.

Ron reached him two steps ahead of the girls. "Harry, Cho - you did it, yeaahh, you did it!!" He was jumping, dancing. "You beat them, wow - one after the other ... We saw them coming in, their looks ... Boy oh boy, you should've seen Drilencu, his face - Harry, what did you do to him??"

Ron stopped. "And then - you didn't come back, and Dumbledore wasn't back, and we thought ..." Concern grew in his face. "Tell me, Harry - please tell me you've won!"

Harry felt too tired for a grin. "Yes."

"YIPEEEH ..." Ron's howling echoed from the walls.

Hermione was beaming, jumping.

Almyra couldn't join, looking at Cho's face had reduced her shining to relief, mixed with anxiousness.

Harry dropped the broomstick. "Almyra, please help me to take her to Madam Pomfrey ... She's injured."

At once, Almyra was at Cho's other side. "Cho, Cho - what happend to you?"

Some spirit reappeared in Cho's face. "You won't believe it, Al - I got everything, from Bludgers to Cruciatius - and came through ... And then, after nothing could beat us, I did it by myself."

"What??" Looking desperately, Almyra glanced at Harry.

"She crashed into a tree ... Dumbledore's trick."

Ron could be calmed down enough to feel responsible for the signing-off and the broomsticks. Hermione would have liked to accompany them to Madam Pomfrey's rooms but then decided to help Ron.

Harry and Almyra escorted Cho upstairs. Cho didn't resist, her last energy had been wasted in her remark.

Madam Pomfrey examined the patient, not too worried, listened to Harry's explanation, made a face, then let him show the wonder cure he had used to tranquilize Cho.

She took the shawl, held it at her cheeks. Took it off quickly, handed it back. "Well, Mr. Potter, you did what you could - but now let me take care of her in a more professional way."

A moment later, Harry was motioned out of the room.

He trotted down, empty, disoriented. Sounds from the Great Hall - of course, supper time. Was he hungry? He didn't know. Something to drink, yes. He opened the door.

Heads turned, then the hall was in uproar. Yelling, shouting, whistling, trampling, starting from the squad members and spreading along the tables.

Harry made a few steps, feeling stunned, then some Gryffindor squad members on his side of the table hurried to guide him. He sat down, glancing mindlessly at the table, at the dishes.

Somebody put a cup in his hand - Hermione.

He took it, drank, held it. Hermione filled it again, he drank, held it. Hermione filled it. He drank half of it.

Hermione looked anxious. "Harry, are you okay?"

"So so ... I got a drink from Lleyrin, some power stuff ... And now, I'm paying for it." The cup was empty again.

The other students were storming him with questions. He tried to answer, couldn't find words. More questions. Suddenly, he felt as if breaking into tears any second.

Pleadingly, he looked at Hermione, who said, "Ron, tell them ... Not now."

Ron shouted, "Hey - leave him ... Press conference's tomorrow, at breakfast."

The pressure stopped. Harry drank more, tried to eat, managed a few bites, looked around. There came Almyra.

He stood up, watched by many eyes, trotted to the Ravenclaw table. Heads were turning, faces studying him, girls' voices whispering. He couldn't care less.

"How is she?"

"She'll be okay, Harry. It's a concussion, not too serious ... Tomorrow at lunch, she'll be back."

"Can I see her?"

"She's sleeping now."

He nodded. "Can I see her?"

Almyra's head, about to shake, stopped. She stood up. "Come, Harry."

They went upstairs. Almyra was talking with Madam Pomfrey, Harry heard something like "... minute, not more." then they were inside.

Cho lying in a bed, sleeping. The cut and the bruises were already gone, the face clean, calm, beautiful. Cho in a night dress ... The little cute one who had bombed Flitwick into dreams ... Almyra's hand pulled him away, he followed.

He remembered darkly how Almyra guided him to the Gryffindor tower, made him sit down, was back some time later with Ron and Hermione. They led him upstairs, Ron guided him into their dormitory, helped him undress.

"Ssangs," said Harry's mouth.

Darkness.

20 - Girls' Business

Next morning, Harry woke with a drumming in his head. A long shower reduced the pain to a slight numbness. He trudged down to the breakfast table, looking for a gallon of drinks and all food he would find.

Eating was difficult, the other Gryffindors took turns to ask questions while he himself had to make do with one mouth for chewing and answering.

George. "How did the dust bombs work?"

"Super ... They saved us, twice. Flitwick was the first. Could you see it from the school? ... Snape was the other, he's been hidden."

Katie. "Who was next?"

"Hooch. That witch - incredible. A jinxed Bludger, almost broke Cho's arm ... And herself, hooded, riding an air attack ... Without Lleyrin, we'd been done and out already there."

He had to describe the air fight, how Lleyrin had knocked the Bludger first and cured Cho then. He left out the parts with the story and with the twenty-seconds cure.

Fred. "Could you use the other firecrackers too?"

"You bet - at the dragons camp, against Drilencu ... Got me the time to hide under my cloak and come at him ... Besides, we'll talk about this later." Harry glanced at the teachers' table. Nothing unusual, nobody missing, Snape looked okay. Drilencu ... Harry's lips tightened.

Ron had watched his glance, turned to him, eyes shining. "Say - what happened at the camp? ... When Drilencu came back, he was mad - stomped through the hall like a bull."

"He cruciated Cho."

Shocked silence. "I used a firecracker to deafen him for a moment," explained Harry, "came down, donned my cloak, and tiptoed closer."

"And then?"

"I disarmed him ... Was a surprise for him, me under the cloak. Then ..." Suddenly feeling reluctance, he hesitated.

"Harry!!"

"Well - I was about to cruciate him in return, except Cho stopped me just in time ... I wish she hadn't done that."

"And that's why he's been so mad?"

Harry grinned thinly. "No - that was just the part driving *me* mad ... And the last word isn't said about that, believe me ... No, what he didn't like at all was, I didn't give his wand back."

A moment of surprise, then shouts and bravos, "Right so, Harry."

"Is it back now?" asked Hermione.

"Should be - I handed it to Dumbledore."

The name raised a wave of questions. "Where did you meet him" ... "What's been his trick?" ... "How did you beat him?"

"He had two of them," explained Harry. "The first trick was this upside-turned mirror. I encountered it once - in the maze, that's why I could hold in time ... It was there that Cho crashed into a tree." He told a censored version of the rescue operation and of Firenze's help.

"And what's been Dumbledore's second trick?" asked Lee.

"Firenze took us to another exit of the forest," said Harry, "but guess what, next second Dumbledore's been standing there, and said something, and wanted to disarm me." He looked at Hermione. "But the sling held!"

"And then?"

"Then I did the same to him."

"You disarmed Dumbledore??"

"I said the same, right? ... That means, I tried but failed too ... Except he had no sling. All I managed was making his wand twist a bit."

"And how ..."

Harry beamed. "I thought that's been it, so near the school ... But Dumbledore said a normal Death-Eater would be beaten now, so ..."

Another wave of shouts and applause. The Gryffindors beamed with Harry. That was their Headmaster, greatest wizard of all!

After the breakfast, Harry first checked with Almyra, hearing Cho was all right and busy adjusting to normal, then advanced to the next table, eager to return Fleur's shawl.

"Not 'ere, 'arry." Fleur seemed embarrassed. "Come with me." They walked to her office.

"Congratulations, 'arry, to you and Cho." Fleur's eyes were shining. "I 'eard about it at the table - Dumbledore was so proud of you, even Snape ..."

"Snape??"

"Yes - 'e wouldn't stop teasing Drilencu, 'e really had fun."

Wonders did happen, thought Harry. "Here ... thank you for the shawl."

"Could you use it?" Fleur looked expectantly.

"Yes - like all the other help, we needed everything ... First I used it to touch Cho's Steel Wing, to take it out of the tree ..."

"Really? - And it worked?" Fleur seemed happy to hear about Veela power calming down a narrow-minded broomstick.

"Yes, without it, that thing could easily have broken my arm ... Then I put it at Cho because she was sick and cold ... Had a concussion."

"And?"

"It worked ... with some side-effects."

"I can imagine." Fleur's eyes were sparkling. "My poor 'unter, so busy fighting the bad wizards and then - a romantic girl at his side."

"She didn't stay at my side."

Fleur laughed, couldn't stop. It was addictive.

"Anyway," said Harry, still chuckling, "when Firenze came - you know, the Centaur who helped me already once before, and I asked him, and he didn't want to - carry her, I mean, it was Cho in her dream state who made him do it."

"What did she say?"

"It was so ... Oh yes, now I remember. - Fiery Firenze, fair-haired fairy horse."

Fleur clapped her hands. "Poetic, so nice ... Didn't you get jealous, 'arry?"

"At Firenze??" He shook his head. "I had other problems, really."

He left Fleur and marched down the floor, thinking about what she had said. Jealous at a Centaur, him? Sometimes he couldn't follow her mind. Then he remembered what she had said about Snape. After a moment's hesitation, he headed for Snape's office.

"Come in."

Snape didn't show surprise. "Mr. Potter - halfway, I was expecting you. Otherwise, it would have been me to look for you."

"Why?" Funny question, with him visiting Snape.

"Well - to hear if you're okay ... To see if we can look at each other." Snape seemed surprised that this wasn't obvious.

"Oh - you mean the curse ... No," said Harry, "I have no problem with *your* curse, Professor Snape - it was okay ... This was a hard exam ..."

"So we are on terms as good as we can be?"

"Yes - er, I hope you didn't get cold ... But we didn't dare to touch the dust."

Snape waved dismissively. "I was rescued quickly, Mr. Potter, aside from wearing enough garment ... And a quilt."

"Yes," confirmed Harry, nodding slowly. "The quilt ... It almost did it."

"Almost?" Snape shook his head. "The quilt worked all right - it was me who failed ... Still unclear to me how you managed - and then ... fairy dust!!"

Harry grinned. "Professor Snape, you've been fighting more than just myself - Myrtle's idea, the twins' work, Lleyrin's drink ..."

Snape's eyes widened. "The Giant chief - he gave you a drink? ... And this ..."

Harry nodded. "That - and the front shield of the Steel Wing, and a similar training with Viktor ... Even so, half of a second more ..."

"Mr. Potter," said Snape with some satisfaction, "you just re-established my self-esteem - and you told me whom I have to visit for some expert talk about potions ... aside from the very interesting stories at the breakfast table ... So I wasn't the only one with a Cruciatus curse."

"No, Professor," replied Harry, "but the only one that was all right."

* * *

At lunch, Cho was back. Harry saw her eating with obvious appetite. He had something in mind, had to stop her from eating too much. Right now, crossing the distance to the Ravenclaw table didn't feel difficult at all, students were looking at him either way ...

Viktor announced a meeting of the squad, in a class room! ... A bit more than an hour from now - time enough. He hurried over. "Cho, good to see you ... How's your head?"

"Like new - useful to eat ... Half a dragon sounds about right."

"Save a little space," said Harry, "we have to make a visit."

"Do we?" Cho studied him.

"Yes - paying for some dust."

He walked back to his seat to finish his own meal, also careful to reserve some capacity. He asked Ron why the meeting was scheduled in a class room.

"Private party," answered Ron, grinning. "We don't need all the other students staring at us."

"Like me, you mean?" Hermione stared at him angrily.

"Well, you are - somewhere in the middle." Ron was amusing himself. "You know, Viktor could establish you as his - er, personal assistant, then ..." His head twisted back, just in time to avoid Hermione's blow.

Faking astonishment, he added, "If that doesn't suit you, ask Harry - he's certainly entitled for a special guest."

Certainly a reasonable idea, there was nothing that could be said against Ron's suggestion - except that Hermione still felt teased, and probably was right. She declined Harry's offer.

So he stood up, marched to the Ravenclaw table once more, found Cho chewing. "Are you still eating?"

"What do you fink thish ish?"

"Sounds more like talking." Harry grinned.

Cho swallowed. "That reminds me ... I wanted to ask you something." She stood up, motioned him to follow. The question seemed not supposed for more ears.

They reached the Entrance Hall. "Harry, this shawl yesterday - what was it?"

Harry kept his face straight. "I had it from Fleur - a tranquilizer."

"Tranquilizer, huh? ... Some tranquilizer." Cho didn't look at him at her next question. "What did I say?"

"You were cold, and hurt ... So I put it around."

"No - with that thing."

"Then ... well, then - um, then came Firenze, and you stepped to him and said you had a picture of him, and that he was beautiful, and then, you said ..." Harry had to giggle, "you said *Fiery Firenze, fair-haired fairy horse.*"

"Oh, no!" Cho's cheeks were pink.

"But that's what made him help us!"

Cho relaxed a bit. Unfortunately, Harry had to giggle again.

She eyed him with suspicion in her face. "What else?"

"It wasn't you then - it was Firenze. He said, *Cho Chang's charming chatter.*"

"Great." She looked very embarrassed.

"And then he came down, so you could climb up ... except you didn't. And then, Firenze said ..." Harry had trouble again, steadied, "he said, *Heave her hips, Harry ...* I think you've infected him ..." Harry erupted in laughter.

Cho waited until he had calmed down. "And that was all?"

"Basically, yes."

She looked unbelieving.

He had to stop this interrogation before ... "Cho, let's go ... just time enough before the squad meeting's due."

He led her to the kitchen. Cho watched the steps and turns and twists with full attention.

When they entered, the house-elves looked up. A moment later, the room was full of chirping and chatter. Dobby hurried by.

"Dobby, I want you to meet my team partner, Cho Chang. ... Cho, this is my friend Dobby - source of cakes and fairy dust."

"Dobby is proud of Harry Potter, his great wizard, sir, how he fought the other wizards ... and of Cho Chang, great witch ..."

Harry avoided Cho's glance - the only way to keep serious. "Dobby, we came to tell you the story - as promised ... To thank you for the fairy dust."

They were urged to sit down, dishes appeared before them, elves around, busy to present still another dessert, and a cup ...

Cho grabbed a piece, took a bite, her hand on her mouth, then she had herself under control again. "Delicious," she said.

It was the signal to bring still more.

Harry started to talk. His intention was to provide a slightly censored version of their patrol while Cho was eating. It didn't work that way.

After each step, after each wizard beaten, especially the female house-elves wanted to hear Cho's version of that part, seen from her point of view. It gave Harry time to eat some of the desserts, moreover, it gave him an insight into Cho's perspective.

Dobby didn't like this zig-zagging of the story, he clearly preferred a unique, uninterrupted Harry Potter version but was overruled by a majority. Like the students, the house-elves were happy to hear their Headmaster and Harry had found some kind of a draw.

When Harry and Cho stood up to leave, the house-elves tried to equip them with all the desserts that hadn't been eaten. Harry declined - as nice as the idea seemed, to come to the squad meeting with armloads of cake and other sweets, it could only backfire. The others would expect similar treats in the future, while Harry didn't intend to share his privileges that much. After all, the twins knew about this source longer than he himself, and they never appeared with presents for the squad.

Maybe Cho had similar thoughts, at least, she didn't object.

They walked to the classroom of the meeting. "So what do you think of the source?" asked Harry.

"Nice people," answered Cho. "First I had to fight one laugh after the other, but after a while, I got used to them ... How many students know about this place?"

"You mean the entrance? ... You're the sixth. The twins found out, and then one day, they decided to share the secret with us three - Ron, Hermione, and me."

"That was generous of them."

Still, the picture wasn't clear yet for Cho. "And Dobby - what's so special with him? He's really crazy about you - his great wizard, sir ... on and forever." Cho's voice had mimicked Dobby's chirping quite well.

"Dobby is free. - He's been hired by Dumbledore, for a salary ... First he had a bad reputation with the others, a *paid* house-elf, imagine ... I guess they've grown used to it by now."

"So he's free - good for him," said Cho impatiently, "but it doesn't explain why you're his one and only hero."

"Sorry, I forgot to mention - I freed him."

"From whom? ... Couldn't have been the Dursleys, could it?"

The picture of Dobby in Privet Drive appeared in Harry's memory, made him chuckle. "No," he said, "his former master was Lucius Malfoy."

Cho's head snapped around. "Really?"

Harry nodded.

"Young Potter - full of surprises ... And when might her great wizard feel it appropriate to tell that story to his cute little witch, sir?"

Harry had to master another fit, more from Cho's voice than from her words. "Not now, anyway." They had reached the classroom.

Some minutes later, the squad had gathered completely. More than that, Ron was also here, and Ron had arrived with a special guest - Hermione. "She volunteered to do the protocol - an offer I couldn't deny."

Viktor made the formal announcement of the news everybody knew - Harry back in the squad, would form a twin team with Cho, a team which, as demand required, would join the other twin team of Katie and Alicia for a quad team. Then he asked for something Harry should have expected with a bit of clear thinking - a detailed report of their patrol, for entertainment as much as for a review of attack techniques that had to be expected from real Death-Eaters.

At least, he and Cho were practiced now. They sat down at the table, examining the unfamiliar perspective from the teacher's position, and told the same story again, passing each other the thread at the proper scene.

They quickly learned - the facts weren't enough, the other squad members wanted a minute description how the teachers had reacted. The former house teams were pleased to hear about the performance of their Headmasters and -mistresses, nobody felt mercy with Drilencu, and all of them applauded when Harry quoted Dumbledore. A longer applause waved up when they had finished.

Viktor stood up. "Harry, Cho - to complete the lesson, what's your conclusion? ... What do we learn from that patrol in general?"

"Hmm ..." Harry looked dumbfounded.

Cho was quicker. "Basically, squad duty is to *find* people," she said, "not to attack them. - But all considered, I wouldn't mind a dust bomb or two out there."

The squad members agreed, shouting. Fred and George hadn't joined, for Harry, it was obvious they had taken this conclusion already by themselves.

Viktor seemed more reluctant. As he pointed out, throwing a dust bomb would invariably expose the rider to a curse from close distance. The squad wanted to hear Harry's opinion.

"If I had a choice," Harry said, "I'd rather stay off. But then, such a bomb in your pocket doesn't feel wrong."

Agreement from the others.

"At any rate, these Steel Wings are awfully effective. The front shield holds a lot - that's why a direct attack might be the best solution ... And cursing the broomstick itself has no effect whatsoever. With them, we're in a totally different position than before."

"What else?" asked Viktor.

"Giants."

Harry and Cho looked at each other, they had given the same answer at the same time. Cho motioned him to speak.

"The Giants' camp is like an outpost," Harry explained, "and the Giants are helpful, experienced in fighting, in wounds ... I think we should get in closer touch with them - something like each team has its own Giant ... Cho and I have ours - it's Lleyrin."

"That reminds me - " said Viktor. "Madam Hooch wants her Bludger back - a task for the squad, she said ... I thought you're the best candidates to get it back from Lleyrin."

Once more, Harry and Cho looked at each other. That witch had a nerve, first sending it and then ... After a moment, Harry realized - from a teacher's view, this seemed a perfectly ordinary request. Back to normalcy - it might take still a day or two.

Viktor wanted them to fly immediately after the meeting, just to Lleyrin and back.

"How do we carry a Bludger?" asked Harry.

A bag, was the answer, sufficiently strong to hold a Bludger, much lighter than a standard box.

Still, they couldn't start yet, he wouldn't visit Lleyrin without a present, not after the Giant had helped them so much, had used a lot of the precious dragon blood, and certainly not for this visit - the end of a story awaiting them. But which?

"What kind of present do you need?" asked Cho.

Harry explained. It could be anything - as long as it looked as if the guest had invested some thought, so it could be discussed in a small talk.

"I think it's me who should give it," said Cho. "He cured *my* arm, after all ... Yes, you got some dope, but you already gave him presents while for me, it's a first."

"Do you know something?"

"Might be," answered Cho, a glitter in her eyes. "Gimme that bag ... Wait here."

She was back quickly. "I need a bottle."

They found one in the Potions classroom. Cho's hand seized in the bag, came up with a smaller bottle, seized again, came up with another, and another ... A moment later, six small bottles stood on the table.

"What's this?" asked Harry.

Cho was pouring the contents of the smaller bottles into the big one. A strong, sharp odour filled the room.

Interrupting her work, she looked up, a malicious expression in her face. "Each year, my mother sends me to Hogwarts with one of those bottles. That stuff - it's called *China Oil*, supposed to be good for a cold, coughing, and I don't know what ... Burns like hell, and Madam Pomfrey can offer better methods, so I never use it. But - you know, I just cannot spill it off and then tell my mother it's empty."

Pouring more, Cho added with grim voice, "That's the opportunity I've been waiting for."

It was Harry's first sign-off with Ron, following the new rule. "Don't wet your pants if it takes a little longer," he said, "I'm sure we will stay with Lleyrin for some time."

They started, Cho head, Harry tail.

The first regular patrol - almost regular, after his exam, after weeks of deep frustration. Wonderful, just great. No wizard waiting for them, hopefully not, that was. At least none from Hogwarts, and no other either, Harry felt sure of that.

Reaching Lleyrin's hut, Cho simply manoeuvred to the window, called, "Lleyrin!" and then dismounted to walk to the door. Harry followed.

When the door opened, Cho said, "Hallo Lleyrin - I want to thank you for your help ... If you could move me on that table, please."

With a smile in his eyes, Lleyrin took Cho and flung her up. At the Giant's questioning look, Harry nodded, was upheaved too.

Lleyrin came with two boxes for him and Cho, to be used as stools. They sat down.

"Cho Chang and Harry, my home is honeyed with your visit."

Had this been a mock version of the traditional welcome? Harry tried to present the formal answer, but Cho was quicker. She held up the bottle. "Then this will help to balance the sweetness, Lleyrin - with greetings from China, where I was born."

Their host accepted the bottle, opened it, sniffed. His nose wrinkled. "Cho Chang, is this a cure in return for a cure?"

"Yes, Lleyrin. It's called China Oil, used for a cold, coughing, and other maladies. For humans, it's pretty strong ... Should be just fine for a Giant."

"I'm sure you are right, Cho Chang, after you had had the opportunity to hone your eye for Giant cures ... Did your arm work?"

"Very good, Lleyrin. Madam Pomfrey, our doctor witch at Hogwarts, didn't have to treat it at all - only my head."

Harry asked himself why he had come. Those two did pretty well without him.

"What happened to it, Cho Chang?"

"I crashed into a tree, Lleyrin."

"Cho Chang in the Tree - that would be a Giants' name for you, although you might not value it properly." Lleyrin didn't smile, still, he seemed to have fun. His glance turned to Harry.

"Did you do the same, Harry?"

"No, Lleyrin. It was a wizard trick I had seen before, and I recognized it."

"So you plucked her out, and then you and Cho Chang could finish your patrol?"

"Yes, thanks to your drink. Without it, I'd never come that far, Lleyrin."

Their host nodded. "Many Giants said the same, at some time. Your patrol is done, Harry and Cho Chang, you might want to hear how Bodragh no Wonders finished his trial."

"Our official duty is to get the Bludger, Lleyrin," answered Harry. "But you're right, I'd like to hear it very much."

"Then listen how Bodragh solved his problem ... He was in the forest and had realized the forest people were hurting his town badly, in revenge for his intruding. Bodragh decided to leave the forest, the town, the entire valley he called his homeground, to seek for a place in

some exile. But before he would do it, he wanted to see this girl a last time, if possible, to apologize for his misguided actions."

Lleyrin paused for a moment, offering an opportunity for questions. When none came, he continued. "So he went to the town, waiting for her in the early evening when he might have a chance to see her and talk with her unnoticed. The girl's name was Seselith in June. Before his unlucky decision to drop the invitation, Bodragh had liked to call her Seselith in Juniper, and she had liked it too.

When she came along the path, he spoke to her, 'Seselith - it's me, Bodragh.' After the first moment of fright, the girl rushed to his hiding spot and asked him why he had come. 'I have to go from here,' said Bodragh, 'I have brought misfortune to all and everybody. I wanted to tell you how truly sorry I am.' Seselith said, 'I have something for you, Bodragh. Wait here and let me get it.' She walked to her parents' house. When she came back, Bodragh saw she had a bundle on her shoulder. He asked, 'What's in there?' Seselith answered, 'My things. I have to go with you.' Bodragh was astonished, quite baffled. "Why do you want to do this?" he asked. Seselith said, 'One reason is that somebody has to take care of you - that's enough answer for now.' ... Then they walked away - to find another valley where people would call him Bodragh near Waters."

After his last words, Lleyrin fell quiet. His audience was quiet too, caught by the story and by their own thoughts.

The Giant stood up. "I'll get the Bouncing Ball."

They heard some clanks, then Lleyrin was back. Harry held the bag open, so their host could push the Bludger in. Harry quickly closed the bag, relieved to see the Bludger calming, maybe from the darkness.

Lleyrin put him and Cho to the ground, followed them outside. They mounted their Steel Wings.

"When we see each other again," said Lleyrin, "it's your turn with a story - this is Giants' tradition. It will be your present for me." He waved. "Be careful with the trees, Cho Chang ... Be careful with the forests, Harry Potter."

* * *

The new year had arrived. It brought air of bitter coldness, going on flight patrol required as much garment as one could wear. Flying without gloves became downright impossible. Some of the squad members had masks that covered the head, leaving only the eyes exposed - just the type Madam Hooch had used in the exam patrol.

Harry envied them. Coming back from patrol, his ears were hurting badly. He had tried the Omnioculars as protection, with a success rating from little to none. Maybe he would have to ask Dobby for knitting such a mask, would certainly help a lot, only he felt it difficult to ask after Dobby had already done so much *and* had given him another pair of socks at Christmas.

For most other students, the days without classes had been an opportunity for recreation or homework, according to personal taste, either way providing a new experience - Hogwarts full but no ruling of the day, except for the meals.

To some degree, it was nice, although the school fell a bit short on entertainment. Lacking anything else, they had asked for education *movies*, to watch them in the spector room. Following this demand, and maybe some gentle pressure from Dumbledore, the teachers had organized a loose routine of daily presentations. However, the list of available pieces looked miserably short, even the favourites - Muggles and Giants scenes - became boring after the third time.

Ron had kept himself busy - day after day - with his *reorganization*. Officially, this task was sailing under the flag of an O.W.L. though it seemed Ron would have done just the same even without the promised reward. Obviously, it involved a lot of penwork. One morning, he surprised the others with a question. "Say, Hermione, do you still have some contact with that Skeeter woman?"

"No, of course not!" Hermione stared at him in disbelief. "The greater the distance, the better for both of us. Why do you ask?"

"Well," said Ron, "I remember she had some pen that could write by itself, while she was talking. I could do with that kind of help, only I don't know where to get it from."

"Ask other office people," suggested Hermione. "For example, why don't you ask Percy?"

It was Ron's turn to shoot an incredulous glance. "That'll be the day - me asking Percy for something like that ... I've got calluses on my hand, mind, not on my brain."

"Fine," snapped Hermione, "then use your natural charm to find someone else to help you ..."

"Good idea," replied Ron, unimpressed.

Except Hermione hadn't finished yet. "... but first, tear off the calluses from it!"

Ron the organizer wasn't brought off his track. "Will do," he answered and left, raising Hermione's irritation more than any sharp reply could have done.

The only remarkable event after the exam occurred during breakfast at New Year's Day. An owl came down to Harry's table, delivering what looked like a New Year's card, except Harry didn't know from whom. Rather than a signature, the card showed a skull with a serpent - the Death Mark. Aside from that, the card showed these words:

- *Wish you were here*

They gave Harry a nasty feeling. He would have dropped the card, however both Ron and Hermione had seen the owl and also his reaction. Hermione convinced him to make a report, so he brought the card to the Gryffindor Headmistress.

"I think I've seen this handwriting," said McGonagall hesitantly.

Later that day, she told him that probably it had been Draco Malfoy.

"But - that's not his style", Harry said, "he would be insulting and all."

McGonagall agreed. The image of an invisible person, instructing Draco what to write, intensified the bad feeling more than Harry would be ready to admit.

They were in double Potions. Snape had started something new. It was called *Analysis*; its purpose to figure out what a brew might include. The first lessons dealt with basic facts of chemistry, very boring.

Not even Hermione could enjoy this dreadful amount of formulas and numbers. Recently, her eagerness for schoolwork had shrunk to an almost normal state, Harry couldn't exactly determine whether it had to do with seven O.W.L.s, certainly enough to keep your interest, or whether this had started around the time when the Durmstrang group had arrived.

Snape was writing at the blackboard, the students busy copying the text onto their parchments. It was boring work. Harry felt irritated by this inefficient technique, there were times when a few Muggles artefacts would have been quite useful.

"Hermione", he whispered, "we need copy pens. You really should contact that Skeeter woman."

"Huh?" Hermione hadn't listened.

"Copy pens - so we don't need to write that crap by ourselves ... Or a school copier, something like what you've ..."

A cold voice interrupted him. "Mr. Potter! Miss Granger! May I be allowed to join your discussion?"

Hermione went scarlet. She hadn't discussed - and now this!

Harry tried to save. "Sorry, Professor Snape ... 'twas only a private ..." He just stopped before saying *joke*; too high the risk of being badly misunderstood - even by the new Snape, more so after the recent encounter with curses and dust dumbs.

Then it was too late. "Ah, I see," said Snape, his voice like in the bad old days. "Celebrities don't talk with everybody. - After class, you two will come to my office. I might have a topic which involves all three of us."

The scratching of the pens was the only sound during the next minutes. Harry tried to catch Hermione's look, yet she held her head down, still pinkish. Hermione and detention - it was as though the sky had come down.

When the other students had left the dungeon, Harry and Hermione followed Snape to his office. Nobody spoke. Inside, they stood waiting for what would happen.

Snape busied himself with his paperwork. Without turning, he said, "Sit down. You didn't wait for an invitation when talking, so why do it now?"

Hermione's face flushed. Harry tried to control himself. He wasn't going to lose his temper in this office.

Snape turned. "I forgot the magic word," he said. "*Please*, sit down."

Harry's mouth fell open. Snape - a smiling Snape - took a seat himself.

"I have something to discuss with you. - Not what you think," the teacher added, looking at their faces. "It's not exactly a secret but I'd prefer to keep it as confidential as possible. So I used the opportunity for a cover-up in full public ... Old habits die hard."

Harry stared. "We were talking about ..."

Snape waved him off. "Never mind. This is not about detention ... It has to do with Potions but it's far beyond the current lessons. I am looking for a backup who can handle a very complex recipe ... This is the reason why you, Miss Granger, were - er, invited."

Hermione's mind was still working on the news that there would be no detention. For once, Harry felt ahead of her - feeling pretty sure he knew what Snape was talking about.

"Your role, Mr. Potter, is a minor one ... this time."

Snape joking - Harry had trouble trusting his ears.

"You are part of the cover story," continued Snape, "especially since I have no doubt you'd hear it from Miss Granger anyway." Again a smile. "However, you might become involved when using the result. It has to do with a cure, and the patient is Mr. Lupin."

Snape watched their faces, noticed that Harry had understood. Now he waited until Hermione, recovering, grasped the meaning of his words. Seeing her eyes widening, he said, "Usually you're quicker, Miss Granger. Sorry, I didn't mean to shock you so badly."

As Snape explained, the potion was extremely complex, dangerous if not prepared carefully. His intention was to make sure at least one student could brew it - "not counting someone like Dumbledore. This stuff needs time, and the Headmaster has other things to do."

Snape's next words made Harry stare again. "There are three students at Hogwarts I'd count up to the task, as far as I can see. You, Miss Granger, are one of them ... One reason why I'm asking you first is, you know the background. You've seen already what happens if the patient does not receive the cure in time ... Another reason ..." Snape hesitated, hurried on, "well, I remember a few occasions when I had you at the wrong end of my public performance. So think of it as an offer for compensation."

A kaleidoscope of emotions passed through Hermione's face. Harry became aware that she knew only the public version of this new Snape - in contrast to himself, who'd met Snape more privately, at several occasions and in several offices, the teacher's own as well as that of Dumbledore. Thinking ahead of Hermione - what a rare experience.

She had found her speech. "I'm ... What would I have to do, Professor Snape?"

"The first phase is learning the recipe - shouldn't take long. Then comes the mastering of the procedure, this is the long part as there are some tricky spots in it ... It will be done with a dummy of the real recipe, some ingredients are awfully difficult to find ... Phase three, then, is the real thing. Phase four - Mr. Lupin takes it. If he survives," Snape smiled, "*when* he survives, you'll do it on a regular base - to get practiced and to keep in shape."

Hermione was silent.

Snape said, "You may want to think it over. In any case, I ask you to keep this confidential."

"I won't tell Rita Skeeter."

"Whom?"

"The Daily Prophet woman."

"Oh. That's good." Snape's expression made clear the message had reached its address.

Back to her usual self, Hermione went for the catch. "Maybe I can give my answer immediately ... Does it count as an O.W.L.?"

Snape's eyes widened a bit, then he looked amused. "I'm glad to hear the shock was only temporary, Miss Granger. The answer is yes. ... Do I understand your answer is, under these conditions, the same?"

"Yes, Professor Snape." There was triumph in Hermione's face.

For a moment, Harry interpreted Hermione's expression as her reaction on the deal she had cut with Snape, although it hadn't been too difficult, not after Snape's previous remarks and with respect to the importance of the task. Only when Hermione's beaming went broader and broader, he remembered - it was her eighth O.W.L.!! She would set a new school record - provided she could manage, although he had little - no, he had no doubt at all.

Snape stood up. "Good. We'll start tomorrow ... Before you leave - may I offer some of this stuff? It's really distasteful." He held up a bottle.

Hermione was caught off balance again. "Why?"

"To wash off this grin. It would crash our cover story right away - nobody would believe you've got detention."

* * *

When Ron heard the story, his excitement remained within narrow limits. Like Harry, he felt no doubt Hermione would master the challenge, probably quicker than Snape would expect. Unlike Harry, the prospect of her setting a new school record didn't stir strong emotions. It seemed as though Ron had only waited to witness the discovery of Hermione's last step toward long-standing glory, for him, this was beyond reach but no topic to worry about either - small wonder, with one O.W.L. more than Harry.

"Very clever," said Ron after Hermione had finished. "By the way - coming back to those pens, do you think ..."

"You're disgusting!" Hermione marched off, probably to find someone who would express more respect for a soon-to-be Hogwarts champion.

Harry wondered if she might be successful, after all, Viktor didn't strike him as the scientific type. A moment later, he realized with some surprise that another person might be the proper admirer - Fleur.

The encounter with Snape and the knowledge of Hermione's task showed an unexpected side-effect for Harry. He followed Potions classes with a new attitude. In his mind, there was always a direct link to Lupin, more so when hearing about the fatal effects a badly brewed potion might have. And - oh wonder, the fog hanging over chemistry basics lifted! He still stood far from familiar ground, certainly way behind Hermione, however firm enough to play ahead of the other students - Ron, for example.

In a few days, the deadline for the O.W.L. signings would be reached. Naturally, O.W.L.s became a permanent issue in the conversations of the fifth-graders. Harry's planning was settled - not only that, he already had finished most of the preparations, thanks to Hermione's interventions early in the school year.

The variations between the topics Flying and Transportation had finally settled to a *Comparative Review of Flying Techniques - Broomsticks vs. Flying Carpets*. In a way a pretty narrow topic, not too much work, although the one still to be done, and of course he nourished the unspoken expectation that his Goblin Request would have a severe impact on the grading, even if his presentation might lack some detail or another. This would certainly be more rewarding than a Special Hogwarts Award, after all, he had one already.

Nonetheless, the proper feeling of joy refused to build up when hearing from other students how far they lagged behind. The reason - right, you guessed it, the one O.W.L. Ron was ahead.

Stupid, somehow, taking this as a reason to feel inferior, what with the Steel Wings, the patrol exam, and so forth - but Harry couldn't help feeling that way. Sitting at the Sunday lunch table, he listened to the conversations of the others.

Neville Longbottom would do an O.W.L. on Unforgivable Curses - an obvious choice, considering the fate of his parents. Harry decided to talk with Neville privately, they might share some efforts and results to mutual profit. Neville's second O.W.L. - and the last one he planned - was of course Herbology.

Parvati Patil and Lavender Brown were preparing O.W.L.s in Divination - the only ones out of the Gryffindors' number and, for this, the target of many jokes.

Seamus Finnigan planned four O.W.L.s, so far like Harry, however would need time until the end of February, which meant the full extension period, to figure out what to settle for. Care of Magical Creatures was the only one Seamus felt sure about.

Harry checked the other tables, seeing similar scenes. At the Ravenclaw table, Cho was discussing with Almyra, quite agitated, actually. Well, couldn't be O.W.L.s, Cho had done hers the year before. Harry didn't know which, didn't know how many, this hadn't been a topic in their conversations, probably because he himself didn't want to talk about and Cho hadn't asked.

At this moment, Cho stood up. She looked at him, twisted her head, indicating Harry might meet her outside.

Surprised as much as pleased, he followed. Passing the door, he found Cho waiting, Almyra at her side.

Sounding a bit stiff, Cho said, "Hi, Harry ... You've met Almyra, but if I remember correctly, you two were never introduced to each other properly - or if so, it was a little confused ... Anyway - Harry, this is Almyra Benedict ... Al, this is Harry Potter."

"Hi."

Harry didn't know what to think. What charade was this? Of course Cho had referred to their first meeting in the Hogwarts Express, but since then ...

If he looked wondering, Almyra looked seriously embarrassed. She was about Harry's size, had a bronze tint which, at this moment, definitely tended to the copper side. Her hair was black as Cho's but, unlike Cho's straight long mane, short and curly, similar to Angelina's.

Cho didn't - or pretended not to - take notice of the awkward feelings around her. "Al is *my* anchor ... She comes from Jamaica, an immigrant like me - that's why we hold together so much."

Yes, indeed. For a long time, Almyra had been the barrier around Cho, the one who'd prevented Harry from approaching her. However, knowing the immigrant state wasn't the only reason for their friendship, he took care not to reveal any such knowledge in his expression.

The effort seemed wasted. Almyra didn't look at him.

"In contrast to me, Al is a pure wizard," explained Cho. "She can trace back a line of Voodoo priests in her ancestors that spans centuries ... Maybe not as many as that Malfoy mess, anyway enough for sure to give some stuck-up noses a bad shock." Cho presented this fact with pride in her voice.

To no avail - poor Almyra was changing from copper to red.

This state wasn't exactly unfamiliar to Harry, still it felt strange registering that with Almyra. In the train, for example, she had appeared quite calm, still watching him when the others had looked away ...

Cho said, "Al wants to talk with you about something ... Okay, see you then." She turned to move.

"But ..." Alarm rung in Almyra's voice. "I thought ..."

Astonished, Harry watched Cho patting Almyra's shoulder. "Calm down," she said, "he won't bite ... If he raises his wand, run."

Toward Harry, she added, grinning, "She's not used to celebrities." Then Cho left them alone.

"Me either," muttered Harry, He felt sympathy, witnessing the effect of Cho's kind of humour toward her best friend.

It seemed to help Almyra, enough to find her speech. "I - um, can we go to the library?"

"Sure."

Harry followed, studying her with more attention. Almyra had a slim figure, an excellent figure actually, although she would never win some contest. Her features were too strong, remarkable but not as pretty as, for example, Cho's. Well, he might be prejudiced.

Searching for another innocent small talk, he asked, "Has Cho been serious about you as her anchor?"

"What? - Oh, yes. I mean, no." At least, Almyra didn't jump. "Not in the sense that she's signing off and on for every flight. ... We used to hold to each other in the first year. You know, as foreigners. Since then ..." Almyra's voice trailed off.

Yeah - on noses and throats, thought Harry, hoping that sooner or later a state might be reached in which he'd be supposed to know this story *officially*. Every secret knowledge was a trapdoor - if not for others, then for him.

He said, "I know that feeling, even ..." His sentence didn't finish either, still, Almyra seemed to understand.

In all her embarrassment, there was some unusual element. After a moment, Harry recognized it ... Almyra didn't giggle. At least not from nervousness, not as a reaction at something strange, the only time he'd heard anything like that from her had been when she tried not to burst out aloud - just before Cho's Chinese pardon ritual.

Reaching the library, Almyra checked around. Obviously, if she'd detected someone else, they'd been forced to look for another room. But there weren't any other students.

They sat down.

Almyra had a roll of parchments with her. She looked up, presenting the first signs of another nervousness.

Harry decided to cut through any further small talk. "So what is it you want to talk about?"

"Yes, I ... It has to do with my Graduate Work."

Harry looked blank.

A Graduate Work, as Almyra told him, was an optional enhancement of O.W.L.s, done in the sixth or seventh year, a lot of work, significantly more demanding than an O.W.L., a project performed by students planning a career as a scientist or researcher.

"The topic is your own choice," explained Almyra, "it can be totally outside of what is taught in Hogwarts. - Mine is, er ..." Again, Almyra had trouble.

Harry started to wonder in earnest. For an instant, the thought crossed his mind Almyra's work might have to do with Goblins, then he dismissed the idea. In this case, as unlikely as it seemed, Cho would have prepared the ground.

Almyra opened a parchment, fingers trembling. "This is the title."

Harry read, trying to understand. *Unintended Transfigurations and Animalizations. Involuntary Dehumanizing Effects of Transient Nature - Case Studies.*

The title didn't tell him much. Animalization and Dehumanization - these terms sounded pretty bad. He looked up. "Can you translate that for me?"

"It's about people transfiguring against their will," said Almyra, gaining self-assurance from her work, "... not under a curse, that is not under a direct one." Almyra's glance kept fixed at the parchment. "I think you'll understand when I tell you who's my first case ... It's Professor Lupin."

"Oh - I see."

The title became more understandable. Unintended made sense now, Lupin didn't volunteer to turn into a werewolf - he had no choice at full moon. And now Harry could guess the meaning of *transient*, the term he hadn't wanted to ask for - it meant a temporary state, ending automatically or with the change of some condition. Dehumanization, animalization - sure, in his werewolf state, Lupin was totally different from a transfigured wizard like McGonagall, he didn't even *think* as a human.

"But what ..."

He didn't continue, tried to find the answer by himself. Was Almyra interested in the dog she had seen in the train? Most likely not, as sure as she suspected a wizard in that shape, she knew it had been an intended transfiguration. Then what else?

Almyra found the fast forward for her speech, as if trying to prevent more questions. "Werewolves are the most common cases of unintended transfigurations. I'm lucky Professor Lupin is here at Hogwarts. I'm even more lucky he's ready to answer me. Dumbledore helped me with this, I wouldn't have been able to ask Lupin by myself. But then, werewolf cases are known already, so - with his case as the only one, my work would be okay but nothing special ... So when I discussed it the other day with Cho, I said, 'I wish there'd be another case at hand,' and what she said was, 'There is one. We have a - " Almyra's voice faltered, came back, " - a Parselmouth here.' And I said, 'Yes, but that's permanent, not transient.' And she, 'No, it's not.' And I, 'What do you mean, it's not?' And she, 'I'm not going to tell you. You are the scientist, go and figure it out.' And I, 'But I cannot - I'll die before - ' And she, 'No you won't.' And then she promised me to do the first step and ... Yes, she did but then ... So that's why we're here."

Harry had to grin. "Yeah, that's her."

Almyra tried a smile, failed. At least, she could look at him, hope and anxiousness in her face.

"So you want me to be your second case?" asked Harry, no longer grinning.

"Er - yes, that's true ... If Cho's right about your - if it's not permanent." Almyra hurried to explain, "You know, it would make the work outstanding - there's almost no literature about ..."

"... Parselmouths," finished Harry for her. "I bet."

He didn't know what to think. Cho had been the one suggesting him. But she'd done so without disclosing anything of what he'd told her at Christmas.

"I don't know," he said after a moment. "I think I know what Cho had in mind when - yes, it's somehow transient. But - " he looked down, "to be honest, I don't feel up to telling it ... It has nothing to do with ..."

Almyra fumbled in her pocket. Her fingers came up, trembling, holding a small parchment, offering it to him. "Cho gave me this. - I don't know what it is, I mean it's something written but I don't know what. She said - she said, 'If there's a problem, give it to him'."

Harry unfolded the piece of parchment. There was one line.

- *She never calls you 'Young Potter'.*
CC

He started to giggle. After a few seconds, it grew into a bad fit of laughter, shaking him, irresistible, uncontrollable, unstoppable.

Almyra looked alarmed, uncertain, tried to join, stopped again.

His body twisting, his stomach hurting, Harry held the parchment to her. "Herechchch ..."

Almyra read, for a moment uncomprehending, then started giggling too, she could giggle, yes, how much she could giggle, and laugh.

It took some time until their attempts to stop were no longer corrupted immediately by look at each other.

Still panting, Harry said, "I guess I'm going to ask a lot of questions, but - you know, I think I could - I mean it's okay. Your work ..."

"Oh, that's wonderful! Thank you so much ... I hope I'll find a way to make up for it."

"There's no ..." A thought struck Harry. "I might know something ... What do you think - could this be a topic for an O.W.L.? ... You know, I was looking for one more ..."

"Easily," said Almyra. "You can - we can profit from each other!"

"Super ... yeah, great!" Closing in on Ron ... "Almyra, we have a deal."

Beaming, all nervousness gone, Almyra offered her hand. "Please call me Al."

Harry took it, shook it. "Okay - er, Al ... Please call me Harry."

They erupted in laughter again.

21 - Private Conversations

Harry asked himself whether he should tell Ron and Hermione about the Parseltongue case study. He didn't feel like it, publications about his person used to create bad side-effects. Sure, this was totally different from an article in the *Daily Prophet*, Almyra wasn't Rita Skeeter - by no means, hehe, but ...

Not yet, he decided. There would come an opportunity. And his fifth O.W.L. had to come as a surprise, he wanted to see Ron's face ... Well, maybe Ron would be just happy with him, maybe that streak of jealousy was playing only in his own head. At any rate, he couldn't help, somehow he had the feeling this news would destroy the harmonic balance - office for Ron, potions for Hermione, Flying Squad for himself.

On the other hand, this made Almyra's study another secret to hide, another trapdoor inviting him, the expert spy. True, it wasn't the first time ... as if he'd been that successful in the Goblins issue ... Then he registered a significant difference - he was hiding something from both Ron and Hermione while Cho knew all along.

When he would tell them, or if they'd find out - how would they take it? ... Did Hermione share things with Viktor without telling him and Ron? Certainly - but then, Hermione had used a time-turner for a full year without telling them a word. She *could* keep secrets, in contrast to himself.

This way or the other, he had to talk with someone about the case study. Cho? - Not yet ... They could talk once he knew more, once he had a grasp on what it meant to be the subject of a Graduate Work. Almyra herself - that would come by itself, and of course, Almyra wasn't neutral ... Fleur? - Not his first choice, maybe if there wasn't anyone else. Suddenly he became aware that all people he checked off in his mind were girls - funny, wasn't it, him and ... Well, he would discuss it with Sirius right away, only Sirius wasn't around. Then he knew whom to talk with - Lupin, of course! Except - Lupin wasn't around either, although it was a while since he had seen him the last time, so he might expect him soon.

Then the case study was thrust aside by a topic less elaborate while more urgent - O.W.L.s. They had to deliver their signings. Harry took a parchment and started writing. Sure enough, almost in the last line, he made a mistake. And again ... When he was done, his parchment looked good in his eyes.

O.W.L. Signings for Harry Potter

1. Care of Magical Creatures
"Giants"
2. Charms
"Unforgivable Curses and the Effect of Sibling Wands"
3. Defence against the Dark Arts
"The Patronus Spell"
4. Flying
"Flying Techniques - Broomsticks vs. Flying Carpets"
5. Transfiguration

"Parseltongue"

Signed by: *Harry Potter*

He turned to Ron. Any moment now, He would have a look at Ron's signing, Ron would see his own, so in a few seconds, Ron would know about his fifth O.W.L. Harry's heartbeat came a little faster than normal. "Hey, Ron, may I see your signing?"

"Just a second, Harry ... Done. For once, it's a short penwork."

Ron presented his own parchment.

O.W.L. Signings for Ronald Weasley

-
1. Astronomy
"Distances in Star Constellations"
 2. Care of Magical Creatures
"Giants"
 3. Care of Magical Creatures
"Domestication of Dragons"
 4. Flying
"Quidditch - The History of Game Tactics"
 5. Politics and Management
"Reorganization of the Hogwarts Administration"

Signed by: *Ronald Weasley*

"Ronald??"

"Yes, that's my name." Ron didn't look too happy. "My birth name - if you want to do me a favour, forget it immediately ... If you want to have a serious quarrel, use it - know what I mean?"

"It's okay, Ron - I just didn't know."

Ron sighed. "It wasn't by accident you didn't ... Nobody calls me like that, and they know why ... Anyway, lemme see yours - shouldn't be a surprise of names, right?"

Not with names, thought Harry. He passed his parchment over, watched Ron's face at reading, saw his friend's eyes widen.

Ron looked up, smiling. "Harry, you brat - all the time, I was thinking - isn't it strange, me with five, and Harry with just four, can't he find something else with all his weird gifts ... And you knew it all along!"

Harry blushed - from guilt because he had expected another reaction, from more guilt because he was hiding something, from anger at himself, having been jealous for no reason at all ...

"No, I wasn't ... I thought, you would ..."

Ron's face showed surprise. "Don't tell me you thought of it as some competition between us?"

"Not really ... Only it felt like that for a while ... Anyway, I found the fifth only a day ago, so I didn't hide ..."

Ron laughed, shook his head. "What a nonsense - with Hermione around, running for eight ... Let's see what our champion has scribbled."

They went to Hermione's table.

"Hermione," chirped Ron, "may we have a look at this grandiose parchment, this endless list of deep, daring, demanding ..."

Hermione simply felt too good, nothing Ron could say would disturb this moment for her. "Here," she said, "look at that ... And live to tell."

They studied her parchment.

O.W.L. Signings for Hermione Granger

-
1. Arithmancy
"Magical Numbers"
 2. Care of Magical Creatures
"Giants"
 3. Charms
"Combat and Duel Spells and Curses"
 4. Herbology
"Medical Plants and Herbs"
 5. History
"The Goblins Rebellion"
 6. Muggles Studies
"Medical Science of the Muggles"
 7. Potions
"The Wolfsbane Potion"
 8. Transfiguration
"Levitation and its Role in the Muggles World"

Signed by: *Hermione Granger*

"Wow ... Hermione," said Ron, looking seriously, "we're proud of you. Eight - this will remain unchallenged for a while."

Hermione's face was shining. "Thank you ... By the way, do you know already whom to ask to be Trustee?"

"Huh?"

It was Ron's question but might have been Harry's all the same. Ask whom? For ... What had Hermione said?

She rolled her eyes. "I knew it - you don't know anything, don't know what's expecting you - if you hadn't me around, you'd be lost ..."

Ron smiled sweetly. "But we *have* you around, dear Hermione - no denying that, and in a moment or two, we'll listen breathlessly to your explanation who's Rusty - and why to beat him."

"Hehehe ..." Next second, Hermione was rolling over, fighting a bad fit.

Harry and Ron looked at each other, waiting for her to calm down.

Eventually, Hermione had gathered sufficiently to explain what she was talking about, although still interrupted by chuckles. It had to do with the O.W.L. review.

An O.W.L. was presented toward a jury of three teachers, the faculty teacher plus two others. The student, as they learned from Hermione, was entitled to specify one of the other two - provided he could find a teacher that agreed to this duty. This teacher's role was called *to be Trustee*.

"The later you'll ask them," said Hermione, "the more likely they'll refuse ... At this time of the year, their list of scheduled O.W.L.s's almost empty, so when asking them now, we aren't likely to hear a No ... What's more, in the signing interviews, the teachers will ask us whether we have a Trustee. If we know it already, we save them time and effort - makes for a nice atmosphere later in the review."

Signing interviews ... It reminded Harry that soon he would have to talk with Drilencu.

A signing interview was a short conversation with the faculty teacher of an O.W.L. If the teacher knew already, as in the case of Ron's Astronomy O.W.L. and Professor Sinistra, the interview was a formality that might be finished within ten seconds. The Patronus O.W.L. in Harry's list had been planned and discussed at a time when Lupin was the faculty teacher, now he would have to discuss it again with Drilencu. What a wonderful prospect ...

Drilencu and Harry, that was a state in suspense, more precisely, in deep-temperature suspense. Not finding anything better, Harry's technique since the exam had been to call him *Pro-fessor* Drilencu, as often as possible in every answer given, ignoring the 'Prof' standard Drilencu had brought to Hogwarts.

It was correct, it wasn't objectionable, best of all, it was a permanent reminder for everybody that there still hung something between them, to be cleared one day ...

Drilencu had reacted by ignoring Harry's raised arms, for compensation, the teacher had started to ask him questions from which he expected Harry would not know the answer, or would be embarrassed because it had to do with matters as delicate as sex.

In return, Harry had started to work hard for Defence against the Dark Arts, this way corrupting Drilencu's first move, and to speak with a stone-cold face about things that might

unsettle him with any other teacher. In short, there was a deep, heart-felt hostility between him and this teacher, and everybody in the class knew.

Ron took all three parchments and headed off. He would be involved in the writing of the faculty lists and teacher lists - another long writing, although Ron had to blame himself, at least partially. His generous offer to take over organization work from the teachers hadn't been left unheard, so much so that recently he found some teachers developing a tendency to "let Ron do it".

* * *

The first response to Harry's signing was a bad one - he got his parchment back. *Unforgivable Curses*, no matter in which context and from which perspective, counted as Defence against the Dark Arts.

Wasn't it wonderful - he had to write the thing again, afterwards, he would have to talk with Drilencu about two O.W.L.s. Wich meant, he had to get prepared, find some armament - er, argument ... He expected trouble of the worst kind, however had already an idea ... causing another office visit.

This done, he felt ready to talk with Drilencu.

But Drilencu took his time.

Harry's first interview was with Professor Grubbly-Plank about the Giants' O.W.L. She knew already, Hermione had been there earlier and had explained the joint project.

The interview was over within five minutes. Grubbly-Plank, very nicely, as well as unmistakably, hinted that Harry, Ron, and Hermione would be expected having their best knowledge in the parts they had contributed to the project.

"Mr. Potter," said the witch, "your interview with the Giant chief is outstanding - none of the other Giant O.W.L.s can offer something like that. So I wouldn't be surprised if the jury would ask you to tell them this story again, with all the details not found in your paper."

Next came Madam Hooch for the *Flying* O.W.L. She asked him what he had in mind with his comparison of broomsticks and flying carpets.

"I think of a split in three parts," explained Harry. "One part is techniques possible only with a broomstick - for that, the Steel Wings are the best example. - Another part is techniques possible only with a flying carpet, mass transportation, for example. - The third part is a real point-to-point comparison ... I know there are family broomsticks which ..."

"Mr. Potter," asked the teacher, "how do you want to gather information about flying carpets? They are not allowed here."

"Well - erm, I have one."

The witch laughed. "I should have known ... All right, Mr. Potter - do it on the paper while for the review," she winked, "be prepared for Steel Wings as the main issue ... After all, we shouldn't grill our main expert for these devil toys."

So his plan worked out, much as expected although Madam Hooch might have caused another problem. But in contrast to somebody else, no bad feelings had been left on her side.

Drilencu still had time.

His next interview was with the Gryffindor Headmistress about the Parseltongue O.W.L.

"Mr. Potter - er, Harry," McGonagall smiled, "what exactly do you want to present in your review?"

"Oh - what it means, how it works, background ..." She had caught him off balance. A few days ago, he hadn't even known this would be an O.W.L., today, he still missed a clear idea what Almyra might deliver.

McGonagall seemed hardly surprised of his vague answer. "Is this a spin-off, Harry?"

"Huh ... Sorry, Prof, I don't know what you mean."

"Are you working on the topic alone?"

The moment of truth. "No, Prof ... I'll cooperate with another student who's working on something similar ..."

"From Gryffindor?" McGonagall looked like the animal of her transfigurations, having a mouse within leisurely reach. So she knew ... Of course - a Graduate Work about Transfiguration wouldn't be planned without her knowing. How stupid of him not to think of it.

"No, Prof ... I guess you know her - it's Almyra Benedict."

McGonagall's lips twisted. "A spin-off, Harry, is a by-product that is created more or less automatically, as the result of some process that creates something else ... That's what we're talking about, right?"

Caught. "Yes, Prof."

"Well ..." McGonagall thought for a moment, then her expression lighted up. "Conceptually, an O.W.L. should be some hard work - not the easy profit from some ability nobody else can offer ... At least that's my opinion, although I know that most teachers consider this oldfashioned ... For your O.W.L., I just realized you *will* have to do work - being the subject of Miss Benedict's study. So it's acceptable ... For the details, I'll ask you again in a month or two."

What was wrong with playing to your strengths? Other people recommended it, seeing it as an advantage if you didn't need hard working ... Anyway, she had accepted it, making clear that she would demand more than just a few words from a Parselmouth.

Three done, two to go. Drilencu didn't move.

Then Harry saw Lupin. His favourite teacher looked horrible - hollow cheeks, dark shadows under his eyes, the eyes themselves looking as tired as Harry had felt after his exam.

"Professor Lupin - Prof!"

Lupin bared his teeth - obviously the best he could manage for a smile. "Harry ... Wait for me in my office." He didn't even ask whether Harry wanted to talk with him.

Harry had to wait a quarter of an hour, then Lupin came in. "Sorry, Harry - at least, now we have time to talk ... A cup of tea?"

Harry nodded, then watched the familiar non-ceremony.

Lupin raised his cup. "To better times, Harry."

"Prof, you ... you look awful."

"Harry, I have a surprise for you - I feel awful."

At least, this time he could smile, deepening Harry's concern. This man was one of the four ill-fated ex-students from Hogwarts which had called themselves Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs - Lupin, Pettigrew, Black, and his father. His father was dead, Wormtail worse than dead, Lupin and Black risking their life every day. Maybe ...

"How's your Patronus?" asked Harry.

"Still the same as before, I have to admit." Lupin sounded exasperated. "I wish I could tell you better ... God knows I could use it ... But I'm not going to give up." His eyes met Harry's. "How's yours?"

"Good, I think ... By the way, that's one of the things I wanted to talk with you about. Prof, I have signed for two O.W.L.s in Defence, the Patronus and Unforgivable Curses."

"What did Drilencu say about them?"

"Nothing yet."

When Lupin's eyebrows arched up, Harry explained the situation between him and Drilencu, how it had started, and why he expected trouble. Then he asked, "Prof - would you be my Trustee for the Patronus O.W.L.?"

Lupin weighed his answer. "Harry, the last thing we need in Hogwarts are fights between students and teachers. You have to clean this up ... I guess the first step should be done by the other side, I'll talk with Dumbledore about it - then, if there comes a hand to shake, you have to take it! - Do you hear me?"

"Yes, Prof."

"Do you promise, Harry?"

He didn't want to, still, he couldn't say no to that face, looking like a skull with skin, except for the eyes. "All right, Prof. - I promise."

"Good ... In return, I'll be your Trustee."

"And what if Drilencu doesn't accept the O.W.L.?"

"Why shouldn't he?"

Harry shrugged. "Our feelings are mutual, so ..."

Lupin had a bitter laugh. "Harry, you're the only known person who can do a Golden Patronus. If Drilencu doesn't accept, I'll ask Dumbledore for a one-day appointment as a teacher for some new faculty, and we'll run it under this hat ... That's ridiculous, I'm biting my nails to ..."

Lupin stopped himself. "Harry, you'll forgive the unforgivable, and Professor Drilencu will forget the insulting defeat he had to suffer ... If this won't happen soon enough, we'll do it as I said."

Harry felt better.

"What about your other O.W.L.s?" asked Lupin. "I hope there are still others."

"Yes, Prof - five altogether ... There's still another one I wanted to talk about ..."

"Another problem?"

"No - not at all ... The topic is Parseltongue."

Lupin looked appreciatively. "Yes, of course ... But why do you ask *me*? I don't know anything about Parseltongue, Harry."

"Well, I had the idea only recently - after I've been asked about - er, there's a student who's going to write about, as a case study, and ..."

Lupin's eyes widened, then he grinned. "Does this student happen to be a girl? - Maybe by the name of Almyra Benedict?"

"Yes."

"Clever of her - fast on track for something worth the effort ... Harry, you beat me again!"

"Huh?"

"In that study - can't you see it? ... I'm just an ordinary werewolf, found easily around the next corner, while a Parselmouth ..."

Harry laughed. Probably just as Lupin had intended, there wasn't a werewolf around the next corner, even so, it wouldn't be someone like Lupin, educated at Hogwarts, thanks to Dumbledore's interventions, and specialized in the fighting of Dementors.

"Okay," said Lupin, "I guess your questions are dealing more with the case study ... What do you want to know, Harry? - About me? - About you? - Or about Graduate Work?"

"Oh - nothing special ... It was just - I haven't talked about this with anyone, so I thought ..."

Lupin explained what to expect from a case study. As he told Harry, there would be interviews, some of them boring, others even less agreeable because the questions would be quite intimate. He speculated that Almyra might try some experiments, in Harry's case certainly with snakes.

"I agreed for myself because I know she's not fishing for sensations ... Almyra is serious about her research." Smiling, Lupin added, "So we suffer a bit for science and education. But it's nice to be in good company."

* * *

Harry's conversation with Lupin could have found no better time. The next day, Drilencu asked him into his office.

Harry didn't know whether Lupin already had done some talking, at least, he didn't see an outstretched hand. Fine as well ... In a way, it would make things easier.

Drilencu held Harry's parchment in his hairy hands. "Mr. Potter, you signed for two O.W.L.s in Defence against the Dark Arts."

"Yes, Professor."

If he would change to 'Prof' now, it would make him look frightened. At least, he had stopped the awkward pronunciation, left out the name.

Drilencu's face showed no reaction. "Two O.W.L.s in the same faculty needs special permission, *Mister* Potter. - Would you please have the kindness to tell me why this permission should be granted here?"

"Yes, Pro-*fessor* Drilencu." More reflex than intended. "It seems as if this faculty - your faculty - raises my best - er, qualities."

Drilencu's face reddened. Well, thought Harry, that was hardly what he had promised Lupin - on the other hand, Drilencu's remark couldn't be rated as a peace offer either.

"Even assuming this is correct, Mr. Potter - I'm afraid it's not reason enough." This said, Drilencu waited for an answer.

If you wait for pleading, thought Harry, don't hold your breath ... A second later, he knew what to say. "Okay, Prof - drop the Patronus."

Drilencu looked very much like in the exam, this time however, his face turned from red to pale. His hand grabbed for a pen, obviously to criss-cross the entry on Harry's parchment ...

"Wait a second, Prof - what I meant was drop it from the Defence faculty ... it's not going to be dropped from the list."

"What faculty ... Never mind, not my problem."

And none of your business, thought Harry.

Anyway, the teacher had regained his balance. Harry realized - for sure this man had encountered more conversations of that kind than he himself.

Drilencu now seemed prepared for anything. "Coming to the other topic, Mr. Potter - *Unforgivable Curses ...*" Drilencu was examining Harry's list, "it's a pretty narrow one. Just three spells, known in every aspect - I'm not sure whether this is sufficient ... It's certainly not an O.W.L. I'd call outstanding."

Calmly, Harry said, "It doesn't need to be outstanding."

"If you're satisfied with less, fine, Mr. Potter. - But it needs to be sufficient for qualifying as an O.W.L., which is a bit more than a homework for next Monday."

"I think this one will meet the qualification - because there are some details which are outstanding ... Killing Curse - I've survived two, one of them under the special conditions of sibling wands ... Imperius - nobody managed to curse me successfully, not even Voldemort ... Cruciatus - well, there is nothing special, except maybe that I know quite well what I'll talk about."

"Special details - unique aspects - and this gives you the right to say, 'My O.W.L. is narrow-minded but qualified nonetheless?'"

Time for the final blow. "I know someone who'd be *very* interested to hear that review. He volunteered as my Trustee."

"I'm sure, Mr. Potter, you'll tell me his name."

"Professor Dumbledore."

"Indeed ... And this is of course reason enough to agree and to say, *Yes, Mr. Potter, very well, Mr. Potter, what a pleasure to be of assistance, Mr. Potter.*"

Harry stared. Drilencu's head had been bowing up and down at his last words.

The teacher laughed up humourlessly. "What a bad joke - at Durmstrang, we fight the Dark Forces, try to live with their nepotism, their hidden menaces, their open menaces, finally find a way to escape, come here to Hogwarts, and what do we find - nepotism, hidden menaces, open ..."

"That's not true!!"

"No, Mr. Potter? ... Then please explain to a dumb Bulgarian what's the difference between this and your last statement! ... Somehow, I missed the finer shades."

Harry opened his mouth to answer, closed it again.

Drilencu waited a moment, then said, "So there are none, and I didn't miss anything ... We seem to agree on that, Mr. Potter. - What I didn't miss either were your insults since the day of your exam, starting *at* the exam, to be precise ..."

Harry started hotly, "You cruciated ..."

"I KNOW WHAT I DID! I KNOW EXACTLY WHAT I DID! ... Yes, I cruciated your girl, I know how it feels - this knowledge is more common among Durmstrang people than here at Hogwarts, Mr. Potter - yes, there are differences ... I did exactly what I was asked to do - a hard, realistic trial ... My victim had to be the one coming down to the hut, and it was her - it's as simple as that! ... Actually, Miss Chang has no problem with me, while you, Mr. Potter ..." Drilencu's fists pressed the table, "... first you wanted to cruciate me yourself - okay, I would have survived it. But then you insulted me once by not returning my wand. You insulted me again by declaring you don't trust me ... Since then, you play the Noble Prince of Revenge in Defence classes ... In my own country, Mr. Potter, people have killed for minor insults."

Harry felt at a loss to speak. A mix of protest, shame, rage, guilt kept whirling through his mind.

Almost dismissively, Drilencu said, "I know about your special abilities, Mr. Potter ... When Mr. Krum returned last year from his visit, he described you as a student who hadn't lost ground under his feet, hadn't developed an attitude of showing everybody how *special* he was ... My experience is different."

A deep, burning red was on Harry's face. "I don't ... I didn't ..."

"Wrong, Mr. Potter - You did."

Harry swallowed, swallowed again. "I'm sorry, Professor - Prof ... I didn't want to insult you."

A moment of silence passed.

"Accepted, Mr. Potter ..." Drilencu exhaled. "I will summarize this episode as follows - I intended to cruciate you, as part of your exam. - You intended to cruciate me back, in the heat of the fight, but - by some accident, we both failed ... Do you agree on that?"

"Yes, Prof."

"Good. Then let's start this interview again ... Just to mark our new beginning, would you please come in again?"

Harry stood up, stepped out, closed the door, waited some seconds. Then he knocked again.

"Come in."

He opened the door.

Drilencu showed a little, but a smile. "Mr. Potter - please sit down ... Under Defence against the Dark Arts, your list of O.W.L. signings shows two entries - quite remarkable ones, actually ... I'm very interested to hear these reviews about unique events and abilities, in particular the Patronus, I've been told you're the ..."

* * *

At the lunch table, Ron asked the question Harry had awaited and feared, unable to find a satisfying method avoiding it, or an inconspicuous answer he could use.

"How was your interview with Drilencu, Harry?"

"Okay." Harry stuffed food into his mouth.

"What did he say?"

"Oh - this and that."

"That's instructive," admitted Ron. "And what did you say?"

"Erm - mainly yes and no."

"Ah-ha." Ron seemed pondering this answer. "And off the mainline - was there maybe a tiny little exchange of opinions?"

"Might have been ..."

Hermione had watched the dialogue. "Ron - drop it," she said. "If Harry had wanted to tell you details, he'd done it already ... Besides, for everybody with a bit more sensitivity than you've been granted, his answers were quite informative." She looked pleased at Harry.

"Oh, really?" snarled Ron, "how stupid of me - not to catch the delicacy of conversations with Bulgarian high-mouths!"

Hermione's head snapped up. "Say this again!!"

"Stop it!" shouted Harry, anger boiling up in him. Toward Ron, he added, "Among the things I said was, I'm sorry ... Is this informative enough for you?"

"Oh." Ron looked as subdued as Harry minutes ago. "I guess I really was a bit slow - except with my mouth."

"Right," said Harry, "that's what we appreciate so much - isn't that so, Hermione?"

Hermione still had a glimmer in her eyes. "Sometimes," she said.

Harry tried to steer the conversation toward safer waters. "Talking about O.W.L.s, Ron - who'll do your Administration thing?"

"That's what they're trying to figure out," answered Ron, obviously grateful for the change. "Nobody feels responsible for it - matches exactly what I found there when starting ... I've suggested to call this faculty 'Panostuchronism', but they didn't agree." Looking casually, Ron was waiting for the question.

Harry did him the favour. "What's Panostuck - er, what's the word?"

"Panostuchronism. It stands for *Paperwork and other stupid chores Ron is messing with*. Maybe I should hone it a bit."

Harry laughed a little longer than the joke deserved, even Hermione could smile. At least, the atmosphere felt more relaxed than a minute earlier. True, it had been Ron's big mouth which had brought them at the verge of a serious row. Basically, however, it had been his own fault.

* * *

The cold weather had changed, just enough for the first snow of the year. After a first timid attempt to dress in white, the world drowned in snowflakes. They came floating down, hour after hour, fine and powdery.

Eventually, the sky cleared again. Since then, a thick white layer covered the ground - snow so dry, it didn't even allow for snowball fights. And for the same reason, it would fail to hold clear tracks of animals. Or people.

Harry and Cho were on patrol, reverse course. They had passed the Giants' camp, were on their way back. Harry was head. He passed over the last trees and reached the lake.

The surface was frozen - almost completely, the snow on top of the ice created a perfectly flat space of white cleanliness, with just a dark spot in the middle.

Pushing the Steel Wing, Harry dived down. Only inches above the snow, he steadied the course. Bending to his left, keeping the pace, he drove a wide circle. The centrifugal force pressed his body onto the broomstick, his head was hanging over the snow, which rushed through his view like a blinding sheet. Behind, the snow was dusting up in a cloud.

Closing the circle, he found his own track. A slight movement steered the Steel Wing free, then Harry climbed sharply. In a second circle through the air, he reached Cho.

His eyes were watering, his face agitated. The childish action had blown away the last bad feelings from the conversation with Drilencu; now he felt challenging.

Looking at Cho who had waited half smiling, half contemptuously, he shouted, "Okay ... your turn."

Cho started to shake her head, stopped. Her lips went thin. She flew a half circle, turned, pushed.

Harry watched as she dived, targeting exactly the same spot. He saw her body jerk to the right. Next moment, it looked as if the Steel Wing was ploughing through the snow, at an absurd speed. Where it passed, snow exploded into the air. From above, it offered a fantastic view.

Cho completed her circle. Using the same manoeuvre as Harry before, she returned, reached him with eyes shining. "Here you are - just to shut that mouth of yours."

Harry inspected the pattern - a perfect '8' was written in the snow, lying down. "Look at that! A Giant's whiteboard for Arithmancy."

Cho looked, nodded, then blushed deeply,

"C'mon, let's go," she said, her voice short.

Seeing her accelerate without waiting for him to lead, he didn't know what to think of it, followed anyway.

When they reached the school buildings, Cho seemed normal again. Harry didn't want to touch the issue, although he had no idea might be so bad about Arithmancy. Maybe *Giant* had been the wrong connotation.

They went in. Almyra was waiting in the entrance.

Cho walked to her, the last steps in an awkward style. She stopped in front of Almyra, stepped hard, saluted, and bellowed, "Patrol back from duty! - Nothing unusual. - Yessir, Madam, Sir!"

Unsurprised, Almyra said, "Stand easy."

Cho quickly stepped twice, then relaxed. Harry couldn't see her face. Cho didn't turn.

Almyra looked at Harry. "Hi ... Can we meet for - after supper?"

Harry nodded, then left to sign in with Ron.

So this would be his first interview about Parseltongue. A little twist was running in his stomach. The interviews would start with what Almyra had called the *Anamnesis*. According to her description, Harry would have to spill out every stupid thought he'd ever had.

At least, she had been able to dissipate one of his worries immediately. "To put things straight from the beginning", Almyra had said, "these sessions won't be some social events. What I mean is, we'll be alone, and I'll not talk about my work with anybody - except Professor McGonagall, that is."

She had added, "It's up to you with whom to talk about, Harry. This is none of *my* business."

After him accepting his role, Almyra quickly had stopped behaving like the female equivalent of Neville Longbottom - otherwise, Harry would have expected the worst from these sessions. Still more helpful was the thought of Lupin, who had done it already. If this teacher could find the spirit to talk about his werewolf experiences, certainly Harry could stand the questions about his Parselmouth nature.

He marched to the room McGonagall had provided for these sessions.

The entrance was protected by a locking sculpture, similar to the one that guarded the staircase to Dumbledore's office. The password was *Jamboree* - Almyra's choice. Thanks to Hermione's Christmas present, the book about magic dances, Harry knew what it meant, surprising Almyra with this knowledge.

Entering the room, he found her sitting at a desk, a large pile of parchments to her side. He took the opposite seat.

Almyra arranged a parchment, seized in her bag, came up with a pen. Holding it at her throat, she said, "This is a test. - One, two, three."

Leaning over the table, she held the pen at Harry's throat. "Harry, say something."

"What do I have to say?"

Without answering, Almyra removed the pen, placed it on the parchment, and said, "Session Number One. Thursday, February the seventh ... Persons - Almyra Benedict, interviewer. Harry Potter, subject Case Two."

The pen was moving rapidly over the parchment, filling line after line. From Harry's angle, it didn't look like normal English. "What's this?" he asked.

"A steno pen ... It'll record our conversation in some short writing."

"That's cool ... Where did you get it? - Ron could use something like that for his office work."

Although - Harry wouldn't know how to explain his knowledge.

"I can tell you," said Almyra, "but be forewarned - it'll cost you an arm and a leg ... To buy this one, I had to start a loan at Cho." The bronze in Almyra's face looked a little coppery. "She'd have given it for free - said something like she'd like to be sponsoring research, better than some other ... Don't know what she meant - anyway, I wouldn't take it."

Harry felt it safer not to comment on that.

Almyra started to ask questions. He started to answer them.

The first questions addressed facts of Harry's whereabouts. Name, age, state, parents. Almyra kept looking at a second parchment, checking off notes with a normal pen. This made it easier for him to answer.

"How is your health in general?"

"Good, I think."

"Any significant illnesses?"

"None that I know of." Was a former tendency to faint at Dementors a significant illness? Probably not - if so, Almyra would have interjected.

"Any severe injuries?"

"Hmm - a Quidditch accident ... Wasn't so bad until that Lockhart did his healing." Harry explained how Madam Pomfrey's Skele-Grow had cured him.

"Any individual marks?"

"Ah - a scar on the forehead - in the shape of a lightning."

"Where did you get it?"

"From an attack of Voldemort - when I was a year old."

The name didn't break Almyra's concentration. "Do you have any memory of it?" She was marking. "Probably not."

"Yes, I do."

Almyra looked up. "Sorry - I shouldn't answer my own question. - Still improving ... How did it happen?"

"It was when ..." Harry didn't continue.

After a second, Almyra said, "We can skip that for now. - Probably not my best question in the first session."

Harry felt grateful.

Almyra put her notes aside. "I want you to talk about the times when you used Parseltongue - just in your own words ... Ooh - drop that, which else? ... What I'm trying to say, just tell the story. I'll use it to prepare questions for another interview. Okay?"

Harry started with the accident in Snape's class. It wasn't chronological order, it was the order in which he had learned about it. Before continuing with what had followed, he spoke about the encounter in the zoo, leaving out the details of his life with the Dursleys.

Then he described the adventures in the Chamber of Secrets. When he spoke about his trouble at talking Parselmouth to the image of a snake on a tile, Almyra looked delighted.

He finished the story of the fight deep below Hogwarts. Almyra's expression was simultaneously terrified from the story and excited about the prospect of this case study.

"My God, Harry, I didn't know what to expect, but - this is a real treasure! ... I'm so grateful you agreed to it."

"Well, for a long time, I was really p ... didn't like it at all ... You know, until some weeks ago, I guess I wouldn't have said yes to it. But then - at Christmas, when I met Cho's parents, they told me in China nobody would detest me talking to serpents. So - it was just the right time when you asked."

"I remember - " Almyra hesitated. "I remember what I thought at the time Hogwarts was full of rumours about a Parselmouth. - I mean, I wouldn't have known you from a troll, so to speak, except ..." She faltered, continued, "Anyway, I was fascinated by the idea of someone talking animal language."

For Harry, it had felt totally normal - until he had seen the frightened faces of the other students.

Almyra said, "I wonder ... Would you have accepted if it hadn't been - er, if I were someone else - I mean, not Cho's friend?"

Harry blushed. "Is this a professional question?"

"No - yes, part of it ... The reasons why the subject of a case study accepts might be of some importance - they might give a hint how the subject feels about its - ability." Almyra grinned. "Maybe the question is irrelevant because - you know, without her help, I'd never found the courage to ask."

Harry grinned back, remembering the scene.

"But then," Almyra smiled archly, "the author isn't part of the study - therefore, Harry, what's your answer?"

"I don't know - really ... What-if questions aren't my strongest ... Probably not - my experiences with publications about myself are pretty bad ... Maybe, if McGonagall would've asked - for sure if Lupin would have asked for you ..."

Almyra looked pleased.

"You know," continued Harry, "I never felt bad - or wrong, having this Parsel thing. It was just the reaction of the others - that look of Finch-Fletchley, after I had saved him from that snake ... The thought of being studied so closely wasn't tickling - quite the opposite, after all these years running around with this scar ..."

Almyra nodded.

Harry decided to answer completely. "No," he said, "there are two reasons why I agreed. The first was of course this line from Cho - after that, I simply couldn't say no."

Both grinned at the memory.

"The other - " Harry stopped. "Al - this is strictly confidential, right?"

Almyra's hand was up, palm forward. "I said it, and I stand to it."

"Okay - well, the other reason ... that was you."

"Me?? - What ..."

Harry said quickly, "Each time I wanted to talk to Cho, you were around, and then ... I mean it has improved a bit recently, but - well, I thought with this study, I could come over and just say hello to both of you." With the words out, he felt sweat on his forehead.

Almyra hadn't laughed. "Yeah," she said, "I know that feeling."

Getting easier, Harry added, "The O.W.L. is of course my official profit but - right now, the other benefit counts more."

Almyra grinned. "I'm glad this study shortens the large distance between the Gryffindor and the Ravenclaw tables."

"Oh - I almost forgot." Almyra's remark had reminded Harry. "There's something else - I'm not sure whether it belongs to the study, but you're the expert ..."

"What?"

"Well - it's not directly Parseltongue, and a serpent is only scarcely involved, but ... maybe, there's some kind of ...

"WHAT, HARRY??" Almyra resembled a gold digger, suspecting a nugget in the mud.

"The Sorting Hat - he wanted to put me into Slytherin."

"Wha - " Just in time, Almyra improved from the monosyllabic repetition to slightly more.
"Explain!"

Harry told her about his first discussion with the Sorting Hat, also about the second one, years later in Dumbledore's office.

Almyra was beaming. "Wow - Harry, I never heard something like that! ... That's super - with your case alone, I would ..."

"No!!" Harry was almost shouting. "Don't say that!"

Almyra twisted. "Sorry - I wasn't serious ... I'd only ..."

"Never mind," interrupted Harry, remembering a lesson from another Defence against the Dark Arts teacher, "it's just - I like the idea of Lupin and me in the same work."

They were done for the day. Almyra dismounted the steno pen and stored it in her bag. "I'll need at least a week to work this stuff through," she said.

Harry wondered whether the two parts of the study would be done in parallel or sequentially but didn't ask. Almyra took the written parchments, and they left.

At the bottom of the staircase, she waved good-bye and headed for the Ravenclaw tower entrance.

Harry turned. In front of him stood Hermione.

"What are you doing here?" Hermione's glance followed Almyra, came back to Harry, astonished.

Harry went pink. "Oh - erm, I've just helped Al with some schoolwork."

"I bet you did ... So it's not Almyra, it's Al, huh?" The temperature in Hermione's voice dropped rapidly. "Listen, Harry. If you think it's none of my business, just say so - okay? ... Don't insult me with such a stupid answer."

22 - Misunderstandings

The air between Harry and Hermione remained remarkably cool over the next days. Harry felt angry with himself, still angrier with her. When Hermione was hiding something, he and Ron never probed too deep. No - wasn't quite true, *he* didn't do it while Ron felt less restrained.

But when Hermione came across something, didn't find out immediately what it was, she could become rather unpleasant. He wouldn't tell, not after what she'd said to him. At breakfast, he asked her how she was doing with her potion.

Hermione glared at him. "Are you interested, or are you training your social skill in conversations?"

"I'm - oh, forget it," snapped Harry.

Ron looked surprised. Some minutes later, after Hermione had left, he asked, "What's up with you two?"

"She thinks I ... She's got something on her mind about me, but she's wrong ... I didn't tell her, and you know how she is when ..."

"Yeah, I know," Ron sighed. "Girls ... By the way, you didn't tell me either, but I think I can wait." As if to prove his remark, he seemed to do that right at the moment.

"It's not really important, honestly." Then Harry found the saving argument. "If I'd tell you now, I'd have to tell her too. - Otherwise ..."

"True." Ron was mollified. "As long as it's not anchor man business, it shouldn't be my problem."

"No, it's not," said Harry. "Just old stuff."

Nonetheless, Ron couldn't give it a rest. The next day, when Harry was discussing O.W.L.s with him, Ron said, "What do you think - will Hermione make it Head Girl?"

"I'm sure she will," answered Harry. "With eight O.W.L.s? ... She's not going to lie down on that - I'd hardly know anyone as clever as her - for me, it's just a question of time."

"Funny," said Ron, with a strange expression, "maybe you should tell her."

"Why?"

"Well, she complained about you ... Said you'd be thinking stupid of her."

"If it's that bad," replied Harry, "I'm sure I'll hear it from her directly ... Until then, I'd prefer to leave it untouched."

Ron walked away without further comment, leaving Harry with a bad taste in his mouth. The study had barely started, and he already had messed up with Hermione *and* with Ron.

The second interview turned out less pleasant than the first one. Almyra arrived with an endless number of questions about the zoo accident. She wanted to know exactly which emotions had stirred the magical power, first the talking with the boa constrictor and then the disappearance of the glass pane.

Harry explained how life had been in Privet Drive, with the Dursleys in general and with Dudley in particular. At least, he tried. It was painful for him to talk, and it was difficult for Almyra to understand. Muggles world in Dursley style was unknown to her.

At one point, she stopped the steno pen. "This is off the record, Harry ... I apologize in advance for my question ... Say - are you making up something? - Maybe for something else?"

"No, I don't." Harry's laugh was short and bitter. "You can ask Ron - no, better not. But you can ask Hagrid what happened when he found me and took me to Hogwarts. He's seen the Dursleys."

Reluctantly, Almyra started the pen again. She continued with questions about Harry's state after the accident. Harry told her he'd been banned to the cupboard.

Almyra stopped the pen a second time. "Harry - are you telling me you were put into a *cupboard*??"

"Yes - as a punishment."

"This is hard to believe."

"I don't care whether ..." Harry stopped himself. "No - it's not true, I do care whether you believe me ... I guess - today, I know why. It wasn't so much for the trouble I'd caused, it was because something had happened that could be explained only with the one word that drives the Dursleys into panic - magic."

Almyra studied him. "Do you have some other examples of their reaction to magical events?"

"Oh, you bet ... We'll come to that - but none that has to do with Parseltongue, so - for now, mark it as questionable, or whatever ... Until this study's over, we'll have found an opportunity to talk about the Dursleys and magic ... By the way, what happened to you as a kid when you showed magic?"

"I got sweets."

Harry stared.

"My parents," explained Almyra, "both work in public - that is, under Muggles. My father is an artist on fairs - he's more for the easy style of life, while my mother, she's got a reputation as a Voodoo priestess ... For her, it was good for business - me walking around, doing some childish magic, while her customers could watch ... They paid without moaning."

"Sounds like heaven," said Harry.

"Oh - I had to sing for my supper," replied Almyra. "When we'll find time to talk, we can trade stories - yours about what happened when you showed magic, and mine about what happened when I didn't ... Anyway, let's get back to our interview."

She started the pen again. "What did you do in the cupboard?"

Remembering back, Harry said, "I had a lot of time to think about things, there in the dark ... This was when I could remember my accident", he touched his scar, "for the first time."

Suddenly, Almyra looked much more enthusiastic. They finished the other questions in a comfortable atmosphere.

Almyra collected her parchments. "Harry, would it be okay to do some tests with snakes?"

"Sure, why not?" Harry's interested came awake. "Real ones or something like Snape did?"

"Both ... I don't know yet how to get them. - I don't feel like asking Snape ..."

Harry had a better idea. "Ask McGonagall. She's already in the picture."

"You're right ... Anyway, that won't be soon - I just wanted to make sure."

They went downstairs. Harry almost wished they'd meet Hermione, but she wasn't there. He climbed the tower to his dormitory. Before he could give the password to the Fat Lady, the door swung open. Ron came out.

"Hi," said Harry.

"Hi ... By the way - Sirius's back." Ron hurried downstairs.

"Wait - " shouted Harry. "Where is he?"

Ron stopped for an instant. Without turning, he said, "With Dumbledore," and disappeared.

Sirius! Relief and pleasure rushed through Harry. He turned, stormed downstairs. In the hall, he sat down with the staircase in view, so they would see each other immediately. Then he waited.

Students passed by. He saw Viktor going to the office, waved at him.

He felt tired, the interview had been more exhausting than expected. The lights at the walls were separating in two pictures, after a moment, he could focus them again. At this moment, two hands covered his eyes.

A voice close to his ear whispered, "Guess who! ... Woe you if it's wrong." The hands were female, small, strong.

"Cho?"

"Lucky you." The hands opened, Cho stepped around. "How was it?"

He realized - this was the first time that she spoke to him about the study. "Stressful," he said. "One time, Al wasn't going to believe what I said. Thought I'd make things up ... She's not used to Muggles as extreme as the Dursleys."

Cho nodded sympathetically.

"We decided to exchange some stories as soon as possible - I have to tell Dursley horror stories, and she'll tell Voodoo horror stories."

"Oh - really?" Cho sounded a bit flippant. "And what am I supposed to do - while you and Almyra tell each other about your terrible childhood?"

It was so close to what Hermione seemed thinking, Harry had to laugh. "You'll be present, of course - that goes without saying."

"Sounds better ... You know, I don't mind if it goes *with* saying."

Harry, now fully awake, looked around. Across the hall, he saw Hermione watching the scene, an expression of disapproval on her face. When his eyes met hers, Hermione turned sharply and marched to the exit. Her gait, after this look, made Harry giggle.

"What's so funny?"

"Oh - nothing."

Cho looked surprised, then hurt.

Quickly, Harry said, "I just saw someone who's got it all wrong. - You know, seeing me with Al ..."

Before he could explain more, a figure came down the staircase. A man, looking like a business agent, short hair, bearded, elegant robe. The man saw him and started to smile broadly. "Harry!"

Harry stared, disbelieving. Sirius Black? With dark blond hair??

"See you," said Cho, and disappeared.

Harry stood up, stepped forward. "Sirius - you? ... I almost didn't recognize you. - You look great." They shook hands.

"Good to see you, Harry ... Who was that girl?"

"My squad partner. How are you?"

"Fine, thanks. Does she have a name?"

Harry laughed. "Yes - Cho Chang. She's the Ravenclaw Seeker." He touched Sirius' hair. "Is it coloured?"

"What do you think? Of course - a useful little charm ... By the way, call me Simon. *Simon Snuffles - Import and Export*." Sirius bowed.

They laughed, then found seats to talk. In a low voice, Sirius told Harry how he had been busy looking for Wormtail. Only he hadn't found any trace.

"Someone with that hand should get noticed," muttered Sirius, "but nothing ... Maybe I'm not clever enough for this kind of work. Snape might have been more successful." He laughed humourlessly. "Who would've thought I'd long for Snape's skill?"

Harry asked his godfather how life was outside Hogwarts, with Voldemort and his Death-Eaters back again.

"It's like a dark cloud," answered Sirius. "Everything's almost normal. There's no killing every other day - if that's what you mean." His expression grew serious. "If there are killings, they are well covered - in our world and in the Muggles world ... He's very cunning, Voldemort. He had to wait many years - he's learned a lesson - especially after you blew his triumph."

Harry couldn't smile at that.

"It's a political pressure," continued Sirius. "Sooner or later, people will come and say, 'Let's make an arrangement.' ... This is our greatest problem, aside from ..." Sirius stopped himself. "Dumbledore knows that, of course. - If there was someone other than that fool Fudge, things might look different. But Dumbledore cannot fight two frontiers at the same time ... This stronghold here", Sirius made a gesture to the walls around, "is the reason why Voldemort doesn't dare to strike. - It's essential to keep a barrier the Dark Forces cannot break."

Harry thought it over. "I wonder what will happen in summer, when school's off. - Will I have to go back to the Dursleys? If all students are spread all over the country ..."

"That'll be an issue half a year from now," interrupted Sirius. "At present, we have trouble planning four weeks ahead ... I know that Dumbledore has something special about that place, er ..."

"Privet Drive," supplied Harry.

"Right - Privet Drive. Nobody has ever seen *all* cards he holds in those long sleeves ... Anyway - " Sirius grinned, "maybe the two of us are ordered to hide at some nice place far away. - A little island under palms ... Or a mountain camp."

"Or China." Harry was thinking aloud.

"Or China," agreed Sirius. After a moment, he asked, "Any place in particular?"

Harry shrugged. "Hongkong."

"Of course - what else." Sirius nodded. "The most natural place for any British wizard."

Harry examined Sirius' face, which looked quite casual.

His godfather, Harry was told, would stay in Hogwarts for two days, three at the most, however without hanging around in public too much. Sirius had booked a room in Hogsmeade. "I'd like to see a demonstration of those Steel Wings," he said. "If you could arrange a patrol at a certain time, we could meet at the bottom of that hill - you know what I mean?"

Of course Harry knew - the hill where they'd met two years ago. "I'll talk with Viktor," he replied. "I'm supposed to fly schedules in a pattern as irregular as possible."

Sirius nodded, he knew about that.

At supper, Ron suddenly asked, "Harry - did you see Sirius?"

"Yes, and we talked together," answered Harry, grateful for small to medium favours like, for example, being noticed by his friends. He gave an account of his conversation with Sirius, speaking to Ron, sufficiently audible for Hermione, who seemed busy with her food - except that, occasionally, her chewing stopped for a moment.

Then Harry remembered Sirius' request. "Ron - can you talk with Viktor, to put Cho and me on schedule tomorrow afternoon? Sirius wants to see the Steel Wings in action."

"Not tomorrow," answered Ron. "Day after tomorrow's possible - right after double Care - okay?"

Harry nodded.

"Does Cho know already?" Hermione spoke - to Harry!

"Not yet," he answered, cautiously. "Might come as a little surprise to her."

"Sure," snapped Hermione. "Compared to some other surprises that might come to her, this one doesn't matter much."

Ron's face was blank. "What are you talking about?"

"Oh - ask him," retorted Hermione. "Friends and friends' friends are always good for surprises - isn't that so, Harry?"

She jumped up and left, barely avoiding to overturn her chair.

Ron watched her leave. "Blah and blah blah are always good for surmises, isn't that so, Harry?"

Harry chuckled.

Not looking pleased, Ron said, "Harry, I'd be grateful if you could get this quarrel straight - preferably some time soon."

"I know, you're right." Harry felt embarrassed. "But how can I tell her - if she spits something at me and then walks away? ... Shall I follow her?"

Ron made a face but didn't answer.

* * *

The next day in Charms, Professor Flitwick announced this would be the last lesson in their current topic. It had been a collection of first-aid and body care spells, including such useful things as hair cutting, nail cutting and polish, but also less desirable techniques like the Vomiting Charm - as helpful as it might be after somebody had eaten something poisonous, training this spell had been dreadful.

As quickly as possible, they had changed to the Sonorus Charm and its counterpart, the Quietus Charm. Listening to students, after they had successfully raised the volume of their voices, was nice, although the real entertainment came with the failed attempts - hoarse whisper, croaking, squeaking, most often, only Professor Flitwick could repair it.

The funniest failure, of course, happened to Neville Longbottom. Rather than raising his volume, he had accelerated his speech. Within seconds, his high-pitched chirping turned a group of orderly students into a bunch of howling, twisting, rolling bodies, their eyes watering. They suggested to leave Neville in his state until the end of the class, however Flitwick didn't agree. Then they asked Neville to show them how to do it. At least, nobody seemed surprised when he couldn't reproduce the effect.

Toward the end of the class, the small wizard asked the students whether they could offer suggestions for the next topic.

Hermione's arm was up first. "What about combat and duel curses, Professor?"

Of course - one of Hermione's many O.W.L.s. But she wasn't lucky. "That's too early, Ms. Granger," said Flitwick. "These spells will be discussed only as of next year."

Time for Harry's try. "Professor - can we do spells to conjure up animals?" If his choice was accepted, he would be able to make serpents at demand - for Almyra as well as for his own O.W.L.

To his surprise, this suggestion failed even worse. "Oh, no, Mr. Potter - not before the seventh year ... There have been quite some accidents in the past - the beast was out and nobody could put it back quickly enough ... No, that's not an option we can consider." Flitwick seemed almost shuddering.

Ron's arm came up. "Professor, could we do useful spells for the office?"

Flitwick looked surprised. "For the office - what do you have in mind, Mr. Weasley?"

Ron explained how he could use spells to copy parchments, to order them into stacks, to search for a certain parchment in a huge pile, and so forth. He described some of the functions in his magic calendar and diary, Harry's Christmas present for him.

"Unfortunately," answered Flitwick, "all these spells - as far as they exist - are well-kept secrets of some companies ... Copy pens, for example - I know there are some, unfortunately, I won't be able to make a pen copying a written text - I'm sorry, Mr. Weasley." The wizard

smiled. "Anyway, if I could do that, I'd be hired on the spot by some other company, could set the salary by myself ..."

For a moment, Flitwick seemed lost in his dream, then returned to the less exciting reality. "What we could do is a collection of useful household charms - heating up water, making a fire burn, repair a broken glass or furniture ... We did some of them already, however, a nice bundle for the practical wizard ... Maybe you'll find some of them useful in the office too, Mr. Weasley."

Compared to the previous suggestions, this one sounded pretty boring. Heating up water - for Harry, water was heated up either by the house-elves, reaching the Gryffindor table as tea or soup, or it was done by some wizard like Lupin, when invited him into his office.

Still, the offer was accepted because the only other suggestion, spells to use a wand for something else, found no majority - too many students had already covered their needs through private research in the library. Making light with the wand was old stuff, other tricks, like the Four-Point Spell Harry had used in the maze of the Wizard Tournament, were easy enough to learn.

The discussion had reminded Harry of the work in his O.W.L.s, waiting to be done. The next class increased the thought - Astronomy, still about star constellations, Ron in his element while Harry felt quite indifferent.

Today's constellation was Gemini - the twins.

Hearing about the two main stars, Castor and Pollux, Harry's first thought was of course about the Weasley twins, especially since Pollux happened to be another red giant. While Ron relished the news that, for once, these two stars were pretty close together, forty-four versus thirty-two light years, Harry's mind was making the connection from twins to siblings.

Sibling wands ... his first Defence O.W.L. said he would specialize on that, despite the fact that he didn't have the faintest idea what to say. Sibling wands refused to fight against each other - that was all he knew.

Thinking about a first step toward more knowledge, he remembered the scene of him and Hagrid buying his wand, how Mr. Ollivander had revealed to him this was a sibling of Voldemort's wand. The most natural step seemed a letter to that creepy shop owner, asking for help, maybe for a reference to some book.

After classes, Harry sat down in the Gryffindor tower to write the letter. The first attempt showed just too many corrections, so he wrote a second and final version.

Dear Mr. Ollivander,
you certainly remember the wand you sold me some years ago (holly, 11 inches), and that this is a sibling of Voldemort's wand. This fact, and the effects when sibling wands fight against each other, is a topic in my O.W.L.s.
Looking for more information about this issue, I would like to ask you for help, for example, a reference to a book or something similar. I would be very grateful for any help you could provide.

Thank you in advance for your efforts.
Yours sincerely,
Harry Potter
Hogwarts, Gryffindor House

He was already late for supper, also, this seemed no good time to send Hedwig with an order. Harry decided to do it after the meal, until then, Hedwig would be awake and eager to fly. He rolled the letter up and went down.

Seeing the parchment in Harry's hand, Ron asked what it was.

"A letter to Mr. Ollivander," answered Harry. "I'm going to ask him for help on the sibling wands issue."

"What do you expect?"

"Oh - whatever, from 'No thanks' to a pile of descriptions ... After all, *he's* the expert in wands, right?"

"That's wonderful," snorted Hermione, "first you do other people's schoolwork, then you let other people do your own - except they aren't the same. Why don't you concentrate on your own work?"

Harry snapped back, "I can ask you the same question."

Ron joined the mood. "Would somebody please explain to me what you two are talking about?" He looked at Hermione.

"Ask him," she said.

Ron looked at Harry.

"I'm not responsible for explaining other people's comments," said Harry, "particularly so if the same people tell me to mind my own business ... Actually it's the old story, those who can't do - teach."

Hermione gasped.

Ron's mouth fell open. This remark could have been his own - for Harry's standards, it sounded quite sharp. "Hey, Harry - " said Ron soothingly, "take it easy, okay?"

Harry considered to leave the table right now, only he wasn't going to flee a battlefield on which - nominally, at least - he counted as the winner. And there was another simple fact that kept him on his seat - he was hungry.

Hermione didn't budge either. She looked hurt, seemed to wait for him to give in ... Not today, Harry thought, there was no reason to feel mercy with her.

The clanging of dishes and forks was the only sound for the next minutes.

Harry had finished. He grabbed his letter and rose from his seat, it was time to send Hedwig, to let off the steam that had accumulated in him. He made some steps, only to find his path blocked - although not by Hermione.

Almyra stood before him. "Harry - I'm ordered to kidnap you. Cho found a place where we can exchange stories."

"Excellent idea." Harry felt Hermione's watchful looks burn in his back. "Lemme just talk with Hedwig, then I'm ready."

"Hedwig - who's that?"

Harry showed his parchment. "Hedwig's my owl - I have a letter for her."

Almyra's face lighted up. "You have an owl? ... I didn't know - can I come with you?"

"Sure - why not?"

Careful not to turn, not to meet Hermione's glance again, he walked to the staircase, Almyra at his side.

"How long has Hedwig been your owl, Harry?" Almyra's voice sounded genuinely interested.

"Since I'm here in Hogwarts ... It was Hagrid's present - some compensation for the bad time I had with the Dursleys ... But that's already in the middle of a story - Cho'll give me hell if she finds out I'm telling you without her around."

Almyra laughed. "That would be a hell to share - she wouldn't treat me any better."

They reached the owlery. Feeling pride, Harry stepped to the bar with the most outstanding owl - his own. Hedwig watched them approaching.

"Morning, Hedwig, old girl - how was your sleep? ... Look who's here with me - that's Almyra. Call her Al."

Hedwig greeted him with a low hooing, then turned one eye toward Almyra.

Almyra's eyes were shining. "Hello, Hedwig - nice to meet you ... What a beautiful girl you are." She raised her arms and plucked the owl from the bar. Before Harry could give a warning, Almyra had the bird flat on her arm, the other hand caressing Hedwig at the neck, the chest - even the delicate feathers at her legs.

Harry stared - not only was Almyra still unhurt, there was no mistaking, Hedwig enjoyed it!

"How ..." He swallowed. "I can't believe it! By now, anyone else would have been a bad case for Madam Pomfrey."

"Not me!" Almyra beamed, stroking the owl, which showed no intention to regain her dignity. Almyra grabbed an owl leg, held it up. "Here - fix the letter."

Quicker than ever before, Harry put the letter to Mr. Ollivander on Hedwig's leg, then stepped back to see how Almyra - or Hedwig - would end the wheedling.

"Okay, Hedwig," said Almyra, "time for a trip - have fun." With her last words, she threw the owl high up in the air.

The instant before she would start falling, Hedwig spread her wings. Two, three strokes, and she was away.

Harry stared admiringly at Almyra. "Wow! A jump start for Hedwig - I never did this with her - I wouldn't have dared!"

Almyra smiled. "That's the greatest - believe me, Harry."

"Where did you learn that much about owls?"

Almyra shook her head. "That would be right in the middle of another story - let's find Cho."

Climbing down the staircase, Harry wondered where Cho might have found a room comfortable enough to sit together. Rooms - they weren't short of rooms, what with the lessons room, the interviews room, classrooms, only who wanted to sit there in the evening?

Almyra marched ahead. They passed the entrance to the Ravenclaw tower - actually no, they didn't pass, they did ... they did ...

"Where are we going?" asked Harry in alarmment.

"Upstairs."

"And then?"

Almyra made big eyes. "Through the door - Harry, is there something wrong with you?"

"But this is ..."

"That's why I had to kidnap you - remember?" Almyra couldn't hold her laughing any longer. "Cho thought you'd never volunteer, so - we had to use this trick ... seems she was right."

For an instant, the thought of turning and escaping crossed Harry's mind - this was the tower with the girls that called him *Young Potter!* Only, it would look too ridiculous ... And besides, Cho awaited them.

Anxiously, he watched Almyra reach a picture that showed a man, sitting in a study at candle light. Angrily, the man looked up. "Who's bothering me deep in my thoughts?"

"Give it a rest," replied Almyra. "Winter Green."

The door swung open.

A large room appeared before Harry's eyes, not so much different from their own tower, except of course - he was the only Gryffindor around.

Heads were turning, stopping at his sight.

"Hey folks," called Almyra, "behave a litte, because we've got a visitor - Harry Potter!"

Other heads wheeled around, now the entire room was looking at him. Harry found the strength to say, "Good evening, everybody."

"Well - that was the good news," informed Almyra. "The bad news is - he's reserved for the upper classes, and guess who that might be?"

Laughter, somebody called, "No idea - tell us," then Harry's eyes had found Cho, sitting in a corner with empty seats waiting for them, with a grin almost too broad for that small face.

When they reached her and sat down, Cho looked questioningly at Almyra. "What took you so long? Did he resist?"

"Last answer first or in the sequence of asking?" replied Almyra with an innocent expression.

Cho nearly stomped her foot. "Dammit, Al - "

"We visited another girl. - Harry has quite a collection, did you know that?"

Cho's face rapidly moved toward a lightning storm. "Aa-al!!"

Almyra wasn't too impressed. "Her name's Hedwig - a snow owl ... She's a beauty ..."

Watching Cho's face, Harry saw the menacing expression, almost at once, change to sympathy.

"... now sent off with a letter."

The sympathy faded as quickly as it had come. "Oh no - not another letter." Cho's eyes were at Harry.

"It's to Mr. Ollivander - the wand maker," Harry explained. "I'm going to do an O.W.L. about sibling wands, and I asked him whether he knows some help."

Almyra looked fascinated. "That's cool - for once something worth the parchment. How did you come across this weird topic, Harry?"

Harry hesitated, glanced at Cho, not finding any support to get off the hook. Sighing inwardly, he said, "My wand has one of the only two tail feathers from a phoenix, and ..."

"Who's got the other?" Almyra looked as merciless as the next worst scientist.

"Er - Voldemort."

Almyra could only stare, had lost her speech.

For compensation, Cho had a glitter in her eyes. "Phoenix, huh? ... Now lemme guess, Harry - do I know that phoenix, by some accident?"

Harry nodded. "Yes - it's Fawkes."

Cho turned toward Almyra. "Isn't he a treasure? - From a scientific standpoint, I mean."

Almyra didn't answer. She looked at Harry, except her mind seemed far away - Harry had no doubt, she was combining her previous knowledge about his fight against Voldemort with these new facts, coming up with enough information to save him from telling the dreadful story again.

"How's your O.W.L. work doing?" asked Cho.

Harry felt grateful for the change. "Good. There are five ..." He explained his topics, and how it came most of the work was already done.

"Five's a decent number," admitted Cho, "I did five too."

Harry learned that Cho had achieved O.W.L.s in Care of Magical Creatures - about dragons, naturally, in Herbology about bamboo and its magical powers, in Muggle Studies about Chinese culture, in Potions about Chinese poisoning techniques and how to cure them with magic antidotes, and - surprise - the fifth about Quidditch.

"And Ron?" asked Cho. "How many's he doing?"

"Also five - although his administration thing should count twice."

"And Hermione?"

Was it a secret? Harry didn't care. "Eight."

"I knew it!" cried Cho. "She's the collecting type - the want-to-have-it-all."

Although Harry was mad at Hermione, he had to defend her - here, at least, where she couldn't hear him. "True, but - eight O.W.L.s don't come by themselves ..."

"Certainly not," interrupted Cho, "she has to work hard, yes, only - that's something for the books, a piece from everything ... It's impossible to cover eight topics thoroughly, all she can do is scratching a bit on the surface."

"What's wrong with that?" asked Harry. "If it counts as O.W.L., it's valid - right? ... I don't think my own ones will go any deeper."

Cho waved impatiently. "Nor did mine - that's not the point ... Harry, if you want to know what an O.W.L. *can be* ..." She turned to Almyra. "Al, tell him."

Almyra seemed as excited about this idea as, minutes ago, Harry about his sibling wand story.

Cho didn't wait until Almyra felt like speaking. Proudly, she said, "Al did three!"

"Huh?"

Whatever Harry had expected, six, maybe seven - three came as a surprise. He didn't know what to say, looked perplexed at Almyra, who seemed quite uneasy, though not embarrassed because of this low number.

"I was working on a project - " said Almyra hesitantly, "actually, I'm still working on it ... Last year, it split more or less naturally in three parts, so I had enough for my O.W.L.s, didn't have to waste time on this nonsense ..."

Seeing Harry's blank look, she explained, "When you do a Graduate Work, nobody'll ever ask you about your O.W.L.s, and I wasn't interested in anything outside that project - the least in Hogwarts records ... The three parts were Transfiguration, Care of Magical Creatures, and Astronomy."

Cho smiled. "Got the picture, Harry?"

"Sure," he replied, "this isn't complicated. It's about werewolves - Transfiguration fits, Care of Magical Creatures fits, and Astronomy is the most obvious - lunar phases, what else?"

Cho grinned broader. "That's one of those cases where everything fits so nicely and still - it's awfully wrong ... Anyway, this evening is supposed to present a collection of stories, right? - So, Harry, what's the weirdest story you can tell us?"

Harry didn't know what should be wrong with his conclusion about Almyra's project - her case study proved his explanation, didn't it? ... But Cho had asked for a story, not for a solution.

The weirdest ... This was easy - for himself, it was the story of Hagrid coming to deliver his letter and take him to Hogwarts, storming the hut at the island, bending Uncle Vernon's gun to a pretzel, grilling the best sausages Harry had ever eaten.

"... went to Diagon Alley, made a visit at Gringotts, and then to the Eeylops Owl Emporium where Hagrid bought Hedwig ... It was the first present I ever got."

Almyra had listened with fascination, her eyes again shining at the mentioning of Hedwig. Now she said, "Harry - I'll never again doubt your descriptions ... Nobody can make up such a story - it's so unlikely, it must be true."

Cho said, "That explains why you've been ready to risk body and soul - yours as well as mine - to save Hagrid ... The li'l bird."

Almyra grinned. "Hagrid has it with birds - owls, hippogriffs ..."

"And some other," said Harry, "still bigger."

"Really?" Almyra looked expectantly. "Tell us."

Just in time, Harry remembered the deal. "Oh no - now it's your turn, Al ... How's life for a Voodoo child?"

So Almyra told about her childhood in a house with a Voodoo priestess as a mother, with Muggless customers who always wanted the same - love potions, curses toward some enemy,

prepared with the help of small figures which included some hair, nails, or skin of the victim, and placed with needles through parts of the body figure, then counter-curses against the work of some other Voodoo priest, cures for illnesses - the common trade of Voodooism.

Often enough, Almyra's contribution had been to tell the victim about the figure in the hands of her mother - this knowledge being an essential part of the Voodoo effect.

"Wasn't it dangerous?" asked Harry.

"Usually not," said Almyra. "Hurting a child - nobody dared to do that ... You know, these curses were just a pressure, some pain - my mother wouldn't have done more, unless I'd come back to tell her this person had done something toward me ... Aside from that, I developed my own set of little tricks to keep them at bay."

"Really?" Harry looked expectantly. "Can you show me?"

"Oh, no ..." Almyra blushed, "not here, anyway - with all the others watching."

Harry felt disappointed. "That's unfair!"

"We'll find an opportunity," promised Almyra. "Besides - our deal was only about stories, right? ... I think it's your turn again ... Tell us more about the Dursleys - they are so weird ... All Muggles I've met were eager to see magic - even if they were frightened, they couldn't get enough."

So Harry told the story how Aunt Marge had come to visit, how she had drunk too much, how she had said one word too much against Harry's parents, and how, suddenly, Aunt Marge had too much volume even for her considerable weight, with the effect that she was floating at the ceiling.

"... came the Knight Bus and took me to the Diagon Alley," finished Harry his story.

"What happened then?" asked Almyra. "Didn't you get a letter from the Ministry, because of forbidden magic?"

"No," grinned Harry, "I met Fudge - they were so happy finding me alive and well, because everybody thought Sirius Black was after me - they dropped it quickly ... And they sent someone to put that balloon straight." The memory of Aunt Marge, hanging under the ceiling ... He could relish it still today ...

Almyra looked confused. "But Black *was* after you, wasn't he?"

"Er - yes, probably." Harry swore at himself inwardly. He, the master spy, had struck again.

Cho had listened thoughtfully, now she was studying his face, keeping her own expressionless. "This was the year," she said, "when you got that Firebolt, Harry - and nobody ever found out where it came from."

"Yes - they thought it came from Black, was jinxed, and I had to wait for weeks until McGonagall was ready to admit it wasn't."

Almyra couldn't care less about broomsticks. "He was never found, that Black ... I wonder what happened to him."

Harry held his tongue, still feeling Cho's eyes on him.

"That Black reminded me of a Voodoo creature," said Almyra, much to Harry's relief. "Ever heard of Samedi - the Duke of the Darkness?"

Harry hadn't.

"He's the personified horror for Muggles who believe in Voodoo," explained Almyra. "He can command the Zombies - dead bodies walking around and doing what he'd told them to do, usually threatening and violating other people ... Zombies are slow and clumsy, as you'd expect from a corpse, but - you know, the frightening thing is, you cannot kill them, simply because they're already dead."

Harry stared. "Is this a myth?"

"For Muggles who believe, it's reality ... I've done a bit of research in that direction. What I found out, this Samedi was a real person - a wizard of course ... His Zombie trick was pretty simple but quite efficient. He stunned people, so that all Muggles believed them dead. Then, still before the funeral or afterwards, he came to de-stun them - only to put them immediately under the Imperius curse ... that's where the slowness and the clumsiness comes from ... I guess he had a lot of fun - in contrast to the poor Zombies."

"What happened to them?" asked Harry.

"Well - they couldn't be killed," reminded Almyra, "so the only solution for normal Muggles was to cut them to pieces."

"Uargh."

"Exactly." Almyra grinned. "You can imagine how people react if you pretend to be a messenger of Samedi."

Harry watched her attentively. No doubt, Almyra had done this more than once. It certainly was unwise to have her as an enemy, also, it illuminated Cho's remark how she and Almyra had held their ground against the other Ravenclaw girls, especially in the first year.

It was time to go. Harry said good night to Almyra, waved a goodbye to the other Ravenclaw students, then Cho escorted him downstairs.

"You see," she said, "it's possible to survive a visit in the Ravenclaw tower."

"Just barely," replied Harry. "If I had known that Al used to run around as a Voodoo witch ..."

"Oh, that ..." Cho waved dismissively. "It's more show than anything else ... Pity she started with that Samedi story - I had you trapped so nicely in a corner with your Firebolt ..."

Harry grinned. For once, he could beat her in that game - twice in one strike. "It was my godfather," he said, "and that reminds me - we'll meet him tomorrow at Hogsmeade."

Cho looked suspicious. "What kind of plot is this?"

"No plot. Ron knows, Viktor knows ... Everything's in good order."

She wasn't convinced. "What's the purpose? - Wouldn't it be simpler to meet here in Hogwarts?"

Harry remembered Almyra's answer to Cho's double questions but decided not to use her trick. "We met already - remember the guy that came down the stairs yesterday? ... That's him. - He'd like to see a demo of the Steel Wings in action."

"Does your godfather have a name?"

"Funny you ask. He had the same question about you. I'll introduce him to you."

Cho's eyes met his own. "For someone as full of interesting little secrets as you, Harry, it's amazing how badly you can hide them ... Although - I wouldn't like it otherwise."

She put two fingers at her lips, then at his. "Good night, storyteller."

* * *

These were the days of new topics in classes. The next morning in Defence against the Dark Arts, Drilencu announced the topic of Veelas and Vampires as finished.

"What we'll do next," he said, "is an extension of the general topic that could be called *Ruling the willpower of other people*. Veela, as we have learned, rule other people through seduction, vampires do it through brute force - although in combination with other effects ... Now, we'll concentrate on ruling techniques based on commanding, misleading, pretension, and other approaches to break, bend, or confuse the victim's decisions ... Some techniques should be known already - who can give me examples?"

Almost every arm was up.

Although Hermione had been quickest, Drilencu selected an arm that was seen less often. "Mr. Longbottom?"

"The Cruciatus curse."

"Correct - although I missed to say, I want to hear the technique *and* the category ... Mr. Longbottom, which category is this?"

"Torture, Prof ... oh, I see - breaking the will."

Drilencu made some columns on the blackboard, wrote "Breaking" on top of the first, and wrote Neville's entry. He turned. "What else?"

Almost as many arms as before. "Miss Patil?"

"The Imperius Curse - bending, Prof."

Drilencu named another column and wrote it down. "What else?"

The arms had reduced significantly, however, Hermione's as well as Harry's arm were still up.

This thime, Drilencu honoured speed. "Miss Granger?"

"Impostor techniques, using the Polyjuice potion ... This is misleading and pretense, Prof - or confusion."

Drilencu looked approvingly. "That's the first in our collection which isn't obvious - five points for Gryffindor."

He wrote while Hermione sat beaming, nose high in the air.

As unchallenged as she appeared in her role as points provider for the Gryffindors, today her stance sent an obvious signal toward Harry, sitting next to her, indicating that some students were simply superior.

Just wait a second, thought Harry.

Drilencu was looking at the students again. Harry's arm was up - the only one left.

"Mr. Potter?"

"Voodoo techniques, Prof ... It's everything - breaking, bending, confusion - the full range."

Heads were turning to him - not including Hermione's, although - he could almost feel how she forced herself not to spin around, mouth agape.

"Three strikes in one, Mr Potter? ... If you can prove with more specific details, ten points are waiting for you!"

Harry didn't let him wait. "For breaking - well, the usage of Zombies is the best example for that, Prof - a specialty of Samedi, the Duke of the Darkness ... Bending - I'd say the most wide-spread Voodoo technique is the use of love potions ... Confusion - that would be the trick with figures to represent the victim, Prof, although it also includes breaking, especially when the Voodoo priest cuts needles through the body of the figure ..."

Other students were staring at him, with a remarkable exception sitting close.

Drilencu smiled. "Very good, Mr. Potter - the points are yours ... Although I'd like to know where you've gathered such a profound knowledge of Voodoo?"

Watch, Hermione, thought Harry, here comes the kill. Aloud, he said, "It's quite simple, Prof - we have a real Voodoo expert here in Hogwarts, in Ravenclaw actually - her name is Almyra Benedict."

Hermione's head spun around. She looked at Harry, her eyes getting bigger and bigger. Her hand moved to her chin, the mouth fell open - Hermione as the personified picture of utter astonishment.

"Of course - " she whispered, "my God - Harry, you're ..."

"Sssht!"

Harry had no intention to start a conversation with Hermione here in class, although he really wanted to know which idea had come up in her mind so suddenly. Only he'd just beaten her - ten points versus five, an event rare enough not to spoil the moment.

Also, more than in any other class, he didn't want to appear *special* - even with actions as innocent as a discussion with the neighbour about something more important than the teacher's words. So it took until they were sitting at lunch before he found out what Hermione had discovered.

While eating with good appetite, he saw Hermione studying him - deeply concerned, as it seemed. The change in her attitude was dramatic. He decided to ask her directly. "What was it you wanted to tell me in the class?"

"I've found out the reason for your behaviour lately."

"Oh, really? ... And what is the reason - according to your judgment?"

"Isn't that obvious, Harry? - You're under the spell of a Voodoo priestess!"

"I'm what??"

"I didn't know ... Couldn't see it, simply because I didn't know she can do Voodoo ... All the time, I thought it was your own will, although it just didn't fit ..."

"Hermione!" Harry's voice was sharp. "Would you please explain to me what you're talking about?"

She looked sympathetically. "Poor Harry - she has cursed you ... That witch is trying to catch you for herself ... Look - you run around with her - you're neglecting Cho - you're talking contemptuously with other girls - like me, for instance ..."

He stared at her. "Sorry, Hermione, but - you're mental."

Hermione nodded. "Yes, Harry, of course - that's what you're supposed to say, except it's just the spell on you ..." She looked agitated. "But don't you worry, we'll find a solution ... We've mastered worse problems - just let me have a look into the library ..."

Harry glanced at Ron. "What do you think of this nonsense?"

"I don't know ..." Ron seemed to search for the administrator's solution. "What are you doing with her, Harry?" He blushed at his own question. "I mean - maybe there's a simple explanation that would show Hermione she's wrong ..."

"I have a simple explanation," said Harry.

Ron and Hermione were hanging at his lips.

"I'm *not* under a Voodoo spell ... Also, I'm not under the obligation to account for every minute of the day ... I can spend my time with you, with Fleur, with Cho, with Almyra ... with Sirius as long as he's around ..."

"Yes, Harry, sure - it's okay ... calm down ..."

It was a devilish trap. Whatever he would say, it was either proof of Hermione's theory or a giving in to her pressure toward his private business.

Rage boiled up in him. "Hermione," he growled, "in contrast to what people believe, you're *not* a know-it-all ... But you're an unsufferable want-to-know-it-all - and if you don't get your will, somebody else is to blame ..."

"Yes, Harry - don't worry." Hermione was all concern. "I know what's making you talk like that ... we'll change it, soon ..."

"I'LL CHANGE IT!" He was furious. "Either you stop talking nonsense about Almyra cursing me with Voodoo - or I'll go over right away and tell her."

"Do it, Harry - just do it! ... It's only good when she knows it's no longer just you, the puppet in her claws!" Hermione turned to Ron. "We have to find a solution, Ron ... we cannot just go to McGonagall - there's no direct proof, that's exactly the hellish nature of ..."

Harry shot up and stomped to the Ravenclaw table. Neither Cho nor Almyra had finished eating yet. They looked up, surprised.

"Hi. - We need to talk, all three of us."

"Does it have time until my dish is empty?" Cho could be very unkind when being interrupted during her meals.

"Hm - yeah, probably ... I'm waiting for you in the Entrance Hall."

He crossed the hall, angry with Cho because she wouldn't follow immediately, angry with himself because he had left his food without finishing, although now it was impossible to go back, more than angry with Hermione ... Eight O.W.L.s could drive better people nuts, it was just too much ... Yes, he could explain what he *did* with Almyra, except it would leave an anger to burn forever - he, the one whose will couldn't be broken even by Voldemort, shouldn't be able to stand a nosy pest called Hermione? - Ridiculous, almost as ridiculous as her crazy idea ...

"Okay, Harry - what's up?"

Cho and Almyra had arrived, were looking at him expectantly, anxiously.

"It's Hermione - she thinks ... Well, she thinks Almyra has played Voodoo on me."

"What??" Two girls, one question.

Harry explained how terms had turned bad between him and Hermione, since she had found him with Almyra after the first interview, what had happened this morning in the Defence

class, and how Hermione was busy right at this moment, thinking about counter curses to set him free.

While he spoke, Cho's face had shown first a sneering smile, then a grin, then a broad grin. Then she had started to chuckle. Now she was barely able to stand upright, holding her stomach, shaken by laughter.

Almyra wasn't amused - not at all. "That stupid witch ... If she thinks she can mess with me ..." Almyra peeked around the corner. "There she is! - Sits there as if she's waiting for me ... All right, people want to believe what people want to believe - like Muggles, like wizards ..."

She stepped through the entrance.

For a moment, Harry couldn't decide what to do, then he hurried after her. Hermione with a bloody nose from Almyra's fists wouldn't improve things much.

The hall had almost emptied. Hermione sat there, stiffly, waiting for Almyra, an expression of defiance in her face. Harry reached the table just in time to watch the full scene.

"Hello, Hermione." Almyra's voice was neutral. "I just heard you're spreading rumours about me doing Voodoo on Harry ... Is this correct so far?"

Hermione's look seemed not quite as calm as she would have liked. "I'm not spreading rumours - it's not a rumour, it's a fact ... And you should know that I'm not going to sit and watch how your influence on him is getting worse every day."

"Ooooh - isn't that cute?" Almyra's voice came mockingly. "The jealous little kid has lost its toy - that *must* be Voodoo ... What else could ..."

"I'm not jealous!!" Hermione's cheeks were burning. "You're the one who's jealous - of Cho, your best friend! That's the reason! ... Will you deny you're an expert in Voodoo ... And how to use it to your own profit?"

"Listen, you first-generation magic wonder!" Almyra's voice had changed to a cold hissing, her head close to Hermione. "Yes, I'm a Voodoo witch - heir of a long line of Voodoo witches - I'll show you ..."

Almyra's fist came up - slowly, held in front of Hermione's face. Suddenly, she spread her fingers, a metallic sound, and sharp talons, longer than an inch, were sparkling in the light.

Hermione's head twisted back.

"That's just a warning, Hermione - of what might happen if you don't stop bullying people just because they won't tell you everything ..."

Another low click - the talons disappeared.

"... and if you try to plant some trouble between me and Cho, you'll be sorry - really sorry!"

Harry gasped. For a split second, Almyra's face hadn't been a face - it had looked like a skull, two burning flames in the eye sockets.

Had it really been ... A glance at Hermione's face, chalk white, told him she'd seen it too.

* * *

Harry sat in Care of Magical Creatures, listening to Professor Grubbly-Plank without hearing any word she said, his thoughts still at the scene in the hall.

After a last glance at Hermione, who had looked still pale yet more stubborn than ever - "See, Harry, I was right," he had found Almyra outside with Cho - a Cho seriously in trouble because she couldn't get enough air from all that laughing.

"Did you show her that skull visage?" Cho had gasped, "Oooh - pity I couldn't see her face," and had burst out again.

Harry had said, "Al - please, it won't do any better if you still confirm her in her craziness."

The answer hadn't been exactly what he wanted to hear. "I can leave her to you, Harry," Almyra had said, "that's just fine with me ... Except - if she's messing with me or Cho, she's lifting more than she can handle ... you may tell her that."

He hadn't told Hermione - she wouldn't be ready to believe Almyra could beat her - not with books, not with a wand ... Maybe with nasty Voodoo tricks.

For Harry, there was little doubt who'd come out second from a contest. Although he had no intention to tell Hermione about the case study now, somehow he had the feeling it wouldn't solve the problem - she would simply take it for another trick story from Almyra the Voodoo witch.

He sighed, trying to concentrate on the running lesson. Their current topic were *snowballs* - small, tail-less animals with silvery fur, almost white. Winter time, particularly with snow, was the only season when they could be found outside dark, cool forests, their natural space. They used the snow as cover for their passage holes. Exposed to an enemy, a snowball curled into the shape of a ball, protecting belly and legs. Touching the fur was no good idea, a very painful flash would shake the arm, leaving a deep burn mark.

Grubbly-Plank had managed to trap some snowballs. The students were supposed to learn how to handle them with levitation charms.

For Harry, static electricity was quite a common phenomenon, while the idea of using charms rather than isolating gloves was a new and surprising concept. He wondered what snowballs could be used for - so far he hadn't heard anything about their purpose, but then, he hadn't listened much.

Remembering the Blast-Ended Skrewts, which served only as nasty barriers in tournament mazes, he imagined Snowballs used as living projectiles, thrown against an attacker - maybe from a broomstick, standard equipment of a squad member ... Two dust bombs, two snowballs, carried in a weapon belt - provided they could be tamed, otherwise, they would flash already before thrown. A crazy idea, he had to admit ... Although, there were crazier ideas, in heads not far away.

After class, he dropped his books in the dormitory and returned to the Entrance Hall. Recently, the Flight Squad had started to use a small room as a store for the Steel Wings. It opened to the outside of the building and offered a significant improvement because the squad members no longer had to carry their broomsticks through halls and staircases.

Since only the branded owner could ride a Steel Wing, there was no risk somebody might *borrow* them. Each squad member had a rack with a name tag on it.

Shortly after the room had been established, someone had switched the broomsticks of a team. Nobody had been hanging around to watch the scene of the members trying to mount the wrong Steel Wing. Of course, they all believed it had been the twins, only they couldn't even imagine how Fred and George had managed to move the broomsticks to the wrong racks. Since then, all squad members knew the registration numbers of their Steel Wings by heart, and checked them before mounting.

Cho sat in the room, had been waiting for him. "Hi, zombie," she said, "waddle up."

Very funny.

He stepped out, mounted, jumped. When Cho was up, he pushed the Steel Wing, course Giants' camp. Ron knew they would meet Sirius, he wouldn't strike alarm prematurely.

They passed the camp. Harry changed course and aimed toward Hogsmeade. They crossed the town, much slower than the last time.

He found the lane going uphill, the one leading to the cave where they had met Sirius once. Suddenly he realized how Cho might wonder, probably she had expected a meeting in Hogsmeade. He checked around, gestured toward the street.

Cho moved her arm slowly in front of her face. However, she followed.

At low speed, only yards above the ground, Harry followed the lane.

Where the path to the hilltop made a junction, a large dog was lying in the grass, head down, eyes watching the street.

Harry was about to push forward when he realized - the dog wasn't black. From the distance, it looked more like a Golden Retriever, although of unusual size. Frowning, he slowed more, then remembered - Sirius had coloured himself efficiently enough to keep it even in his dog shape.

Harry pushed.

Reaching the junction in full gear, he arched upwards and sideways. The Steel Wing bolted up. Pulling as hard as he could, he drew a looping. Coming down, he braked, came to a halt just before the dog.

The manoeuver had given Cho time to close up. She dismounted, looked at the dog, then turned to Harry. "All right, you clown. Where's your godfather?"

Before Harry could answer, the dog leapt up and moved into the bushes.

"Just a second."

Cho looked the street up and down. When a branch snapped behind her, she turned sharply.

Sirius came stepping down the path onto the street.

Harry beamed. "Hi, Simon ... I want to introduce you to my team partner - Cho Chang ... Cho, this is my godfather, he's called Simon Snuffles."

Sirius turned to Cho. "Hello, Miss Chang. Nice to meet you."

"Good afternoon, Mr. Snuffles." Cho's eyes were examining Sirius. "Where's your dog?"

"Er - waiting."

"Certainly," replied Cho, "and well hidden, I assume."

Sirius looked at Harry, a tacit question on his face.

"My godfather has several names," explained Harry. "Simon Snuffles is the public one. A more private one is Padfoot - it was my father who gave it to him, when they were together at Hogwarts."

"Padfoot, huh?" Cho's glance changed from Harry to Sirius. "Somehow, this dog looked familiar, except it had the wrong ... Mr. Snuffles, did we meet before - maybe in a train?"

Sirius smiled. "Not really, Miss Chang - although you may have met a close relative of mine."

"A relative who's black?"

While Sirius, evidently better used to the game, didn't move a muscle, Harry twisted. Had she said ... He made a quick decision. "Yes, he's black - blacker than black ... Cho - there's still another name, and this time, it's the real one ... This is Sirius Black."

Cho's eyes widened. Her arm moved to grab her wand, then she stopped. "What game is this?" she asked, her voice hard.

Sirius made a placating gesture. "No game, Ms. Chang - except that my close relative and I were of course the same ... You're one of the few people who know about my identity ... To put you at ease - Albus Dumbledore is one of them ... He's also the one who sends me around with various orders."

Sirius glanced at Harry, then continued, "I didn't know how much Harry had told you ... I wasn't aware he'd reveal it here - anyway, I trust his judgment."

Cho had relaxed. "Me too," she said. "Well - most of the time. But I'd like to know a little more about this hide-and-seek game, Mr. Black. So far ..."

Sirius interrupted her. "Please keep to the name Snuffles, Miss Chang - for my security ... You're right, you need to know more before you can trust me. For the background of the story, I'd prefer Harry as the one who'll tell you - the important point is, I'm not the criminal

as which I'm known in public, although I cannot prove it - even so, some people believed my version of the events. One of them is Harry, the other Dumbledore ... With his help, and thanks to a desperate action of Harry and Hermione, I could escape ... Since then, I'm a secret agent of Dumbledore."

"Hermione?" asked Cho, disbelief in her voice. "She helped you to escape?"

"Yes."

"Well, Mr. - er, Snuffles, somehow, this is almost more convincing than Professor Dumbledore's part in the game."

Sirius smiled. "I don't know exactly what you mean, Miss Chang - although I might have a faint idea ... Anyway, I appreciate your cooperation. - I must say, your nerve in this encounter was quite impressive."

Cho's expression didn't change much. "You know," she said, "when with Harry, I always wear a spare one."

Sirius had been able to watch the Steel Wings at their arrival. Now he was eager to see more.

Harry checked the area - no other humans around, a falcon in the sky the only movement in sight. While Cho held guard above tree level, he demonstrated the qualities of the Steel Wing in a sequence of manoeuvres, illustrating the sheer power, the fine balance, instant braking, and the other features.

Then he encouraged Sirius to stun him - more precisely, to try it.

Sirius didn't like the idea.

Harry insisted. Finally, they agreed to try it while Harry, ten yards away, only a yard above ground, was lying flat on his Steel Wing, the broomstick aimed toward Sirius.

The spells hit the broomstick all right, only to bounce off, deflected from the front shield.

"Okay," called Sirius, "I give up. Come over."

Harry touched down, beaming. "What do you say? - Isn't this the best broomstick you ever saw?"

"Beats me," replied Sirius, "I'm no expert. But for sure I'm less worried than before about you flying around." Pointing toward Cho still up in the air, he added, "Especially in such company."

Then Sirius told Harry they wouldn't see each other again for some weeks.

Cho came down to say goodbye. As Sirius was about to step into the bushes, she said, "Mr. Snuffles - I'd like to ask another question ... Why do you change into a dog? Isn't your new appearance safe enough?"

Sirius grinned. "It's more a matter of convenience than safety, Miss Chang - as a dog, you can walk miles effortlessly." With another step, he was gone.

Harry looked at Cho. "So - what do you think of my mysterious godfather?"

She took her time, then asked back, "Why did you tell me about him?"

"It wasn't planned that way - but then I realized it's too complicated, always that balancing with the names ... Against you as my team partner - especially since his name is easily confused with his colour - as a dog, I mean ... Besides, for me, secrets always have a tendency to blow in my face."

"Who knows about him?"

"Lupin was the first. Then me, Hermione, Ron, Dumbledore. Since Voldemort's back, the Weasleys and Snape ... Now you."

"Lupin? - What's Lupin got to do with him?"

"That's part of the story I owe you. - It's the story of four Hogwarts students - Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs. Moony is Lupin, Wormtail is - er, Pettigrew, Padfoot is Black, and Prongs - that was my father."

Cho looked thoughtful. "He's been in Azkaban for years, and then - what made him come back? How did he manage?"

"That's all in the story, but - basically, he came back to protect me from Wormtail."

"Hasn't been too successful, has he?"

Harry's head snapped up. "He's lived off rats to be near me! Wormtail's escape - that wasn't his mistake. It was ..." He swallowed, calmer, he added, "He had a chance to kill him. It's been me who didn't let him do it."

Cho looked apologetically. "Sorry, Harry - I take it back ... Although it's obvious he was right - you have to tell me that story."

"Sure - but not here."

"Harry ..." Cho hesitated. "What does he mean to you?"

"What ..." Harry felt astonishment. "He's what I have of a family."

"A family? - After you can count the days spent with him on one hand?"

"Yes ... The Dursleys - forget them ... The Weasleys - it's kind of family life with them but it's not *my* family. Sirius knew my parents ... Okay, maybe we've been together only for hours, but - it doesn't matter."

Cho looked away. "I know what you mean."

After a moment of silence, Harry asked, "Ready to fly back?"

Cho's look returned to him, a warm smile on her face. "Wait a second, Harry - I guess one trust's worth another."

Harry didn't know what she meant. He watched as Cho reached into her coat and came up with a thing that looked like a glove, only longer. Her left hand went through, then it was at her left sleeve.

She stared into the sky, Harry' glance following hers. The next second, he twisted as a shrill whistle cut through the air.

For seconds, nothing happened.

Then Harry saw it - the falcon was falling from the sky like a stone! No - not like a stone, still a controlled dive, wings folded, only the tail feathers steering. When he was sure the bird would crash onto the ground, or onto Cho, the mighty wings came out, slowing the fall - an instant later, the outstretched legs landed on Cho's outstretched arm. It was still a considerable impact, however, Cho seemed used to it, balancing out with a short bending of her knees.

She looked at Harry, beaming. "Here - that's my surprise of the day ... What do you say - isn't she magnificent?"

Harry studied the falcon, which was looking back at him. Dark, almost black feathers, except at the throat and in the face which showed a light brown ... not brown - bronze, bronze like ...

His eyes wide, Harry whispered, "Cho - is this ..."

Her face was radiant. "Yes, Harry - that's Al! ... What do you think why I've been so quick at figuring out the connection between Black and that dog? I'm so used to Animagi, it's quite natural to me."

Teasing, she added, "Yesterday, we gave you all information, only you didn't get it right."

Harry protested, "For a moment, the thought crossed my mind - except, I couldn't see how Astronomy would fit to it, while - for werewolves, that's an obvious topic."

Cho laughed. "No, Harry - nobody needs Astronomy to learn about full moon and new moon ... We're used to it all our life. But for a bird, crossing through the night sky - I mean for a bird who's not a real bird, knowing the star constellations is extremely important for proper navigation."

"Star constellations?" Harry felt stupid. "And we do them for months - Ron can't get enough of them ..." Another thought crossed his mind. "Is she - er, is Al registered as Animagus?"

Pride was bursting out of Cho. "That's the clou, Harry - yes, she's registered, but only as an owl!"

"How ..."

He didn't know what to ask, but Cho was eager to explain. "The first shape Al managed in her project was an owl - for her, it had to be a bird, and owls - somehow that seemed the natural choice ... But this was only the first major goal, mastering an Animagus act ... The next she did was the second obvious choice - now, Harry, what could that be?"

Harry was lost. "Tell me."

"Dummy - yesterday you saw it all over, remember? ... The Ravenclaw emblem - a bronze eagle!"

He had to admit, it was quite obvious - provided you could think quickly enough in such strange concepts.

"Then we realized, an eagle is simply too big - not for her, but for me ... She was too heavy on my arm. That's why she developed another variation for the day, close enough to the eagle but just the proper size for someone of my proportions ... Don't you dare to laugh!"

Cho didn't need to worry, he felt no such temptation, kept looking admiringly at the falcon. "Can she do still more shapes?"

"Not yet - but she's working on it ... The next won't be a bird, that's all I'm supposed to say."

Was Almyra trying to become a werewolf? The thought was somehow impossible, but then, who would think of an Animagus with more than one shape ... How did it look when the falcon became Almyra?

"Would ... Would you ask her to change? - Here, I mean?"

Cho grinned. "You could ask her as well by yourself, Harry, although the answer would be no ... Almyra says - changing, somehow that's like undressing in public."

23 - The Call

Two days later, sitting at the breakfast table, Harry saw Hedwig coming down toward him, a letter at her leg. So Mr. Ollivander had responded, pretty quickly, however with just a single parchment.

As eager as Harry felt to read Ollivander's reply, there was Almyra - watching him, smiling, making it impossible to open the letter while the owl kept waiting to be treated with some refreshments. And Hedwig would leave no doubt what she wanted. Afterwards, as he knew, he would have to carry Hedwig upstairs to the Owlery - she didn't like flying with a full stomach, not even up the building to her own entrance.

It was remarkable what the owl could stow away. Harry felt sure, without Hermione sitting here, Almyra would have come over already, to watch closely, to help him, knowing some special treat that never had crossed his mind.

Finally, Hedwig was fed sufficiently. He fetched her, stood up. "All right, you meat bag, let's go."

And surely enough, he hadn't made a dozen steps yet when Almyra was at his side. "Morning, Harry - morning, Hedwig, how was the night?" Turning to him, Almyra asked pleadingly, "Do you mind if I'm the one to take her upstairs?"

"No - certainly not." Harry laughed. "Look at her, she's waiting for it ... Take her - it gives me an opportunity to read that letter."

At once, Almyra grabbed the owl, which seemed more than satisfied with this change. Harry walked back to his seat, sat down, about to unfold the letter.

"Poor Hedwig - not even your owl is safe from her, Harry." Of course - Hermione had watched the scene.

Harry couldn't suppress a grin. "Yeah, right - Hedwig is so frightened, she keeps still while Almyra's pinching her all over."

Hermione looked horrified. "With needles??"

There was no sense in talking with Hermione about anything that involved Almyra. "No, not with needles," he answered, rolling his eyes.

Hermione seemed relieved, so Harry could finally open the letter from Mr. Ollivander.

Dear Mr. Potter,
answering your recent letter about sibling wands,
I suggest to read an essay written by one of my
ancestors. I think it was 1674, and the title is
'From Wandes of the Same nature'. You may
find it in every well-assorted library. Since then,
nobody of my knowledge has addressed this

issue with comparable thoroughness.
Should your own examination reveal new details,
I would be glad to hear from your discoveries.

My best wishes to your work,
Hazelard Ollivander

A source older than four hundred years?? Harry sighed, he would have to fight with this awful Olde English. On the other hand, maybe he should praise himself lucky - after all, it might have been Latin.

Well, this was certainly better than nothing. Without Mr. Ollivander's information, he would never have found that paper ... Would he find it? The Hogwarts library could surely be called *well-assorted*, except this had to wait till late afternoon before he would have an opportunity to ask Madam Pince.

In Transfiguration, it was McGonagall's turn to start something new. "Today," she said, "we will begin with the first exercises of transfiguring ourselves - at least, parts of ourselves."

Excited murmurs ran through the class.

In Harry's mind, a picture came up in which he was able to transfigure into an animal by himself. What would be his choice? Another dog? ... Certainly not a bird like Almyra - for him, air space seemed inseparably linked with broomsticks ... Not a cat either, at least not such a small one like McGonagall, on the other side, why not something bigger ... A black panther?

It would fit nicely with his hair, a panther with a lightning-shaped pattern on its forehead, except - it was so exotic, not practical at all. Sirius could walk everywhere without getting noticed ... What about a Centaur? Was it possible to transfigure into a Centaur - he wouldn't be able to use this shape in the streets of a city, still ...

McGonagall's next actions brought him back, made clear there was a long way to pass before he could think seriously about the animal of his choice.

She placed a large, wooden box on the table. The front side showed a hole, about two inches diameter. Then she turned to the class, waited for silence.

"Your first task is to get something out of that box. To do this, you have to transfigure your hand - or maybe your arm - into a shape long and thin enough to pass through this hole ... But still, you must be able to grab a small item and to hold it!"

Her hand was up - holding a glittery coin. "The first student who can manage will find this galleon inside - plus ten points for Gryffindor!"

Ron asked, "Can he keep it, Prof?"

McGonagall smiled. "Yes, Mr. Weasley - this will be the only time in Transfiguration that you can win something other than points."

New excitement among the students. Harry saw a determined look in Ron's face. However, his friend would have to beat Hermione, usually it was her role to win such contests.

McGonagall's hand held another coin. "The second student will find this here - a sickle, plus five points for Gryffindor."

The announcement was greeted with moaning and scoff remarks.

"Better than nothing," called Ron.

He was right, although - compared to the galleon, a sickle seemed ridiculous.

"The third - " McGonagall's hand was up with a new coin, this one coppery, "the third will find this knut, plus one point for Gryffindor."

Laughter in the class.

Seamus asked, "Prof - can we do some bidding on the winner? It'll add some more money to the game."

"Mr. Finnigan!" McGonagall looked indignant. "This is Transfiguration, not some turf. It's a good old tradition to offer one coin of each kind at this significant step in your magical education, but not more! ... Now - who wants to give it a try first?"

The students glanced at each other. How to do that without being taught?

Ron was the first to protest loudly, "Prof - you didn't show us which spell to use! - How can we take it out without knowing what to do?"

"Oh - that's part of the challenge - what did you expect?" The Headmistress showed an expression not too different from a Snape in humourous mood. "If someone has an idea, I will show him how to do it ... And this student has the first try."

Seconds later, the air was full of arms - everybody had an idea how to transform his arm into something that would catch the galleon.

Ron was the first, he wanted to reshape his arm into a long, thin one.

McGonagall demonstrated Ron's idea - her spidery arm went into the hole, came out with the coin, put it back into the box. Then it was Ron's turn.

He really managed to make his arm thin - unfortunately, he wasn't able to control his movements in this shape.

Next came Hermione. Her idea was a bird's claw - not unlike the falcon claws Harry had seen only yesterday.

Hermione could make her hand into claws immediately. She seized into the hole - everybody heard the coin drop inside the box, Hermione hadn't found the proper claw movements to hold it.

Neville Longbottom surprised everybody. His idea was to transform the arm into a snake, that snake should catch the galleon with its mouth.

McGonagall did it first. It was a spectacular view - a snake at the right shoulder of the Headmistress, gliding into the hole, returning with the coin in its fangs.

Then her arm was back. "Mr. Longbottom, please - your try."

Neville concentrated, murmured - really, his arm turned into a snake! Whispering went through the seats while Neville tried to command his snake arm.

He had difficulties. The snake turned its head left, right, not knowing what to do.

Stifled shouts of encouragement were heard, the sympathy of the class was on his side - Neville beating Hermione, that would be the day to remember forever!

The snake was close to the hole, testing, probing ...

"Yeah - do it, Neville!" Harry had called it, his eyes hanging on the scene.

The effect was disastrous. The snake turned around, looked in his direction ... Other heads had snapped around too, every student was looking at him!

Harry went deep red. Glancing at Ron, he whispered, "Did I ..."

"Yes," confirmed Ron. "I don't know what you said, but - for sure it wasn't English."

Neville's concentration was broken, anyway, his snake no longer followed any of his commands. A short wave of McGonagall's wand, and Neville's arm looked like an arm again.

Neville slumped back to his seat.

"I'm sorry, Neville ... I wasn't aware ..." Harry felt deeply embarrassed - not for his Parseltongue speaking, only because he had spoiled Neville's try.

"It's okay, Harry." Neville smiled, the only face in the class looking friendly at him. "I was surprised by myself that I could hold it so far - anyway, I don't think I would have taken the galleon."

Although Neville's attempt had been the one closest to success, no other student seemed ready to try the same - not with Harry in the same room.

Harry sat there, contrite, thinking about his stupid Parselmouth ... At least he would have something to be discussed with Almyra, she would be delighted - another proof how involuntarily his weird ability came and went ...

"Mr. Potter - I'm waiting for your try!"

He twisted up. McGonagall was looking at him.

He walked forward, feeling watched by many eyes ... Of course, they all expected him to repeat Neville's trick, only with more success ... Could he do it? Somehow, he felt no doubt, his snake would glide into the box and come out with the galleon ... And then? Should he give it to Neville? It wouldn't help much ...

"What do you want to try, Mr. Potter?" McGonagall looked expectantly.

"I'd like ... I want to try it with a Goblin hand."

A little surprise in her eyes, replaced by approval.

McGonagall's hand changed shape, showed long, thin fingers. The fingers went into the hole, stopped.

"A normal Goblin hand is still too thick - or the fingers are too short ... Just a second, Mr. Potter ..."

The hand narrowed more, now, the wrist was tiny. McGonagall seized into the box - some movement inside, then the fingers came out, the galleon between index and middle finger.

"Your turn, Mr. Potter."

He pointed his wand at his right arm. "*Gracilongioirem!*"

An awkward feeling, though not painful ... His fingers thinning, stretching, reaching almost twice their normal length, his wrist spidery, seemingly unable to hold these long fingers. He tried to move them. It worked! Funny feeling, as if his nails were endlessly long. Now let's see ...

The Goblin fingers went into the hole. He could feel the piece of wood on which the coin was placed, waiting to be won. There was the edge ... His feeling in the fingertips normal, he touched forward, felt the galleon ... Could he grab it? It was difficult, bending these long fingers - especially the thumb, not used to such weird proportions ... He had it!

Now the last part - holding the coin while these endless fingers were coming out ... In a second, he would have won ten points - yes, and a galleon ... A second later, the others would boo on him ... he knew it. For Hermione, it would be just another proof that a Voodoo curse enabled him to do things he couldn't otherwise - like beating her in a new spell.

Slowly, he moved his fingers out. When the tips with the coin reached the wood of the box, he let go. A clank - everybody in the class heard the coin dropping inside the box.

"Almost, Mr. Potter." McGonagall was looking at him ... Had she watched? It didn't matter - she wouldn't talk about it, also, she might understand.

He walked to his seat.

"All right," said the teacher, "the price is still waiting for you ... The only homework - train your skill! ... Next time, I hope these coins will find new owners."

* * *

Harry and Ron were in Divination. Generally speaking, Harry would agree any time that selecting this faculty could easily be rated as his biggest mistake in Hogwarts. Today, however, Divination offered one advantage that could hardly be overrated these days - Hermione was somewhere else.

Ron didn't cause a problem. While it was still unclear whether he believed in Hermione's version of things or accepted Harry's statement that his relation with Almyra was innocent, uncursed, and - most of all - his private business, at least Ron treated Harry like a normal human.

More, he refused to help Hermione in her quest of Harry's rescuing. Initially, Hermione had been able to gain Ron's support - until Harry had warned, "Ron - this is a second house-elves strike. That's all I'm saying." Since then, terms between Harry and Ron had returned to a slightly cooler version of normal.

Divination also ran a new topic, started a week before - Tarot cards. Professor Trelawney had introduced the cards and their meanings, now the students were ordered to learn at least their basic meaning.

Twenty-two Big Arcana, fifty-six Small Arcana - an awful lot of cards when, in addition to suit and value, each of them represented a complex pattern of meanings, hints, symbols, to be interpreted for good or bad depending on the question and on their position in a pattern. Compared to that, planetary courses and constellations looked straight and predictable.

So far, they had worked on simple divination patterns of three to five cards, not more. Today, Trelawney presented the most advanced pattern, called the *Celtic Cross*. It included eleven cards! To find the answer to a question, in particular a question that involved future events, each of these eleven cards had to be interpreted according to its function.

Working in teams of two, the students were ordered to lay out Celtic Crosses, to train their skill and their fluency of interpretation.

Professor Trelawney kept moving around, to listen and to help where required. As always, most of her attention was caught by Parvati Patil and Lavender Brown, shrieks of surprise and delight came from that table.

Neither Harry nor Ron took the cards seriously. True, Tarot had more appeal than tea leaves. It also felt more familiar than I Ging with its exotic remarks about crossing the big water, only this method suffered the same weakness as all the other techniques - predicting the future was a ridiculous concept.

Luckily, they had found a way to kill the time in a more amusing style. When talking the other day with Fred and George, the twins had shown them a game that had been played by generations of Hogwarts students. It was called *Parrot Tarot* or, simpler, *Sixty-Six*. A two-player game, and what was wonderful - it could be played in class! Of course, only so long as Tarot cards were natural items on a table.

The game required a full deck of Tarot cards - the reason why Harry and Ron had taken care to arrive with a spare deck, after all, their table had to look as if they were working hard on a Celtic Cross.

In Parrot Tarot, a player hand contained six cards, a thirteenth card, laid open, indicated trump. The second player in a trick had to follow suit, otherwise, he could play a trump card to make the trick.

Ace was highest in a suit but counted the least - one. King, Queen, Knight, Knave followed in descending order but rising point value, from two to five. Tens counted ten, Fives five - as much as a Knave, while the other cards had no point value. King and Queen of a suit formed a *Marriage*, which counted twenty, or twice that much for the Trump Marriage.

After every trick, the catching player could say "Stop", thereby ending a game. If he had sixty-six points or more, he scored once. Otherwise, his opponent scored twice.

These were the basic rules, covering just the Small Arcana with fourteen cards per suit. The Big Arcana added a flavour of bluff and poker.

Laid out before the next trick, any of them could double the point value - no matter which player would make it. Of course, normally it was the opening player who would bid that way, however his opponent could do the same. A Marriage could only be doubled with the Fool. The Magician, laid out after a game, would double the score.

By far the most malicious card was the Wheel of Fortune - playing it at the end of a game moved the score from the winner to the loser, with doubling and all.

Harry and Ron had laid out a Celtic Cross for cover and then, without even checking it, had started playing Parrot Tarot.

Ron was in the lead, almost beyond reach. When it was his turn to shuffle the cards, he touched the deck with his wand and whispered, "*Manglopaginae*", then, with a low rattle, the cards arranged themselves in a neat stack.

Harry, to his great annoyance, hadn't mastered the shuffling charm yet. When trying, the cards would spill all over the classroom. He wondered if Ron had learned a bit more than shuffling by random, although he had to admit, Ron kept winning games no matter who'd shuffled.

Ron dealt a new game, Pentangles was trump. Harry took his cards and arranged them. They should be good enough to close up a bit - King and Queen of Pentangles sitting side by side, two Big Arcana ready, one of them the Magician. Should be a quick blow.

He was about to open with the Knight of Cups when a voice from behind made him freeze.

"My - what a lovely set!" Professor Trelawney took the cards from Harry's hand, which suddenly felt powerless, and placed them on the table. Then she did the same with Ron's cards.

Her eyes showed amusement. "The Potter Parrot across the Weasley Wager ... I haven't seen this pattern for quite some time."

Heads were turning to the scene.

Ron, his face darkening, stared down at the table. Harry could feel - he didn't look any different.

Trelawney examined both hands more closely, then looked at Harry. "Dear, dear - what a pity - for once, the cards promised you luck, and then it's not going to happen ... Ts, ts."

Harry sat silently, waiting for the inevitable. Fred and George had warned them - in Hogwarts, being caught at playing cards in class meant detention.

Trelawney took her time, letting them sweat. Eventually, she said, "Detention - really, my dears, giving detention is such a mundane technique, it hardly fits my style ... Besides, the thought of you two cleaning up for me isn't exactly entertaining. As for the alternative, Mr. Filch's attitude in general - and toward Divination in particular - just prevents me from lending him a helping hand ... Not even yours."

No detention? Harry was gaining hope - but only for a moment.

"There's a better way," continued the witch. "It's called the Trelawney Treat ... Each of you will take a card from the talon, and its value will tell us how many pages I expect from you next Monday ... You will write an interpretation of this Celtic Cross here - the one you ignored so deliberately ... I'll lend you a book or two that may be helpful in the task."

Harry heard giggling around. Without turning, he knew most of it came from Parvati and Lavender.

Trelawney was reveling in the scene. "I'll be a sport," she said. "If the card has no point value, you come out free."

Both Harry and Ron looked at her with surprise. This came unexpected.

Trelawney's smile turned malevolently. "For a balance - if you catch a Big Arcana, it counts twenty ... Mr. Potter - pick your card, my dear."

Harry tried to make his fingers look steady. He grabbed half of the talon and turned it - the Five of Cups!

Exhaling deeply, he relaxed. Five pages - bad, however manageable.

"Mr. Weasley, please."

Without hesitating, Ron took the card from top of the talon and laid it open, looking triumphantly - the Nine of Bats!

"Close run, my dear ... Mr. Potter - five pages Monday morning ... You should have checked your Cross - even if it was just pretense, the cards should have warned you."

For the first time, Harry paid attention to their Celtic Cross.

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.-----.  
! !  
!Tower!  
! !  
'-----'  
.----- .-----  
! 8 ! ! 3 !
```

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! of ! ! of !
!Sword! !Pent.!
'-----' '-----'

.----- .----- .----- .----- .----- .-----
! ! ! 4 ! ! 5 ! !Knave! ! 8 ! !Queen!
!Force! ! of ! ! of ! ! of ! ! of ! ! of !
! ! !Cups ! !Sword! !Bats ! !Cups ! !Pent.!
'-----' '-----' '-----' '-----' '-----'

.----- .-----
! 3 ! ! 7 !
! of ! ! of !
!Sword! !Bats !
'-----' '-----'

```

Nominally, he had laid out the cross with by asking how to solve his trouble with Hermione. Now he wrote down the card values for his five-page homework. So far, the pattern didn't tell him anything.

For the rest of the hour, Harry felt in a bad mood. The expression in Ron's face, barely avoiding glee, was no help either.

While the other students left the tower, he waited for the book from Professor Trelawney. Coming back, he found Ron gone.

Today was Friday. Harry had planned an evening with some library research, with a closer inspection of Ollivander's essay, then a leisurely chat in the Gryffindor tower. Tomorrow would be his third interview with Almyra - that meant, if he wouldn't finish the paper this evening, it would spoil his Sunday thoroughly. What a bloody mess.

After lunch, equipped with sufficient parchments and even more rage, he went to the library. Who was sitting there? Hermione - probably studying some counter-curses she would try on him. He retreated quietly, climbed the stairs to the lesson room.

Five pages about a Celtic Cross, that would mean about two cards per page, in other words, droning on about each of the eleven cards for nearly a half-page.

It also meant, he had to write down his question, and Professor Trelawney would read it. So what - quarrels with Hermione Granger were nothing new to her. He examined Trelawney's book. *Treasure Tarot - Thousand Tricks to Tamper Tacky Tables, by Theophrastes Tuckery.* Thunder and tempest - this Tuckery tended to T's.

Yes, the Celtic Cross was mentioned, was even represented with a nice little diagram.

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.----- .
! 11 !
!Fact-!
! or !
'-----'

.----- .-----
! 5 ! ! 10 !
!Chan-! !Influ!
! ces ! ! ence!
'-----' '-----'

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.----- .----- .----- .----- .----- .-----
! 6 ! ! 2 ! ! 1 ! ! 3 ! ! 7 ! ! 9 !
!Past ! !Posi-! !Signi! !Nega-! !Futu-! !Hope/!
! ! ! tive! ! fier! ! tive! ! re ! ! Fear!
'-----' '-----' '-----' '-----' '-----' '-----'
.----- .-----
! 4 ! ! 8 !
!Roots! !Summ-!
! ! ! ary !
'-----' '-----'

```

Scanning through the book, Harry felt surprise. The author wrote pretty much to the point, gave examples, totally different from what Harry had expected in a book of the Divination teacher. So maybe it wouldn't take the full evening.

He began to write.

The first card, the Signifier, represented the question itself. He had asked, *How to solve the trouble with Hermione?*

What was the first card? ... *Five of Swords*. He browsed through the book ... Swords ... Five of Swords. *Superficial Knowledge* - well, you could say that twice. *Useless quarrel, based on insufficient information or bumbling*, said the book.

He could almost copy the text, it was a perfect fit, only he had to write down a few more personal details than he'd planned. Would Trelawney really read this paper? Not very likely ... Even so, writing it down felt almost as good as speaking it out aloud.

Next card. Number two, Positive Factors; it was - what? The *Four of Cups*. And this ... *Reflection*. The book said, *Learn to be alone without feeling lonely*. It said also, he should use the minor and not so minor disasters of his everyday life to think it over. He had done this already, there was no reason to do it again, this Trelawney Treat wouldn't change his mind - the scene this morning with Neville's snake arm had shown him again how other people would react hearing about the case study.

This settled, he only had to find a half-page of nice words about positive factors.

The third card should be simpler - Negative Factors. In the cross, the *Knave of Bats* occupied this position - *Playing with the Fire*. Little surprise, Hermione and a challenge, challenged by another girl - suddenly, Harry had an image of Hermione capturing him and then starting to de-curse him, or to make him drink some dangerous potion.

Well, it wouldn't be that simple ... He wouldn't fall to an Imperius curse ... Of course, she could stun him, only a stunned person wouldn't drink a potion ... After all, this Tarot seemed less stupid than he had expected, the possibilities of what might happen could easily fill an entire page.

He came the the fourth card, representing the Roots. This was the *Three of Swords* in his cross - *Learning Processes*. True, he had learned how to live with Hermione's attitude. It had taken time, much more time than with Ron, there had been a lot of ups and downs.

Had Hermione learned too? Yes, he had to admit that for her, ignoring a rule, even breaking a rule, had been a new and probably painful experience. Okay, now she had to learn something else - that he, Harry, wasn't a book, lying open to be read at demand.

Chances, the fifth card, had the *Eight of Swords* ... actually a lot of swords in that pattern. *Chances* - or *Danger*, depending on how he preferred to look at it. The book said, *You become aware you have many abilities but you are tied*.

Was he tied? Sure - he was tied to Hogwarts, Hermione also, a rather trivial fact. Luckily, the previous cards had given sufficient text, this one didn't provide much.

Number six stood for the past. What was the difference between Roots and Past? He didn't know, maybe the card would help. A Big Arcana - one of two in the pattern. *Force* - representing *Vitality*. The book spoke about challenges, about a tendency to overestimation ... Was he prone to it? Counting the results, the answer was no.

Was Hermione prone to it? It couldn't be denied entirely, the story with the time-turner gave a lesson. She had started Divination, only to drop it soon.

He didn't want to write that, there was a slight possibility Trelawney might read it. So he had to find some other blah-blah.

Then what was lying in the future? The *Eight of Cups* in that position - *The Mystery of the River*, whatever this meant. He had to leave familiar ground, reach new horizons. Adversary, according to the book, was a possibility to miss the point.

That wasn't the future, that was present - Hermione had missed the point entirely. Well, certainly so, because he hadn't told her. New horizons - he had no idea what it could mean for him, however, it wasn't complicated to write some nonsense which filled almost another page.

That brought him to card number eight, Summary. The *Seven of Bats* ... what was this? ... *Energy* or *Activism*, depending on how to look at it. It didn't tell him anything new, in particular, it didn't answer his question.

But then, had he really expected an answer from Tarot? Not initially, only after the first cards had matched so precisely, he had developed some expectation. Stupid of him - he only had to fill five pages.

Eight done, three to go, slightly more than one page missing. The ninth card stood for Hopes and Fears. This was ... the *Queen of Pentangles* - stood for *Rooted in the Middle*. It was clear as mud, checking the book, Harry found statements to fit everywhere and nowhere.

In this case, a little copying had to fill the lines. At least, it took him to the last page.

The tenth place in the Celtic Cross represented Influence from the Environment. In his pattern, the *Three of Pentangles* filled this position - *Profession* or *Nomination*. Suddenly the cards fit again, his nomination as the subject of a case study had started the trouble.

According to this card's function, it would also solve the problem, would at least help solving it. Certainly so - provided you believed in Tarot ... At any rate, a keyword to fill another half-page.

The eleventh and last card was supposed to represent a special factor that might have an impact, for the better or for the worse. What was it ... oh yes, the *Tower*, the worst card in Tarot - *Shock* or *Release*, depending on how you looked at it. The titles could be combined, liberation through a shock, this should be good to fill the last lines.

Done. He was ready to meet Professor Trelawney Monday morning.

Had he learned anything how to solve his problem with Hermione? - If so, he wasn't aware. Anyway, he could test his new knowledge right now, there was enough time left of the evening to join the others in the Gryffindor tower.

* * *

After a late and leisurely breakfast next morning, Harry strolled to the library. He wanted to have a look into the Ollivander essay. To his surprise and dismay, there was no such paper in the Hogwarts library.

"Let me check it with my colleague in Beauxbatons," said Madam Pince. "They might have a sample ... Although I have little hope - after all, if an English wizard's paper isn't found in *our* library, how should it be available in a French school? ... You may ask again on Tuesday, Mr. Potter - until then, I'll know whether Beauxbatons can help ... If not - well, then, only the NLML can help you."

"The what?"

"The NLML - National Library of Magic Literature; what's not found there simply doesn't exist ... It's in London, where else?"

"Can we borrow it from them?"

Madam Pince laughed. "Oh no, Mr. Potter - none of these books ever leaves that building ... Either the book is quite common, then you can read it in any normal library - like ours, or the book is rare and precious, then, the only way is their Reader Service ... But that's expensive."

"Reader Service - how does it work, Madam Pince?"

The face of the librarian witch was shining, obviously, she would leave Hogwarts immediately when offered a job in the NLML. "They have spectator cabins - to read a book, you rent such a cabin ... Then, the book is placed on a table in a protected room, and a spectator camera transfers the picture of the current page ... Very nice, this system - you can magnify the pages, you can zoom ..."

"And what if I want to turn the page?"

"You press a button," replied Madam Pince. "Each cabin - or each book - has an associated servant who turns the page ... These people are trained to take care of the sensible material."

"Servants!" Harry felt consternation. "You mean - wizards?"

"No, Mr. Potter," laughed Madam Pince, "not wizards - house-elves!"

Another information he better didn't tell Hermione. Well - currently, there was small risk he would spill any secret to her.

"There's still another possibility," explained Madam Pince. "The NLML has produced some spectator movies of important books ... These movies can be rented - they need spectators with a stand-by function - for what I've heard, all new systems offer that, so our own spectator should do - however, Mr. Potter - I don't expect this essay to be found in the list of available movies."

Harry thanked the librarian and left.

He wondered how expensive this Reader Service might be - sitting in a cabin for hours, the poor house-elf somewhere down in the building, waiting for the next button press ... it didn't matter, he would never get the permission for a visit in London ... If the result on Tuesday was as expected, he would have to contact Drilencu.

Coming to the lunch table, Harry found his seat occupied - by Charlie. The only seat left free was at the other side of the table, right next to Hermione.

What was worse - sitting next to her or looking into her face? Anyway - he was hungry.

"Hi, Charlie ... How are your dragons?"

"Thanks for asking, Harry - good so far, except for the Chinese Fireball - she's a little cold."

"Cold - what does it mean?"

Hermione, at Harry's side, snorted. Probably she knew, probably she thought every fifth-grader should know - well, probably she was right ...

"She doesn't breathe fire," replied Charlie.

Ron giggled. "Shouldn't be Harry's problem ... If he needs a Chinese Fireball breathing fire, he'll find supply here in the building."

Harry could grin at that - even ostentatiously so, might Hermione have something to feel upset about.

Charlie chuckled. "Ron - if it ever happens someone's cursing that big mouth of yours, you shouldn't be surprised."

"No, I won't," agreed Ron, then his grinning went broader. "As long as it's just the mouth ... Other people - much politer than me, actually - are suffering from full-body curses."

Charlie didn't understand. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Ron pointed. "Harry - he's cursed by a Voodoo witch ... ask Hermione, she'll tell you everything about it."

Smiling, Charlie examined Harry. "He looks quite normal ... Harry, where did you meet a Voodoo witch?"

Harry felt uneasy, didn't know what to answer.

Ron solved the problem for him. "You met her, Charlie - at the ball ... It's Almyra Benedict."

Charlie burst out laughing. Having calmed down again, he said, "That's a coincidence ... To tell the truth, I wanted to ask her for the next ball ... What do you think, Harry - is this still a good idea?"

Again, someone else was faster answering for him - Hermione. "The question is whether she'll accept. - I wouldn't be surprised if she's already set her mind who'll be her ball partner for Beauxbatons."

Charlie's eyes narrowed a bit. "After this profound advice from two sides, I'd like to hear it from the people you're talking about." He looked at Harry. "What's your comment, Harry?"

This time, Harry could answer for himself. "Don't worry about me," he said, "neither because of Voodoo nor because of my ball partner - it'll be Cho ... So - if Al says no, it's for some other reason."

Charlie eyed him. "Al, huh? ... Sounds as if I should ask you to ask for me ... You seem to know her quite well."

"This has nothing to do with - er, balls and so," replied Harry.

"It's Harry's big mystery," explained Ron in a dramatic voice. "He won't tell anybody."

Charlie glanced at his brother. "Listening to you - this seems the best proof Harry's perfectly normal ... I wouldn't do it either."

Harry felt pleased, more so when Hermione produced another snort. If Charlie would ask him ... He had a better idea. He would meet Almyra shortly after lunch for the third interview, then he would tell her to inform Charlie. Every unprejudiced person, knowing about the study, was a help.

Entering the interview room, he found Almyra sitting at the table, busy with her parchments.

She looked up, smiled. "Hello, Harry."

"Hi ... Al - did you meet Charlie?"

"Charlie?" Almyra blushed a bit. "No - why?"

"Oh - I thought." He was unsure whether it was appropriate to announce the news before Charlie had talked with Almyra, then realized - any more keeping of information would only create a real chaos. "Well - er, we talked at lunch, and Ron was joking about me - you know, Hermione's obsession with me under a Voodoo spell ... Anyway, Charlie said he wanted to invite you for the Beauxbatons ball ..."

Almyra blushed more.

"... and then Hermione came with her nonsense, and Charlie asked me what ... But of course I wouldn't tell at the table ... What I'm trying to say, if - if you talk with Charlie, and Charlie asks about me - please tell him about the study, and that this information is only for his ears ... He'll understand immediately."

Meanwhile, Harry's cheeks felt as flushed as Almyra's were looking.

"Okay, Harry." Almyra didn't glance up.

"There's something else I have to tell you - it has to do with the case study, so I guess you should start that steno pen first."

"What is it?"

"I used Parseltongue again."

Almyra's embarrassment disappeared in an instant. When the pen was activated, Harry explained what had happened in the Transfiguration class. He finished, "... I felt like an idiot - Neville, he of all people!"

"Isn't there any sign telling you that you're talking a different language?"

"No - I don't hear it ... I have to ask other people whether it was English or Parselmouth ... it's a nuisance, really!"

"I think I know why," said Almyra. "You learned it still before you could talk normal English - that means, it's even more natural to you than your *mother* language - and this is of course a strong indicator that you've learned it - better, received it, when Voldemort attacked you - when you were a baby."

Harry made a face. As Almyra had told him, this interview would concentrate on that accident, on his memory of it which had developed through many encounters - with Dementors, with Voldemort, with dreams ... It would be awful, he was sure of that.

Almyra saw his expression. "Relax, Harry - the interview won't be as bad as you'd expect ... I've prepared something - a little surprise."

"Please - not another surprise ... That's the last thing I need, really."

Almyra's face was shining. "This one's helpful - it was clear to me how painful it would be for you, talking about this event ... So I got some help, a technique to calm you down ..."

Seeing Harry's expression, she added, "No - not Voodoo, it's a standard technique in medical examinations ... Harry, if you want, I can put you in a trance."

"A trance? - What ..."

"It calms down the patient - more, it activates a memory that's not available when fully awake ... You're not dazed, not sleeping - it's some kind of hypnotization, like a mild version of the Imperius curse."

"In this case, it may not work," said Harry.

"Why not?"

"I'm immune from the Imperius - nobody can curse me that way."

"Really? - Not even ..."

"No." Harry looked grim. "Not even Voldemort."

Almyra seemed impressed. "Well - it's *not* the Imperius curse, it's totally different ... Anyway, there's just one way to find it out. - But first, medical ethics require that you agree. ... Do you?"

"Sure."

"This was the unofficial version. - Now comes the official one."

Almyra started the steno pen, then said, "This is for the record. - Harry, you have been informed that a trance is unharmed but makes the patient speak out things he might not speak about when fully awake ... Do you confirm that?"

"Yes, I know."

"Do you agree to be put in a trance and then interrogated by me, Almyra Benedict - about your accident as a baby?"

"Yes, I agree."

"Thank you." Almyra stopped the pen, took her wand. "Harry, find a comfortable position on that chair, so your head isn't lolling around ... Ready?"

He nodded.

The wand pointed at him. "*Mesmerisio!*"

The room dizzied. Harry's view lost focus, Almyra's image faded, melted into a diffuse mist ... He was nowhere ... Voices? No - a single voice, echoing in - where? Maybe his mind ... Disoriented, he followed that voice, having a direction where to turn ... The voice grew louder, stopped - but he knew how to reach it, his mind crossing a shapeless space, he could feel a presence, somehow familiar, aimed toward it ... Closed in.

He was near it ... all he had to do was to make contact.

The mist faded, contours appeared, colours ... A room. A fireplace, fire burning in it, a chair - empty, put aside ... he had seen this place once. In front of the fireplace, on a hearth rug - a snake! He had seen her too ...

"Harry Potter."

The snake spoke to him! A large snake, a brilliant pattern covering the body, the head slightly up in the air, two eyes, motionless, staring at ... him?

"Who are you?"

"My master calls me Nagini ... You may use this name also, it's as good as any other."

"Where are we?"

"This is the place to which you are invited for quite a while, Harry Potter ... And you came - except it's only your self that came ... Why didn't you bring a body with you? Then I could show you the other rooms."

Harry tried to move, or to turn his head. There wasn't a head to be moved, his perspective was fixed toward the gigantic snake. But he could speak, or maybe just think, whatever - the snake understood. And he could remember ...

"It's safer that way," he replied. "I remember the last time we met - you couldn't await eating my body ... Didn't work out, did it?"

"My master intended to kill you, I was waiting for your corpse. It would have been rightfully mine ... But you are alive, Harry Potter, because my master failed again."

The snake spoke almost without emotion, only her last words seemed to indicate contempt.

"Your master - that's another reason for me to stay away. He would kill me on the spot."

The snake's voice was definitely sneering. "He might try - certainly with the same result as before, or worse ... Even if he's successful, a surprise will await him."

"What do you mean?"

"Your blood helped him to come alive again. Killing you is the worst he can do."

"I don't believe you. You're just trying to get hold of me."

"You came at your own. You ask - I answer your questions. Believe it or not, it doesn't matter."

He wouldn't agree to that - not for himself, and he had his doubts it was true for the snake.

"Where is he?"

"My master is out, doing what he called 'Collecting a guest that needs some convincing.' He will not be back before the night, or the morning ... We have time to talk, Harry Potter."

Trying again, he registered at least one thing was true. He wasn't able to change anything at his state. "About what?"

"Possibilities. Plans. Do you want to kill Voldemort?"

Certainly, except ... "What I want is one thing - what's possible is something different. Why do you ask?"

"For you, Harry Potter, it is possible to kill my current master - if you can do it. Then, you can become my new master."

"Why should I do that?" That'd be the day, thought Harry, appearing in Hogwarts with a snake, chatting with her during lunch. "I might as well set you free - you won't be the first snake I set free."

"It is my nature to serve a master - and to be rewarded by him. Voldemort uses my services, my liquids, while his rewards are little. He has broken many promises - you, Harry Potter, are the better master for me."

"You would betray Voldemort? ... That's hard to believe."

"My master commands me. I have no choice. It doesn't mean I have to think what he thinks. My willpower is bound, but my spirit is free."

A serpent, said the Bible, invented the first lie. Harry said, "If Voldemort would instruct you to catch me with this story, you'd say the same - right?"

"Yes."

"Then how could I find out whether it's you speaking or the command of your master?"

"I don't know." The snake seemed quite indifferent at that question. "Perhaps you cannot ... It's my own spirit now."

"Can you prove it?"

"No. But you came unexpected, my master had no instructions how to treat you, or your bodiless self."

Good argument, that. However, hard evidence looked different. "When he's back," asked Harry, "will you tell him that I've been here?"

"You are here."

Could he change it? Again, he tried to move, or to change his perspective. No success. If he couldn't move, what could he do to return, or to reach another place ... He tried a new approach, to disappear without a specific target.

Without thinking of any particular place, he concentrated on *not to be here*.

Nagini's contours wavered, the place was fading, then he heard a voice ... Was it Nagini again? He couldn't recognize the voice, if this turned out to be Nagini, he had to try once more ... Passing the space again, he oriented himself toward the voice, followed its calling ... Felt closer, near ... Another room, different - no fireplace ... A face, hanging above him, two faces ... His focus returned, more, his body sense - he was sitting in the lesson room, the two faces above his own were those of Madam Pomfrey and Almyra.

Almyra looked frightened, desperate. The doctor witch was shaking him, slapping his face ...

"Ouch! - Madam Pomfrey - no!"

The slapping stopped. "Finally - he's back." Madam Pomfrey turned to Almyra. "Go - get his Headmistress."

Almyra hurried to the door, disappeared.

Madam Pomfrey examined Harry's eyes. She held a finger before his face. "Look at that finger." The finger moved to both sides.

Harry followed its movement for a moment. "I'm okay," he said. "You can stop it."

"That's what I like most - patients telling me what to do." But Madam Pomfrey's voice was friendly. "Mr. Potter - what happened to you?"

"I was ..." A thought struck Harry. "How long have I been off?"

"Since I'm here, trying to awake you - about five minutes ... Altogether - I don't think it was more than a quarter of an hour ... Now tell me, young man - did you feel something while you were off?"

"Er - yes, I spoke with a snake."

"A snake!" It stopped Madam Pomfrey's questions for a moment - whatever she had expected, his answer was something she wasn't prepared for.

A sound came from the door, next second, McGonagall rushed into the room. "Mr. Potter - Harry - are you okay?" Anxiety was visible in McGonagall's eyes.

Before Harry could answer, a new sound from the door. "Harry! - are you okay?"

It was Hermione. Had she been lurking somewhere outside this room?

Before he could answer both questions at once, Almyra's voice yelled through the room. "GET LOST!" She was looking furiously at Hermione, her hand ready to catch her wand.

Hermione glanced at Almyra, back at Harry, then at McGonagall. "Professor - she has cursed Harry - she's a Voodoo witch - she's doing it all the time ..."

"Miss Granger! - Stop that nonsense!"

"It's true!" Hermione was pointing at him, an instant later at Almyra. "Look - she's hurt him! - This is some Voodoo ritual - except she's messed up ..."

McGonagall looked almost as furious as Almyra. "I say stop! - Miss Granger - one more word of this rubbish, and you'll get detention. Do you hear me?"

"But ... what's she doing here - with Harry?"

"Miss Benedict is doing a case study of Parseltongue, and Mr. Potter is helping her - it's certainly not difficult to see that he *is* the case. This is none of your business, Miss Granger, but - obviously there's no other way to stop your madness. And now, please let us alone - NOW!"

Hermione stopped, as if hit by a blow. She looked at McGonagall, finding a sparkling glare, at Harry, finding a cold stare.

She turned. Slowly, like dazed, shoulders sagging more with every step, she walked to the door, disappeared through the frame.

After a second, Almyra hurried to close the door. The faces of the three women turned to Harry again.

"I'm fine," he said. Toward Almyra, he asked, "What happened here?"

"After the trancing spell, I started the pen. Then I asked you a question, and you gave an answer - it's recorded. Then ... before I could ask another question, you started to - I think it was Parseltongue, Harry - a hissing - not a normal language ... Of course, the steno pen didn't record it ... First I thought it was the answer to my question, but it didn't stop ... You were - er, talking, stopping, talking - always in Parseltongue ... It sounded - well, frightening."

Almyra looked guilty. She, the calm scientiest, had felt frightened of her study object.

"And then?"

"After a few minutes, I thought I'd better wake you - didn't know what was going on ... I said the spell that was supposed to finish the trance, but you didn't stop - nothing changed ... I tried again, and then - I went for Madam Pomfrey."

McGonagall turned to the doctor witch. "How did you wake him, Poppy?"

"I'd like to know for myself." Madam Pomfrey looked doubting. "See - Minerva, I did the usual spells in such a situation - only he didn't wake ... When he came back, it seemed more because he was fed up with my treatment, rather than from the effect ... He says he spoke with a snake."

Four eyes were growing in astonishment, although with different undertones.

"A snake?" McGonagall, suspiciously.

"A snake?" Almyra, excitedly.

Harry stood up. "Yes ... Her name's Nagini - Voldemort's snake ... I guess we should see Du - Professor Dumbledore - otherwise, I have to tell it again."

Toward Almyra, he added, "Take your steno pen, for recording."

Madam Pomfrey said, "I don't think you'll need me any longer - Mr. Potter, if there are any symptoms left - headache, for example - contact me ... Otherwise - be careful with trances."

Almyra remembered her manners. "Madam Pomfrey - thank you for your quick help ... I wouldn't have known what to do without you."

The witch showed a dry smile. "The same I did - waiting until this stubborn young man felt like coming back to us normal people ... Bye."

Almyra collected her parchments and pen utensils, then they headed toward Dumbledore's office. Passing the door, Harry checked around, he wouldn't have been surprised to see Hermione at some corner. But she wasn't there.

Dumbledore smiled at their entrance. "Minerva - lately, it seems to develop into a habit - Saturday afternoon visits from you, and Harry - only the third visitor changes ... Miss Benedict - how are you?"

"Good afternoon, Professor Dumbledore."

Almyra looked around. Suddenly, her troubled face lighted up - she had spotted the phoenix, which gave a sweet sound of welcome, then fluttered through the room. For a second, it looked as if Fawkes would come to Almyra, then it changed course and landed on Harry's shoulder.

"Hello, Fawkes." Grinning, Harry whispered to Almyra, "That's the only bird preferring me, even if you're around."

They sat down.

Dumbledore said, "I'm eager to hear which exciting news brought you here, my dear Minerva - good news, I hope."

"I don't know yet, Albus." McGonagall pointed at Almyra. "Miss Benedict can explain the first part."

Dumbledore looked toward Almyra. "May it have to do with your Graduate Work, Miss Benedict?"

"Yes, Professor Dumbledore ... We - that is, Harry and I - had started another interview - I wanted to ask him about his accident as a baby, and - to make it easier for him, I offered a trance ... Yes, and he accepted, so I tranced him ... But then, he started to speak Parseltongue, and I couldn't put him back. Then I called for Madam Pomfrey, and she came, and then Harry woke up ... Well, I think that's all I can say."

Dumbledore's expectant look changed tack. "Where have you been, Harry?"

"In a house - in Voldemort's house. ... I spoke with Nagini - that's his snake."

The amusement faded from the Headmaster's face. "Please tell us everything you can remember, Harry."

"Yes, Professor Dumbledore. I think I can remember all ... I asked Almyra to bring her steno pen, so she can record it."

Watched by Dumbledore, Almyra activated the pen, then Harry tried to explain how it had felt to cross that shapeless space, and how he had followed a voice that was calling. He repeated the conversation with Nagini - not always the exact words, however the meaning.

When he had finished, Dumbledore asked, "Were you called back, Harry?"

"No, it didn't feel like that." He tried to find the right words. "It wasn't like when you called me back from that - er ..."

"Pensieve?"

"Yes, the pensieve ... When Nagini said, 'You are here', I tried to move - to go to another place ... First it didn't work. Then - then I tried to be *not there*, and this brought me back into this - this nothing ... Then I heard a voice - I wasn't sure who it was - could have been Nagini again, but I thought I'd give it a try, and I followed that voice ... Yes, and then I was back in the room, and Madam Pomfrey was shaking me."

McGonagall said, "Poppy said it wasn't her treatment that brought him back, Albus - she thinks it was his own decision."

"What do you think, Harry?"

"There was no pulling ... I heard the voice only after I'd left that room ... In this nothing, I didn't feel anything - only when I woke up, I felt her slapping my face."

"You could see only this single picture, Harry - is this correct?"

"Yes, Professor Dumbledore ... It wasn't the first time I saw this room."

Suddenly, a glitter was in Dumbledore's eyes. "When did you see it before?"

"That's what I'm trying to remember ..."

Dumbledore calmed himself. "A standard means would be a trance to help your memory, Harry - but it's obvious that we cannot use this ... Harry, have you been in that room personally?"

Harry shook his head. "No - I couldn't say how the other parts of ..." Suddenly he remembered, his eyes getting bigger.

Dumbledore had watched his expression. "When was it, Harry?"

"The dream ... Wormtail, Nagini - this old man ... I woke up because my scar was hurting so badly."

"When did you have this dream, Harry?"

"Last year - before terms started ... I was still in Privet Drive - a few days before the Quidditch World Cup Final."

Dumbledore nodded. "This old man - what do you know about him?"

Scanning his memory, Harry was absent-mindedly stroking Fawkes, with an effect very much like what Almyra had planned with her trance - he felt calm, could think clearly ... Yes of course!

"I saw him again - he came out of Voldemort's wand ... He was the first who came out - no, the first was Cedric, then him - he was a Muggle!"

"And your dream was when Voldemort killed him - right, Harry?"

"Yes, I think so." The touch on Fawkes' feathers was smoothing the memory. "It was the killing that made my scar hurt."

"Good, Harry - that's enough." Dumbledore showed excitement. "With this information, we can do a little research - I guess we can ..." He interrupted himself. "Harry, Miss Benedict - I think you'll agree a trance is not appropriate in this case - not as a means to ease an interview."

"Of course not, Professor Dumbledore." Almyra seemed frightened at the thought of a second try.

Harry smiled. "Fawkes - that's the best tranquilizer ... safe, reliable ..."

Dumbledore studied him. "Harry - would you be ready to visit Nagini again?"

McGonagall's head snapped up. "Albus! - You shouldn't do that! ... Imagine - what if he's caught there?"

Dumbledore patted her hand. "Don't worry, Minerva - let's hear what he thinks of it."

Harry hesitated. "Well - I wouldn't do it for fun and leisure, Professor."

"Agreed, Harry - there must be a good reason." Dumbledore didn't smile. "More - you must feel safe ... If you think it was just by a lucky accident that you came back, we won't try again ... On the other hand, if you think you have enough control to return to us, calling you - I would like to know for which *guest* Voldemort was out."

A frightening thought ... In his own style, Dumbledore appeared as merciless as their enemy ...

An idea crossed Harry's mind. "Professor Dumbledore - If I say yes, would you agree to lend us Fawkes for an interview? - With him on my shoulder, it feels as if I can walk through my memory like through a library."

Dumbledore looked pleased. "I'll do more ... I'll lend you this office for the interview about the accident - provided you accept me as a silent listener in the background ... Miss Benedict?"

"Er - yes, Professor Dumbledore." The thought of the Headmaster listening to her performance wasn't exactly calming Almyra's nerves, everybody could see that, while the prospect of meeting Fawkes again, and for a longer while, was obviously exciting for her.

"In this case - " Dumbledore was serious again, "can we do it tomorrow? - I'd suggest, still before lunch - it might be the proper time to meet Nagini alone, without Voldemort around ... It should be done like today - in the same room, with Miss Benedict as the one to trance you, Harry ... Eleven o'clock, is this convenient for you?"

Almyra nodded. Harry nodded also, although not very excitedly. He hadn't expected such an early repetition, however, Dumbledore was right - meeting Nagini without Voldemort being present in the same room was certainly preferable.

Almyra collected her parchments, then she and Harry walked down the staircase, leaving McGonagall to discuss the plan, or to argue more with Dumbledore about the uncalculable risks involved.

Reaching the hall, Almyra looked at him. "I'm sorry, Harry - if I had known what would happen, I'd never tried it."

"It's not your fault - how could you know?"

Almyra shook her head. "That's no excuse. - It *is* my fault, Harry - in research, not knowing what will take place is the worst that can happen ... I should have been suspicious ... Remember, you've warned me - you're immune from the Imperius, you said ... Only I didn't listen. And now ..."

Almyra sounded so miserable, Harry had the feeling another girl would have started to cry. He did something he couldn't have done with anyone else - he took her shoulders and turned her toward him.

"Al - cheer up! ... I should have passed Fawkes over to you, then you'd feel okay now ... I feel okay - thanks to him."

"Really?" A shimmer of hope in her eyes.

"Yes, really ... Fawkes has helped me so often - with him, the interview will be better than a table conversation ..." He giggled. "Talking about table conversations, look what we have - Dumbledore has a trace to follow - we get Fawkes when we're going to try again - and there's someone who's no longer moving around and shouting, Voodoo, Voodoo!"

Almyra's jaws tightened. "Hermione ..."

"Give it a break," said Harry. "You know - she's still my friend ... It'll be an interesting conversation with her - I'm sure."

Almyra asked, "Who's going to tell Cho?"

Without hesitation, Harry answered, "That's your job! ... A fair share - I have to talk with Hermione, and you have to talk with Cho."

"Oh God - she's going to kill me," muttered Almyra.

Harry grinned. "Well - to quote somebody, if she raises her wand - run."

* * *

He had to find Hermione - the sooner, the better. In a few hours, the events of this afternoon might appear totally different in her memory, he had to talk with her as long as their both versions matched - as far as this was ever possible.

She wasn't in the Great Hall. She wasn't in the Entrance Hall. Up to the Gryffindor tower - nothing. For a second, he considered asking Ginny to look whether a girl was sitting in the girls' toilets, then dismissed it, there were still one or two possibilities.

Library - crowded, while no Hermione. Ron's office? - Unlikely. Viktor? - Maybe ... Another possibility struck him.

He walked to the lesson room, opened, peeked in - there she was, sitting at the table, books around, although it didn't look as if she was making noticeable progress.

Watched by Hermione, he crossed the distance, sat down at the table. "Hello, Hermione ... I was looking for you."

"Harry - " Her voice sounded as unhappy as she looked, still red around the eyes. "What happened? - Are you okay?"

"I'm all right ... Although that's not what I wanted to talk with you about ... Okay - before another rumour is spreading ... Al tried to trance me for an interview - about the accident when I got my scar. It failed ... No - it didn't fail, the effect was I found myself talking with Nagini - Voldemort's snake."

"Oh my God - Harry, you must ..."

"CUT IT!"

Hermione twisted, looked as if being hit.

"We've been with Dumbledore until some minutes ago. He wants me to try it again - tomorrow ... And that's all about what happened to *me* today, Hermione - know what I mean?"

"Yes."

"Then let's come to the other big event of today - the scene with you and Almyra and McGonagall."

Hermione reddened. "Er - I don't think I want to talk about it ... Not now ..."

Harry's voice turned sharp. "That's all you have to say??"

"No - probably not." Hermione was glancing at the table, one hand kneading the other. "Only - I don't know what to say ..."

"That's a new experience, huh? ... Well, those who climb highest fall deepest ... Anyway, I could offer a few suggestions what to say."

"Harry, I ... I'm sorry ... I didn't want to ..."

"See - not bad for starters, Hermione - sounds quite okay to me, so far."

Some of the old defiance returned in her face. "But - why didn't you tell me? It would have saved ..."

"Are you trying to blame me??"

Her face reddened again. "No - sorry."

"If it makes you feel better - I had a similar conversation with Drilencu, not so long ago - only today I'm on the other side of the table ... So I can quote him."

Hermione looked up. "What ..."

"He said, 'Accepted, Mr. Potter' ... So I say - accepted, Hermione."

"Thank you, Harry ... but, please - why didn't you tell me about this study?"

He shrugged. "I was in no hurry to come with this news ... Parseltongue - the reactions of you and Ron hadn't been that much better than those of other students ... You looked at me as if I had a disease - so I didn't feel like bursting out at the next breakfast."

Hermione's expression made clear - for her, it was still closer to a disease than to good health.

"It wasn't planned that way," said Harry, "not as a lesson in minding your own business - although I don't mean *Forget it*, not at all - only, when we met in the corridor and you asked me what I was doing with Al ... Do you remember what I said?"

Hermione nodded.

"It was the truth - only you were just too clever - knew better ... Okay, I thought, if she's that smart, let her guess ... And guessing you did - oh my, how you did!"

The red in Hermione's face deepened. "Please ..."

"Okay - I'm not going to rub it in ... But that's all - I didn't lie to you, I always said the truth - only it wasn't the full truth."

After a moment of silence, Harry asked, "What I'd like to know - Hermione, what did you think was going on?"

"Well ... " Hermione's head was glowing. "Before ... Before that evening we met, when I was watching her toward you - or you toward her ... It was always so awkward, like people very embarrassed - especially from her side ... And then, suddenly, you two were talking, and laughing ... I just took the wrong conclusion."

Harry chuckled. "And then you heard the word Voodoo, and love potions ... and it just fit so nicely - right?"

"Yes."

But Hermione couldn't be without a little negotiating. "On the other side, Harry - you didn't mind heating it up ... Remember that scene with your owl? - You said she's pinching her all over!"

Harry grinned. "Even that's been true - really ... If you want to know what it means - ask Almyra."

"Oh God ..." Hermione glanced to the door, back at him, her voice carefully. "Say, Harry - is she really - you know, a Voodoo witch?"

"Her mother is a Voodoo priestess - it's her trade, doing this magic or the other for Muggles ... As a kid, Almyra had to do errands for her, so she developed some tricks for her own protection - we've seen some of them, remember?"

How well did Hermione remember!

"Otherwise," said Harry, "I don't think she's hanging to it ... Al's too much involved with her scientific work - takes all of her time and interest."

"Now, now," protested Hermione, "a sixth-year student and *scientific work* - Harry, that's a bit early to call it like this."

Harry's voice was suddenly cool. "I see - the lesson held for just five minutes, Hermione - then once more, you know better than myself what I should say."

Her arms flew up. "No - please, no - I didn't ... Yes, I did, but ... Sorry, Harry, it won't happen again."

He grinned. "Be realistic, Hermione - let's say it won't happen before tomorrow morning, then it's okay."

She smiled guiltily. "Yes ... So you really think what she's doing is serious work?"

"Hermione, if you want to know - ask her, then make up your own judgment."

"Oh no - how could I do that? ... She'll spit at me, or laugh at me ... It's so embarrassing ..."

"You can't keep it that way, Hermione - do we agree on that?"

"Yes, certainly - if I'd know how to do it ..." She looked at him hopefully. "Harry - can you help me?"

"Sure."

Her face lighted up. "Really? - Oh, super, Harry, would you go the her and ..."

"No."

"But ..." Hermione looked flabbergasted. "Didn't you just say you could help me?"

"Yes."

"Then why ..." Hermione stopped herself, then smiled. "Okay, Harry - got it ... Sorry, I did it again - how long did it hold - two minutes? - At least, this time I noticed by myself."

He sat there, grinning.

"Dear Harry ..."

He laughed. "Please - no overkill!"

"Good." She was serious now. "Harry - what could you do to help me?"

"Just to be sure - you're ready to apologize to her - right?"

Hermione nodded, not looking happy.

"Then I have a suggestion - actually, it's better than it sounds."

"Better?" With a careful voice, almost timidly, Hermione said, "Harry - it didn't sound yet."

He grinned. "I know - I said it in advance, to support somebody's learning process."

"Oh ... Please tell me."

Harry held up a finger. "The first thing we need is Ron's owl - Pigwidgeon."

"An owl? - This small ..." Seeing Harry's expression, Hermione stopped herself. "Sorry - please go ahead."

"Pigwidgeon, yes ... It *must* be this owl - but I think Ron'll agree to it."

"Why just Pigwidgeon, Harry?"

"Because she's so small, and so funny."

This explanation didn't feel complete for Hermione, however, she had no choice than to listen.

Harry continued. "You'll write a small letter that you want to meet her - to apologize for your wrong accusations ... Okay so far?"

Hermione nodded.

"For this purpose, you invite her in the Gryffindor tower. I'll add a postscriptum in which I'll extend the invitation to Cho."

Hermione smiled archly. "Are you catching opportunities, Harry?"

"It's the other way around," he answered. "Some days ago, I was invited in the Ravenclaw tower ..."

It surprised Hermione considerably.

"... and I was looking for something on which to hook my own invitation for them to the Gryffindors ... Then I saw - this is the best hook within reach."

Hermione looked thoughtful. "Cho will follow the invitation - no doubt about that, but - do you think Almyra will come?"

Harry grinned. "I have a hook that'll catch her ... In your own part of the letter, you'll write something like *Harry told me that my current project for Professor Snape is of great interest for your study*. Then you say ...

"Is it true?"

"Yes, of course it's true!! If you'll ever let me finish, and if Almyra will follow the invitation, you'll find out why ... What - oh yes, you must say that you don't know why, but as a sign of your apology, you would like to tell her the details ... That's it."

"You're talking about the werewolf cure - right?"

"Yes - what else? Did you start another project for Snape?"

"No ..." Hermione's mind was racing, trying to solve the riddle.

"All this," said Harry, "will be done tomorrow. You have to send Pigwidgeon so that the letter is delivered at breakfast - will be a short flight from the Owlery to the hall ... And the invitation is for tomorrow evening. - Okay?"

Hermione twisted. "So soon?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "Would you feel better to wait another week?"

"No - not really ... I wish the first moment was already over - Harry, you're sure it will work?"

He smiled. "Want to bet?"

When Ron heard the news at the supper table, his comment was short and concise. "Harry, don't get me wrong, but - your Parseltongue is frightening for everybody ... You should hear yourself - it gives me the creeps ... As for you talking with that Nagini, well - I don't think it's a good habit - there's just one benefit - it's a relief that you and Hermione are talking again."

* * *

Sunday morning, Harry woke early. He had dreamed - something bad, except he didn't remember details. Did his scar hurt? Not really, maybe a bit ... He was tired but sleepless, felt cold, his body was hurting like after hard work, or a fight.

He tried to sleep again, unsuccessfully so.

Was this a late effect of his encounter with Nagini, something he should contact Madam Pomfrey for? Not now ... One more try for sleep, if it wouldn't help, he would go for a long, hot shower, then an early breakfast - at least, he wouldn't be late for the arrival of Pigwidgeon.

The hot water warmed him up. After a while, he felt almost normal, the twisting in his stomach had to be hunger. He took his time dressing, thought of cleaning up a bit, stopped when some sleepy grunts told him the noise would wake the others.

Armed with the book about the magical dance rituals, he walked down to read at the table, waiting for the breakfast.

Slowly, the hall filled, first and second-graders the earliest after himself, older students following. They looked at him, didn't dare to talk with him.

Ron arrived. "Moin' ... Something wrong? - Did you fall out of the bed, Harry?"

"Yes."

Ron nodded, satisfied with the answer, obviously not fully awake.

Harry started to eat, feeling better with each bite.

The twins arrived, Seamus, Katie and Alicia, drowsy faces, not accountable before their first cup.

He saw Almyra arrive, seconds later Cho. He would like to know what Cho had said, how she had reacted hearing Almyra's story. So far, all he could see in their faces was Sunday morning sleepiness.

Hermione was coming through the door - from the Entrance Hall, not from their tower. The letter had been prepared the evening before. She reached the table, slightly panting.

Harry greeted her. "Did you send the owl?"

"Yes. - Should be here any second now."

Harry watched the air above the tables. There she was - Pigwidgeon, looking ridiculously small, fluttering excitedly, sailing through the hall toward the Ravenclaw table.

A second later, he could hear a squeak of delight - Almyra's voice.

He looked at Hermione. "So far, so good."

Hermione kept her eyes to the table.

Harry felt less restrained, watched the other table. He saw Almyra glancing over in his direction, smiling, beaming. She seemed busy with the little owl. Would she send her back with an answer?

Minutes passed. No owl answer.

The nervousness in Hermione's face grew by the minute. No owl arriving with an answer left two possibilities, and obviously Hermione couldn't decide which of them to consider worse - Almyra not answering at all, or answering personally, any second now! Harry's sense of pity with Hermione was barely above zero.

"It doesn't work," muttered Hermione. "She didn't answer ... She'll not come.

Watching, Harry said, "Wrong. Here she comes."

Almyra had left her place, was coming over, followed by Cho.

Harry could see Pigwidgeon in Almyra's hands, an ungraceful lump of feathers and legs - as far as he could remember, the first time that tiny owl was calm and quiet.

Almyra reached their table. She smiled at Harry, then looked at Hermione, who looked back at her, at Pigwidgeon, showing anxiety, mixed with surprise.

"Hello, Hermione."

"Erm - hello, Almyra."

"I got a letter from you. I would've sent a letter back, except I just couldn't let go of that cute owl - so I thought I'd come personally, to deliver the answer and the owl by myself ... By the way, is it yours?"

Hermione shook her head, pointed at Ron. "It's his - her name's Pigwidgeon."

Almyra laughed. "Poor thing - such a name! ... What I wanted to say - well, yesterday, I still would have thought it impossible - me accepting an invitation from you, but - somehow ..."

Hermione straightened herself. "Almyra, I'm awfully sorry - for what I said and ..."

Almyra interrupted her. "It's okay - you know, after this little thing arrived, I couldn't be mad at you any longer ... A clever trick, I have to admit - the owl and your offer." She looked at Harry, who just grinned.

"You think it might be interesting for you?" asked Hermione, her curiosity gaining control even at this embarrassing moment.

Rather than answering, Almyra asked back, "Can you give me a keyword?"

"It's a cure," explained Hermione, "for - a werewolf cure."

"I had a feeling it would be that." Almyra's eyes were shining. "I'm *very* interested."

Hermione looked relieved. "That's good ... I'm glad I can offer something for - er, compensation ... To be honest, I'm also very interested to hear what you're doing - Harry didn't tell me more than ..."

Harry stood up, looked at Cho, and strolled toward the Entrance Hall.

After a few steps, Cho was at his side. "Morning, storyteller ... Yesterday's story wasn't too nice."

He grinned. "No, not really ... That's why I had Almyra telling it to you."

"That was really foul play - Al so upset and so miserable, I couldn't even shout at her."

Harry shrugged. "You know how it goes - I'm not looking for trouble ..."

"Yeah - trouble finds you ... And because it wasn't exciting enough, Dumbledore is going to do it again!" Cho's voice sounded angry.

The next test, in little more than an hour from now ... Harry didn't like the idea either. Then a thought struck him. "Cho - come with Almyra ... If you'll be the one to call me, nothing will be able to hold me in that house."

Cho beamed. "Really? - I'd like to be there ... and I like what you said."

An hour later, Harry arrived at the interview room. Almyra was there, Cho with her. A minute later, somebody knocked at the door. Harry went to open.

It was Dumbledore. "Good morning, Harry ... Good morning, ladies."

Harry pointed at Cho. "Professor Dumbledore, I asked Cho to be here when it's time to call me back."

Dumbledore smiled. "An excellent idea, Harry - I'm sure you'll follow that call better than Madam Pomfrey's."

Harry grinned, Cho blushed a bit.

Dumbledore said, "Before we start - Harry, do you feel safe enough to try? - I don't want to push you into something you're not up to."

"I'm not frightened at the thought," replied Harry. "Otherwise - it's very strange ... I don't even know whether I'll find it again - at least, I'm sure I'll return."

"Good." Dumbledore's hand was on Harry's shoulder. "I left Fawkes in the office because I thought it best to keep the start situation as close as possible to that of yesterday - with the notable exception of Cho, that is. However, we'll have him ready in a minute ... I'd say we'll call you back after ten minutes, Harry - as long as we don't know more, this is the maximum."

Harry nodded, then sat down on the same chair as the day before, found a comfortable position.

Almyra's wand was pointing. "*Mesmerisio!*"

The picture of the room faded. He was in the mist again, immediately trying to listen. How clear had the voice been yesterday? He couldn't remember, didn't hear a voice calling now ... He tried to turn his mind around, extending senses ... Something like a mark, giving a direction.

He concentrated on it, felt it coming closer - or him closing in, there was no sensible movement. It was near now, although nothing to see or to step on.

His mind touched the something.

Contours, gaining sharpness ... Almost no colours ... A wall, a floor, dim light, looked like a floor to a dungeon, iron bars - something like a cell, inside, a shape on the floor, a figure - a man, motionless. Before him, curled on the floor, Nagini.

"You come again, Harry Potter?"

"I wanted to see whether I can find you again ... Where are we?"

"Still in the same house, only today I have to be here in this cold cellar."

The complaint could only be felt in Nagini's choice of words, not in her voice. Not overly sympathetic, Harry asked, "Why, Nagini?"

"My master commanded me, to guard his guest."

"His guest? - The man in the cell, is this the guest?"

"Yes."

"Why do you have to guard him?" Harry felt genuinely astonished. "He's in a cell, behind iron bars - not very hospitable, actually."

"It's my master's command. This man is a wizard, he was difficult to catch. He might find ways through the bars, but he cannot find ways past me."

"Why's he a prisoner? ...Who is it?"

"A wizard who caused my master trouble, so my master went out to catch him. I saw him for the first time. His name - my master called him Lupin."

24 - Ordeal

In his bodiless state, Harry was unable to feel shock, not even desperation - that would come later, he knew. The figure in the cell - he tried to see more, couldn't turn a head since there was none ... He directed his mind toward the small spot in the corner of his vision, examined all details - dirty garments, dark spots ... Blood?

Then he realized - there was a possible source of information in his full view. "What will happen to him?"

"My master will ask him questions," replied Nagini. "He will use him for some purpose - sooner or later, his body will be mine."

"Which purpose?"

"I don't know. He may send this guest to invite another guest - my master often uses people that way."

"I'll come back, Nagini."

Harry retreated into the misty nowhere, sensed around ... No voice, but a strong pulse ... Why hadn't he sensed it earlier, when he had searched for Nagini? - Either it hadn't been there some minutes ago, which was unlikely, or he had been in the center of that pulse, then it emanated from the room with Cho, Almyra, Dumbledore - and with his body sitting in the chair. He aimed toward the pulse, was attracted without own effort ... Felt close, warmed by it - a sphere of human feelings.

He dived into the sphere.

Lightness, warmth, colours, shapes ... He was back. His eyes still focusing, he saw Cho jumping up, hurrying to him.

"Harry!" She reached him, touched his shoulder, his face, his hair, showing an expression of deep relief.

He took her hand, "I'm fine," then turned toward Dumbledore. "The guest is there - it's Lupin!"

Shock in the faces of Almyra and Cho. Dumbledore's face - no surprise, the smile gone, the features changing, losing all kindness, a hard glare, eyes burning. "Describe, Harry!"

He explained what he had seen, repeated the short conversation with Nagini.

He had barely finished when his own shock hit him at full force. His body tensed, crooked, his hands turned to fists, nails deep in his own flesh. "No ... Please - not him, not ..."

Dumbledore was up, was at him, he felt lifted up, dimly heard Dumbledore's command toward the others to follow, was carried along the floor at incredible swiftness, his mind crying in the unbearable pain of the knowing ... Up the stairs, he was dropped into a chair, an instant later, something on his shoulder ...

After moments, a hot warmth streaming through his clenched body - relaxing, smoothing enough to hide the face in his hands ... someone holding him, stroking his hair, murmuring - no English, maybe Chinese ...

After a while, the need for asking was more urgent than the pain. He looked up, his face wet, recognized Cho at his side, Fawkes on his shoulder, Dumbledore sitting across, watching him, showing sympathy - a layer of emotion sitting on top of rage and fury.

He had to know. "Professor - what can we do? ... Can we ..."

"We'll try, Harry." Dumbledore's voice was sharp. "I promise you - we'll try ... That's what I can give you. - We need some time ... It depends on how long Voldemort will keep Lupin. If it's long enough, there is a chance."

Long enough ... How long would Voldemort need to interrogate Lupin, or to use him, or to ... Another wave of desperation started to crash through his mind ...

"LISTEN!"

He looked up. Dumbledore was staring at him, fire in his eyes. "Voldemort holds Lupin as a prisoner - Harry, that means he wants to use him. - He's in no hurry to kill him ... He'll ask him questions, he might think of using him as a hostage, or to send him under the Imperius curse for some purpose - it gives us *some* time."

Harry hung at Dumbledore's lips. Some time ... Enough to do what? Storming that house? Before they'd be inside ...

Dumbledore spoke again. "We'll use that time - every minute of it. If we fail, it won't be because we lost time in despair. Do you agree, Harry?"

He nodded. Lupin - his teacher in the art of Zen, meditation, fighting. He wouldn't fail.

"We need three people here," said Dumbledore, "Professor McGonagall, Mr. Krum, and Mr. Weasley." He looked at Almyra. "Miss Benedict, would you please ask Professor McGonagall to join us immediately?"

"Yes." Almyra was up, went for the door.

"Cho, Harry - please catch Ron and Mr. Krum - and no word outside this room!"

"Yes, Professor."

Down the staircase, they separated. Cho went for Viktor's office, Harry for Ron's.

He was lucky - his friend sitting there. "Ron!!"

"Harry - what happened?" Seeing Harry's face had raised alarm in Ron's voice.

"Not here - Dumbledore asks for you ... Please come."

They reached Dumbledore's office, found McGonagall already there. Moments later, Cho came back with Viktor.

Dumbledore made them sit down. "Ladies and gentlemen, we have a task to perform - a task about which no word has to be said in public - not as long as we're working on it. Do you agree to that?"

Nodding, expectant looks.

"Through a trance, Harry found a way to make a mental visit in Voldemort's house and to talk with his snake, Nagini ... He did this yesterday, learning that Voldemort was out to catch a *guest*. ... Asked by me, Harry did it again some minutes ago. He found Nagini, guarding this guest, better, this prisoner who was lying in a cell ... The prisoner is Mr. Lupin."

Shock in the faces.

Dumbledore waited a few seconds. "There is a small chance we might help Mr. Lupin to escape. We will use this small chance - either until there is no more chance or until Mr. Lupin is freed ... As long as it takes - this way or the other - we need cold blood. Do you hear me?"

Nodding, murmurs of "Yes."

"Our first goal is to find that house. For this, I need Mr. Black alias Mr. Snuffles - here in Hogwarts first. This, in turn, requires the fastest messenger we can think of - which is you, Mr. Krum, using your Steel Wing."

At Viktor's expectant look, Dumbledore showed a parchment and a medal Harry recognized immediately - he had used it as a portkey during his training with Lupin.

"This is Mr. Black's address - you'll need your navigation skill to locate it, Mr. Krum ... you'll need Harry's Invisibility Cloak to fly undetected, and you'll take this medal with you ... It's a port key to the place where the Hogwarts Express arrives - you and Mr. Black will use it to return together."

Viktor stood up. "Is okay, Mr. Dumbledore ... I'll find him - if somebody tells me how he looks."

"Harry will describe him - and will give you his cloak ... If you start now, Mr. Krum, I hope to see you back with Mr. Black within three hours."

Harry and Viktor went down the staircase, Harry describing Sirius' current appearance. "To check his identity, ask him who's Padfoot ... It's his nickname."

"Yes, Harry ... When you haff your cloak, meet me in the storage room."

Harry stormed to his dormitory, took the Invisibility Cloak, went down again. He found Viktor waiting outside, his Steel Wing ready.

Viktor moved the cloak over his head - next second, he was gone, together with the middle section of the Steel Wing.

Viktor's voice from mid-air said, "See you, Harry."

The two ends of the Steel Wing jumped up, accelerated. Watching, Harry realized that anyone looking up would believe he'd seen two birds flying the same direction.

He returned to Dumbledore's office. Ron was gone.

"Where's Ron?"

"He is scanning the school archive," replied Dumbledore, "for all information we have stored about a former student - by the name of Riddle."

Riddle ... Voldemort's original name. Suddenly, Harry saw how Dumbledore would try to find the house - looking for a family residence, for a place where the Muggles police had found a dead old man ... For a graveyard on which a stone with the engraving *Tom Riddle* should be found!

Dumbledore reached in his desk, came up with something that looked like one of those cards found in Chocolate Frogs.

"As soon as Mr. Krum will be back with Sirius, I'll be gone for some time - together with Sirius. Professor McGonagall will be the only person you can talk to about this issue - aside from discussions within your group." A very short smile. "I know that your part is the worst - you can only wait ... To ease it a bit - and to make sure our knowledge doesn't accidentally spread through the school, I suggest two measures."

The Headmaster showed the card - a picture of Nicolas Flamel, Dumbledore's fellow wizard. "This is a key - the key to a room with some comfort, large enough for all of you to sit and exchange thoughts and hopes ... There's only one key - Harry, I think you should take it."

Harry stood up to receive the card.

Another short smile from Dumbledore. "To simplify things, Harry, you should include Miss Granger to the group ... Also with respect to Mr. Krum - otherwise, our confidentiality won't hold long."

Harry nodded.

"In a minute, I'll show you where you can find this room ... Please use it inconspicuously - which means you should have your meals in the hall with the other students, although this room would provide the same services ... Aside from that - " Dumbledore looked him into the eyes, "Harry, it is mandatory that you'll do *nothing* without consulting me first - in particular, don't visit Nagini!"

"No, Professor Dumbledore ... I hadn't planned it, but - why not?"

"One reason - as bad as it sounds - you might find Mr. Lupin dead."

Harry's stomach contracted painfully.

"This is very unlikely," continued Dumbledore, "at least for the next days ... Another reason is, we simply don't know whether Nagini said the truth - it could as well be a plot of Voldemort ... This way or the other, an unprepared conversation with that snake might hurt our chances."

Unprepared? Did it mean ...

"Further - you *will* visit her again, Harry - after I'm back, hopefully with the information we need, and after a careful instruction what to say."

So Dumbledore had a plan! A small flame of hope came alive in Harry.

"And now - I'll show you the entrance to that room, then it's time for lunch."

The door was reached from the same staircase that led to Dumbledore's office. Dumbledore pointed to a metal plate under the door handle. "Here - press the card against it, with the face toward the door - then it opens ... It's a guest suite - please try it after lunch."

Harry walked to the Gryffindor table.

Ron's seat empty - that meant he still was scanning through the archive. Had his reorganization brought some order? This project, target of so many teasing remarks, was suddenly crucial to Harry's hopes.

Hermione was already there. "How was your, er, visit?"

"Not here - later."

She studied his face. "Harry, did you - did something happen?"

"Later."

"Did you see Ron?"

"Yes - he's in the archive."

"What's he looking for?"

"Later."

For anyone else, this answer should have been good to stop asking questions - a concept beyond Hermione's grasp. "How much later?"

"After lunch."

"By the way - did you see Viktor? Do you know where he is?"

"Yes."

"And?" Before Harry could answer, Hermione added, "Let me guess - later, right?"

He nodded.

"Wow - that must be exciting news! - Whatever I ask, your answer is *Later*."

"You'll hear it soon enough - believe me."

It stopped her questions, although Harry could see how she kept thinking about what might have happened. Once, she started, "Harry ..." stopped immediately when he shook his head. Gradually, her expression turned more and more worried.

As soon as possible without causing attention, he stood up.

Hermione asked, "Where are you going?"

Harry pointed. "You'll find me on the staircase."

He climbed to the landing where the paths to the guest suite and Dumbledore's office parted, sat down to wait.

Had Ron found something? He would see him coming up - or down if Ron was with Dumbledore.

Minutes later, he saw Hermione climb the stairs, looking around, accelerating her step when she spotted him. Then he heard other footsteps at the bottom of the staircase. Ron? No - not Ron's characteristic step, also, more than one pair of feet.

Hermione reached the landing. "What door is this?" she asked.

"To a guest suite. I have a key."

"Why - what's the purpose of this suite?"

"This is the only place where we can talk about what happened - and what's happening right now."

A head appeared in the staircase, immediately followed by another one - Cho and Almyra.

Hermione, seeing them, asked, "They know?"

He nodded, took the card with Flamel's picture and pressed it against the metal. A soft click, then the door opened a bit. He pushed it wide open and stepped in.

Luxury - that was the first impression. Hogwarts in general already offered a decent comfort, every piece in the halls and classrooms made of high-quality material to last for long, but the equipment in this large, comfortably-looking room was outstanding. At any other time, it would have been good for a delightful inspection. Not today.

Hermione had followed. Cho and Almyra entered the room, Almyra closed the door.

Harry turned to Hermione. "Okay - now listen."

"Wait a second ... As much as I want to hear it - why are you telling me? What's my role in this plot?"

"Your role - same as ours, basically - to appear normal outside this room ... If we know and you don't, it doesn't work ... Viktor's involved - that's another reason."

Hermione's expression showed fright, barely controlled. "You've seen the guest, Harry - right?"

"Yes."

"Is it Sirius?"

"No - Viktor's on the way to catch him."

For an instant, Hermione looked relieved.

"It's Lupin."

"No! - Oh my God ..." In slow motion, Hermione slumped into a chair, her eyes fearful, fixed on Harry.

He gave a short summary of his visit, what he had seen, and what Dumbledore had said and done. He finished, "If Viktor can find Sirius quickly, he should be back within the next two hours."

Cho asked, "What do you want to do now, Harry? Sit and talk?"

"Not yet," he replied. "You may do it - I'll sit outside and wait ... Until Ron's back from the archive ... until Viktor's back with Sirius - whatever comes first."

"And then?"

"Then I'll hear what Ron has found, and I'll have a word with Sirius ... And then, I'll sit here and do what Lupin has taught me to do at the beginning of a fight - meditation ... Afterwards, we'll have lunch."

"What about our invitation?" asked Hermione.

Almyra started, "Under these circumstances, we ..."

"No!" interrupted Harry. "Please - let's do it - only here ... Then we can talk - we need to talk ... I don't know if I can, but - I'd go crazy otherwise."

The girls nodded. Almyra said hesitantly, "Harry - can you show me how to meditate?"

"As far as I've mastered it, and that's not that much. Lupin ..." he choked, swallowed. "After I've seen the others coming back - okay?"

Almyra nodded.

He walked through the door, closed it, sat down at the stairs. Yes, he was waiting, only it didn't feel like that. Not yet. Too many thoughts were whirling through his mind.

The numbness was gone, was replaced by a white-hot burning. The first minutes, he had to fight hard - this burning was nothing but despair, only he couldn't afford it - not now, not later, not tomorrow, not until ... Not afterwards either, whatever would be the end of it. He wished he could meditate now, but more important was to follow up the next events.

Fighting despair - how? Change it into something else, Lupin had said. Using the emotion stirred up by the enemy, using it constructively - that's the key to success. For a while, all he could do was holding a wall that protected him from drowning in the waves of desperation.

Ever so slowly, he regained control ... Changed the direction of the waves - away from him, toward a target. Despair mutated to hate ... Still not constructive, hate is blind, Lupin had said ... Then he knew how to ride the waves.

You hate - whom? Voldemort. Take the hate, hone it, form it ... into determination. As lead might change to gold, his hate transmigrated to a powerful determination. He no longer hated Voldemort - he was determined to extinguish him.

He still felt unprepared, didn't know how, this had nothing to do with the current situation, which meant it wouldn't help Lupin, the only connection was that Lupin's capturing - and probably torturing - had formed his determination. He would make an end to the being of Voldemort ... Maybe in a month, maybe in a year, or two years ... Eventually, he would do it.

This thought felt entirely new. Before, he had been frightened, or hateful, had simply wished Voldemort wouldn't exist. As strange as it sounded, he hadn't felt *personally* involved - true, when he was younger, the thought of revenge for the death of his parents had come up every now and then, but only as the outcry of a child who cannot stand his fate. This new thought had a totally different quality.

Would somebody else do it first?

Unlikely ... Dumbledore seemed the only candidate. If Dumbledore would kill Voldemort in the course of the rescue operation, Harry wouldn't complain - only he didn't expect such an outcome. Dumbledore would concentrate on saving Lupin, which was a totally different goal - as he knew clearly since his lessons with Lupin. If Voldemort killed Lupin before they found a chance to save him, Dumbledore would return to Hogwarts immediately. Harry knew - what Dumbledore was doing right now was an exception, riskful. Holding the fortress Hogwarts, that was the Headmaster's task.

Footsteps were coming up - Ron, Harry recognized his rhythm.

When Ron appeared in the staircase, Harry saw parchments in his hand. "Have you found him?"

"I've found something. Follow me."

They climbed up, knocked, entered Dumbledore's office.

Ron put the parchments on Dumbledore's desk. "Here - first the Riddle file, except it's useless - someone has tampered with it ... No address, no background, according to this file, a student named Tom Riddle came from nowhere."

"And second?"

Ron's face gleamed in triumph. "A letter - wasn't put in that file, otherwise it would have disappeared together with the other parchments ... I came across some time ago, when cleaning up piles of old stuff ... It's a letter from the Ministry of Magic, informing Hogwarts about a criminal case in which three members of the Riddle family were killed."

"And this letter ..."

"Mentions the name of the town. Little Hangleton."

Dumbledore was up. "Ron - if we succeed in saving Lupin, he'll have to thank you first! - Without your work, it might have taken days to find the address."

Ron showed pride, while no joy. "Not the first, Professor - without Harry ..."

"True," admitted Dumbledore, "I certainly didn't forget - but this is the first successful step in our rescuing efforts."

Harry and Ron walked down to the guest suite. Ron watched as Harry opened the door, gasped when seeing the luxurious room. "Wow - I wish I could appreciate it more."

Harry went back to guard the staircase, leaving Ron to tell the girls what he had found.

A few minutes later, he heard the door open, turning, he saw Cho.

"Harry - mind some company?"

Rather than answering, he moved aside, providing room for her to sit down. Almost by itself, his right arm came to lie on her shoulders, his other hand found her hand, held it, was held in reverse.

Her voice was low. "Can you stand it?"

"Yes ... I'm really waiting to meditate, but thanks to Lupin's lessons, I have it under control ... It's like waves rocking through me - but now, these are waves with a target."

"The target - it's not Lupin, is it?"

"No. I hope for him ... Every once in a while, I can touch this thought for a moment, then I have to put it off quickly ... Anyway, this was the catalyst which formed my thinking and pointed the target."

Cho nodded. "To kill Voldemort."

Was he surprised? "Exactly - although, *killing* isn't the proper term - what I'm going to do is make an end to a - a state, and as part of this, Voldemort must stop to exist ... How did you know?"

"I knew since ... Soon after you returned from the tournament - and even before, I suspected it ..."

Cho had started to cry. "Isn't it obvious?" she sobbed, "Voldemort knew it for fifteen years - why do you think did he try to kill you? ... And Dumbledore, he knew it for almost as long as that ..."

Sobs were ripping through her body, alarming Harry in a way that was no less than astonishing - a minute ago, he would have denied there was still room for any emotion other than the concern for Lupin and his determination toward Voldemort. "Cho - what ... Why are you crying?" He held her tighter, tried to still her shaking body.

"Why? - What a stupid question! ... I knew it - I knew what would happen ... Not looking for trouble - ha! If trouble doesn't find you for a few weeks, you're jumping up and down, shouting *Here I am!* ... I tried to avoid it, tried to keep myself away - only I couldn't ... Because - oh dammit!"

Up she was, hurrying down the stairs.

He called, "Cho!"

"Gimme ten minutes," her voice came from below. "I can't stand girls crying in public - especially when ... I'll be back!"

He slumped down again, feeling shattered, like grinded in a first mill, only to be pushed into a second and, escaping that, facing a third. Lupin captured by Voldemort ... Who knew that Harry was - had been, would be? - his deadly opponent ... As Cho knew, Cho who couldn't keep ... It was too much, more than he could handle at once.

First things first - Lupin and Voldemort had priority now, Cho wouldn't run away ... What a stupid thought - Cho had done exactly that, while Lupin couldn't ... Still, he knew only the words were wrong, not the thinking.

Ten minutes passed. No Cho. If his priorities were at Lupin and Voldemort, why did he wait for her return more than for Viktor's and Sirius'? Five more minutes, ten.

The door behind him opened.

"Harry!" It was Ron. "They come! We saw them through the window."

He raced up and to the window.

Along the lakeside came two figures - Viktor and Sirius, already close to the entrance. It was incredible how quickly Viktor had found him - riding a Steel Wing at full speed was definitely a fast method of travelling.

Harry stormed downstairs, met Sirius at the bottom of the staircase. "Si - Simon!" He flung himself into his godfather's arms, was hugged, comforted.

"Harry - " Sirius held him tightly. "If there's a chance, we'll take it. Don't give up hope ... I know what I'm talking about - remember?"

Yes, Sirius knew. He had stood twelve years in Azkaban.

"Now let me talk with Dumbledore."

Harry released his grip and followed upstairs. At the landing, he said, "I'll wait in here," then he entered the room again.

The others were looking at him. Hermione seemed a bit relaxed since she had seen Viktor. Almyra had a question in her eyes - of course, she had seen Sirius only from high above.

"Almyra - do you know who this is?"

"Your godfather - Mr. Black alias Mr. Snuffles ... Is this the same ..."

"Yes - the one you were asking yourself what happened to him ... He and Lupin were in the same class at Hogwarts ... By the way, you've met him before."

"I saw him, yes, only I wouldn't call it a meeting."

"No - you saw him before, with switched roles ... You have something in common."

It took a second, then Almyra's eyes went big. "In the Hogwarts Express?"

"Yes ... He used to be a safeguard between Lupin and other people."

Hermione's glance turned between Harry and Almyra. "What does Almyra have in common with Sirius?"

Harry bit his lips. He and secrets ... Glancing at Almyra, he saw her head motioning toward Hermione. Asking with his eyes, he saw her nod.

"Almyra's an Animagus," he said.

Hermione's mouth fell open.

Ron wheeled around and stared at Almyra. "Wow - cool, Almyra ... Which animal?"

Almyra's face was coppery. "Birds," she said.

"Birds?" Ron didn't understand. "Which bird?"

Hermione had recovered. "An owl - right?"

Almyra nodded.

Watching Hermione's expression, Harry said, "And a falcon - for day business ... And an eagle - in honour of Ravenclaw."

Any other day, it would have been fun to watch Hermione and Ron at this moment.

Ron, regained his speech first. "Harry doesn't make jokes of that kind, but - is it true, Almyra?"

"Yes."

Ron stared at her in fascination. "Say - are you a genius or simply mad?"

A short smile, the first for what already felt like an eternity. "It's not that complicated - not after you've mastered the first transformation, that's the difficult one ... Besides, these are all birds of similar size and habit - except one is a night bird and the others are day birds ... You know, most Animagi simply stop after they've mastered the desired animal - for them, there's no reason to proceed further."

Hermione asked, "And for you?"

"The ability to transform was just a step in a greater project ... True, it's a great feeling, and I went for an owl first because this was what I wanted to be - a bird ... It's simply fantastic - flying through the sky."

Hermione was hooked, wanted more. "This project - is it a secret?"

"Yes. - No, not really - I don't know ... Anyway, this is the day to call things by their name, right? ... Especially with ... What I'm trying to find is a method of healing werewolves."

"That's why!" Hermione was excited. "But - what do you mean by healing?"

Almyra shrugged. "To get it under control ... The optimal technique would be *not* to turn into a werewolf. - Almost as good would be to turn or not to turn, depending on your own will ... A minimum solution would be to change the werewolf to a wolf - I mean to provide him with the same self-control as an Animagus ... That's where this step fits in. - Anyway, I'm nowhere close to a solution, so - your potion's still unchallenged."

Hermione looked deeply impressed. "It's not mine - I just learned to brew it ... Compared to what you're doing, it's like some kitchen work."

"No, it's not," protested Almyra. "I'm a mess with potions - I know the recipe, see, but it's as far beyond reach as the moon."

"Really?" Hermione felt pleased. "Snape said he knew three students in Hogwarts that could do it ... I was sure you were one of the other two."

Almyra shook her head. "Not me."

Hermione seemed to scan Hogwarts students in her head.

Somebody knocked at the door. Harry went to open.

It was Sirius. He made a few steps into the room, looked around. "Very nice - we should meet here again after this story is over." Then he checked the other people in the room. "Hello, Hermione, Ron - each time we see each other, there's some trouble, right?"

Following Sirius' glance, Harry said, "Sirius - this is Almyra Benedict ... Al, this is Sirius Black ... You two have met already."

"Nice to ..." Sirius stopped, shook his head. "But I'm *glad* to meet you, Miss Benedict - personally, that is."

"Mr. Black - I'm afraid the same indication applies to our meetings."

Harry lost patience with the small talk. "Sirius - what will happen now?"

"We - that is Dumbledore and I - will try to locate that building - that's the next step ... Thanks to Ron's work, it shouldn't take that long."

"And then?"

"Then we'll establish a portkey connection between here and a safe place near the building. Then - well, I guess there'll be some dogs and cats strolling around that building - to confirm it's the right one, to check whether Remus comes out under some spell - to hold guard while Dumbledore's working on a plan."

Harry was surprised. "McGonagall will be part of the watch team?"

"Certainly," replied Sirius. "We need every Animagus who can move around without raising suspicion."

Almyra stepped forward. "Mr. Black - I can offer an owl."

Sirius' eyes narrowed. "You?"

"Yes ... Alternatively, I can offer a falcon."

"Sounds great ... Day bird and night bird - that's exactly what we need ... But you have to check this with Dumbledore ... At any rate, every Animagus who can handle more than one shape is supposed to call me Sirius - or Simon in public ... It's a family tradition."

"What a coincidence," replied Almyra. "There's something similar in our family - I'm called Al."

Sirius showed a humourless smile. "Okay, Al - as much as I'd appreciate your help, first we have to find that house, then Dumbledore has to agree ... Until then, think it over whether it's a good idea to be near someone who'll kill you at the first wrong movement ... I'm serious - I won't think less of you if your answer is no."

Almyra's face had paled a bit. "My offer will stand."

"Yeah - probably it will." Sirius looked appreciating. "You find that kind of strange people near Harry." At these words, he looked at his godchild. "So - I'm going to find my friend Remus ... Harry - see you."

An instant later, Sirius had closed the door behind him.

Harry glanced toward Almyra. "Why, Al? - What's your reason to risk your life watching that house?"

"It's quite simple," replied Almyra. "I have to protect an investment - remember, Lupin's my case number one."

Harry studied her face. "That's not reason enough - not for someone with a clear mind."

Almyra bit her lips. "There are more reasons ... To pay back, for example - Lupin accepted the study ... He's the one who sent you to protect Cho - and by some accident, it's my ability that is required ... You know as well as I that a bird is just the superior animal for that job, so it might be the difference between make and break - although ..." She turned toward Hermione who was listening in astonishment. "Hermione - you've done things with Harry that were dangerous - please tell me - have you been frightened?"

"Yes - especially before it started."

"That's good - so I'm not the only one ... Honestly, I'm scared enough to ... you know what I mean." She turned again. "Harry - what about this meditation? - Does it help?"

He nodded. "Absolutely."

"Then - please, let's do it now."

Ron and Hermione stood up, about to leave. Hermione asked, "Harry - can we leave you two alone?"

"Whatever that's supposed to mean," he replied, noticing a short blushing in Hermione's face, "the answer is yes."

A moment later, he was alone with Almyra. Looking at her, he knew - any other day, they would have laughed loudly about Hermione's question, or maybe about the implication from his answer. Anyway, it had improved their mood - a good start for a meditation.

Harry went to a wall and sat down, feeling the thick, comfortable rug underneath. He said, "Al - find yourself a place to sit down."

"Why not in a chair?"

"You have to balance out your body - normally, this should be the lotus stance, except I never managed - but it does the job."

After a moment, Almyra went to the same wall, yards away, and crumpled down. It was an excellent choice, as Harry noticed immediately - they were close enough to talk, without looking at each other, without hearing each other's breathing.

He said, "What I know is - meditation is something to clear your mind, to collect your strength, and to find answers to questions ... I guess first we should formulate some questions - I'll ask the questions aloud - the same questions I'll ask myself afterwards - okay?"

"Wait a second - the meditating itself, how is it done?"

"Hm - you think ... You scan your mind for an answer - a honest answer ... I guess that's it, basically - not what you want to answer, not what somebody else would like to hear - your own true answer."

"Sounds like research."

"Really?" Exploring your unknown self ... "Maybe it is ... Ready?"

"Yes."

"Ah - wait ... Al, are you aware that this is a fight?"

"A fight? ... Why - I don't intend to fight, certainly not with Voldemort ... All I'm going to do is to sit in some tree and watch."

"Yeah - now look at it this way. - You offered to take away something from Voldemort, actually the information what's happening in this house - and we know, he wants to keep that information ... If you fail, you won't get it ... If you fail worse, he'll kill you ... Is it still not a fight?"

"Oh my God, Harry - is this the way you're inspiring yourself? ... For me, the effect's totally different!"

"This is the first step, Al - remember, only the truth!"

"Whew - it's a frightening truth ... Okay, yes - it's a fight."

"What's your goal?"

"Er - to rescue Lupin."

Harry waited silently, being aware that his teaching already worked as a preparation for his own meditating. He could even have fallen to the same trap as Almyra, hearing her mistake made sure he wouldn't.

After a moment, Almyra asked, "Is something wrong with my answer?"

"Yes."

"Why - I don't see it."

"You cannot rescue Lupin. If somebody can, it's Dumbledore."

"Yes of course, but - Oh, I see ... Then, my goal is to watch that house, hiding in my animal shape as an owl - or a falcon, maybe - and to collect information that'll help to rescue Lupin."

"Is this your only goal?"

"Yes - I'm not trying to impress someone, if that's what you mean."

"No, I didn't think of that - my mistake, the question was wrong." Harry tried again. "Is this your complete goal?"

"Seems it's not ... Well, of course I'd like to come through alive - and unharmed."

"Right ... Except - Al, there's no of course. Your goal might have been to collect the information even if you'd get killed."

"No, it's not ... But I see the point ... Got it, Harry - go ahead."

Harry became aware - Lupin hadn't been his only teacher in such preparations, the meeting in Dumbledore's office, during the summer break, had shown him already a lot. He asked, "Can you do it?"

"Aah - yes."

"Are you up to it?"

"I don't know ... Probably not, that's why I'm sitting here."

"Right ... So you'll ask yourself again *after* the meditation, okay?"

"Yes."

"And you'll answer honestly?" Harry's voice was pleading.

"Yes, Harry. - Don't worry, I see what you mean."

"Good ... Do you want to win that fight?"

A moment of silence told him Almyra had stopped herself from giving the obvious answer. Then, hesitantly, she said, "I just remembered there's no 'of course', only - can you tell me what it means?"

"Yes ... By the way, I had the same difficulties the first time ... It means, there's no sense saying *I'll try my best*. - It means, doing it half isn't enough ... Only the winning counts - if it's easy play, there's nothing wrong with it, because this isn't a school test ... Although it won't be easy play."

Some more silence, then Almyra said, "That's something to think about for a while."

Harry nodded to himself. How right she was. Aloud, he asked, "What's your strength?"

To his surprise, he heard her giggle. "Harry - I feel embarrassed telling you what I think about myself."

He smiled. "Okay - it's enough to answer that yourself, in a few minutes. The same with the next question, what's your weakness. ... Two more questions, then we're done with our program. The first - what's the strength of your enemy?"

"He's Voldemort - a dangerous, powerful dark wizard ... Do you expect me to count his abilities?"

"Only one is important."

"Only one ... we're not discussing who's better, he or Dumbledore - hmm ... I can guess, Harry, but there's none outstanding for me."

"He kills without a split second's hesitation."

"Oh - yes of ... I mean, yes."

"What's the weakness of your enemy?"

"I see only one - it's you!"

Unsmiling, Harry said, "Look deeper - and look at the things at hand."

Another moment of silence, then Almyra's voice. "You've lost me, Harry ... Please help me."

"The things at hand - he's at a known place, he's under surveillance without knowing, he's holding a prisoner that couldn't be killed immediately - even if only to torture him ... More - in his new body, he's as vulnerable as any normal human, which means he can be killed ... At a deeper level, see the reasons why he failed to kill me - he was unprepared, the things that happened came as surprises - he's not doing his homework, and he's overestimating himself."

"Wow ..." Somewhat awestruck, Almyra asked, "Harry, did you find these answers by yourself?"

"Not all, and the others with help from Lupin ... Okay, that's it ... You know what to do?"

"Yup."

It was the last word spoken for some time. For a few more seconds, Harry could hear Almyra's breathing, then he was alone with his thoughts and feelings.

His feelings, in particular, were prevailing, resisting to be pushed aside. What Cho had said on the stairs ... He had to split his meditation in two - no, three - a quick check for the current situation, then Cho, then his determination toward Voldemort.

Could he do anything to help Lupin? - If there was any role for him, it would be defined by Dumbledore ... Yes, there was a role, the Headmaster's words had indicated something, without giving details ... Until then, he had to keep a cool mind, preserve his abilities ... Something else? - Yes, he could support those with more active roles, like Sirius, or Dumbledore, and Almyra - he did so right now ... He could do something more - this evening, he'd do it, and it would help all of them to come through the days ahead. Something forgotten? - Nothing as far as he could think.

Then Cho.

Cho ... She had said, *I tried to keep myself away - only I couldn't*. Away from him ... That meant - what? Did it mean the obvious? There was no obvious, as he'd stated only minutes ago, so carefully now ... Undeniably, it meant a power, stronger than her will, was forcing her toward him - despite the fact that she expected - at least feared - to lose him soon, to be left with a broken heart ... In spite of all his training in thinking the truth, it took a moment before he was able to think the word.

Love ... Cho loved him ... Maybe not happily, certainly not happily right now, however she did. It came as no surprise, only - suddenly the world was different.

He ... loved her. Yes. He loved Cho, loved Cho Chang, loved her, loved her, a song in his blood, as strong and powerful and delicate as a phoenix song, pushing away all embarrassment and clumsiness and lack of self-assurance ... This was the only state fitting this new world - in his meditation. In public, there would be still some way to go. Be it.

What did it mean? - More important than anything else, he wasn't going to break her heart.

As a consequence, he wasn't allowed to die in pursuing his goal - to end the being of Voldemort. Outside, sitting on the stairs, this outcome had looked acceptable - dying together with Voldemort would have been a thought he could tolerate. No longer.

He had to survive for Cho ... More, he had to tell her this - as soon as possible, to end her misery, to make sure she wouldn't try some suicidal act from sheer desperation ... So he had to develop a plan. For this, he had to become - no, it wasn't true, there was no need to be better than Voldemort, nor to be worse ... His only goal was to extinguish him, for that, he needed a plan and probably some special abilities ... He was special - and he had a special wand ... He had a bond with Wormtail, he was on - speaking? - terms with Voldemort's snake.

Starting today, he would collect all information and would examine it how to be used for a plan ... Once Lupin was free - alive or dead - he himself would feel free to act ... Was this overestimation? - Not in the goal, Cho had seen it long before himself - Voldemort had seen it first! For anything else, time would tell - he was bound to survive, so he was bound to be thorough, and careful. It wouldn't happen next week, it had only just begun.

He opened his eyes. He was ready to jubilate when Lupin was back, ready to mourn if it wasn't meant to be. At some day in the future, he would be ready to end the story which had started today.

Turning toward Almyra, he saw her watching him. He smiled. "Done?"

Her eyes widened. "Harry - for an instant, you looked ..."

"What?"

Almyra opened her mouth, closed it, finally said, "Never mind - it's gone ... You look a world better than an hour ago."

"How did I look, Al?"

She twisted. "Merciless."

He nodded. "Don't tell Cho - not before I had the opportunity to talk with her ... What did you find out?"

"A lot ... I'm up to it, Harry - now." Almyra blushed. "All the time, I was aware of you, sitting next to me - it was like ... a source of confidence, and guidance ..." Her face was a deep copper.

He glid across the rug and knelt in front of her.

"Al - look at me ... As wrong as Hermione was in her thinking, she wasn't completely wrong - we can think the same way."

Almyra looked wondering. "Strange - I never thought of myself as a fighter - and now ..."

"I heard it differently," Harry said, grinning.

"Huh?"

"I heard a story about some birds, and fists - and bleeding noses ... Long ago."

"Oh - that." Almyra grinned, grew serious again. "And today it's about a bird too - and this time it's me."

* * *

Harry and Almyra left the suite to look for the others. It was almost time for lunch, but Harry wanted to talk with Cho - immediately, if possible.

He checked the Great Hall, the Entrance Hall - no Cho.

He found a place to sit down and wait, the entrance to the Ravenclaw tower in view. Waiting - the name of the game for the next hours, next days.

The hall filled with the other students. Almyra was coming down the stairs, Cho behind - a Cho looking furious.

She saw him, walked to him, hissed, "So you've infected her with your madness - great, Harry. Super - magnificent!"

Almyra's expression showed helplessness.

Harry said, "We'll be back in a minute," then took Cho's hand and started to walk toward the exit.

Cho followed without resisting, as if robbed of any power. "Where are we going?"

"Just around the corner - out of earshot." He crossed the Entrance Hall, went outside, turned to the storage room, followed by Cho.

Inside, he turned, looked at her.

Angrily, Cho said, "What's this - are you going to tell me another secret?"

"No - although I know it only for minutes ... What I said up there ..."

"Yes?" Suddenly, hope was in Cho's face.

"It wasn't all - I forgot to add two things. - The first is ..." He swallowed. "I love you."

An instant later, she was in his arms. "I love you too ... oh my ..."

Holding her, feeling her, he whispered, "And that's why I'm not going to get killed - because it would break your heart."

"I know I can't stop you - so promise me, Harry ..."

"I promise ... I'll do it, but only when I can do it - and stay alive - and come back to you ... This is an inseparable part of my determination - that's what I found out while meditating."

She looked up. "Seal your promise ... Kiss me, Harry."

He kissed her, sensing smooth lips.

After a moment, she asked, "Why didn't you do it the last time I asked you?"

"Because ..." He stared at her. "So you know what you said in the forest?"

"Not everything - only the important part."

After another moment with lips too busy to talk, she said, "Okay - the minute is over. We have to go back to lunch."

He held her. "Before we go - don't be mad at Al ... She's fighting the fight because she can do it and I cannot - but she's up to it, and she'll come back."

"How do you know?"

"For one, this is part of the goal we defined - not getting killed ... Also, while in meditation, all the time she felt waves passing from me to her - giving her confidence and strength - just while I was figuring out how it is between you and me ... That means, the power Al felt passing over is our love."

"That's a clever trick, young Potter."

"Trick? - What do you mean?"

Cho smiled. "You together with Al - alone, in a luxury suite, waves passing between you - wouldn't it be enough to make any girl jealous? - No, you say, there's no need because it's our love that's sending out the waves ... Funny thing is, I believe you every word - and I believe she'll come back ... Now let's go - there's food waiting for me!"

Food, as it seemed, was something Cho would never ignore, come love or low spirit.

For Harry, it was different; sitting at the supper table, unable to talk about the two most important topics - although for different reasons - was a trial he hadn't expected to be as painful as that. He forced a few bites into his stomach, busied himself with filling his cup, drinking some, whirling it around ... He felt like a poor actor on stage, luckily, his only audience were Ron and Hermione who had their own trouble.

He heard some remarks from the other students about Dumbledore's empty seat, just good nobody wanted to discuss it with him.

As soon as he could do so without gaining attention from the wrong people, he stood up and strolled away, aware of the glances that followed him - from the Gryffindor table, from the Ravenclaw table, but only from those involved. Taking his time, he reached the exit to the staircase. As soon as he was out of sight, he dropped the leisurely behaviour and hurried upstairs.

Card, click - the door was open. He walked in.

The others wouldn't arrive within the next few minutes. It gave him time to inspect the room closely. Several doors had caught his attention before, now was the opportunity to find out their purpose.

Trying the first, he found it locked. There was a metal plate below the handle, similar to the one at the entrance door, except that here his card didn't work.

He went to the next, trying the same, failing again. He tried at the third door - a click. The door swung open.

A bedroom - large, as luxurious as the other room, a double bed, more modern in style than the four-posters in the dormitories. Another door. Harry reached it, tried the handle - it worked, opened to a bathroom.

He walked out and closed the door.

One more door in the central room, locked as well, no response to his card. Obviously, this guest suite offered room for up to eight people - or less, depending on whether they came as couples or singles. His card was good for the central room plus one bedroom, probably, Dumbledore had similar cards for the other bedrooms. Idly, he wondered which pictures might be found on them, then continued his inspection.

A small door in half height was left. It looked like the door of a built-in cabinet. Opening it, Harry found an empty space. It could have been a single-box cabinet, except something looked wrong.

"May I help you, sir?"

He jumped, spun around, hand seizing his wand - nobody there!

He made a step toward the direction where he'd heard the voice, recognized some movement, his hand was out, up - then he relaxed. "Blimey - you gave me a jump!"

The figure in the picture - a servant in old-fashioned robes - bowed. "I deeply regret, sir - I could not find a better way to offer my services."

"Yeah - probably not." Harry still felt shaky. "I wasn't aware of you being ... By the way, how should I call you?"

Another bow. "I'm Arbogast, sir - the butler of this suite."

"Well, Arbogast - nice to meet you ... My name is Harry Potter."

"Yes, sir - I recognized you ... Pardon, sir."

"How - yes of course." His scar, what else? "It's okay, Arbogast ... Which services can you offer?"

"Drinks - food - other items for your convenience, sir. - What you might expect from a butler."

"This suite looks better by the minute," said Harry. Remembering the weird box in the wall, he asked, "Arbogast - what's the purpose of this thing?"

"A lift, sir - a connection to the servants' level. You won't need it for food and drinks, but maybe for other services."

"Such as?"

"For instance, sir, if you want your robes cleaned, this would be where you'd put them in - and take them out shortly afterwards."

"I don't think we need it today, but a glass of juice would be welcome."

"Very well, sir." Arbogast turned, turned back. "On the table, sir."

Harry stared. A large glass, unlike everything used during the meals, awaited him there, full of a golden-shimmering liquid. He made a step toward the table. At this moment, a knocking came from the door.

With a "Ssht" toward the picture, he opened. It was Cho.

She looked around. "Harry - did you train your speech of the evening?"

"No - why?"

"I heard you talking. A hidden guest?"

"Something like that, yes."

Cho stomped her foot. "Young Potter - if you think you can drag me, only because ... Anyway, you're wrong! - Who is it?"

"His name is Arbogast."

"Deeply satisfying to know *that* ... Harry, who - is - it??"

Another knocking from the door. Walking over, he had an impression as if smoke was curling out of Cho's ears.

Opening, he found Ron and Almyra. "Come in."

They walked to the chairs.

Cho's voice came growling, "I'm waiting, Harry!"

"Oh, yes. - What do you want to drink?" He looked at her, at the others.

"That looks good," said Ron, nodding toward Harry's glass. "Same for me, please."

"Almyra?"

"Yes - for me too."

"Cho?"

"I don't want a drink - I want an answer!"

"Just a second." He looked at the picture. "Arbogast - please three more glasses of juice."

"Very well, sir."

The spectacle again - Arbogast turning, turning back, three glasses appeared on the table.

Harry grinned. "Here you go."

"Yes," said Ron, "that's how life should be - only with less trouble than today."

Passing Harry, Cho murmured, "I'll kill you, Harry - if nobody else does, I will." Then she marched to the table and took her glass.

A moment later, Hermione and Viktor arrived.

Two more glasses, then the round was complete. Harry raised his glass. "To the people that hold our hopes - Dumbledore and Sirius!"

The others followed.

Putting down his glass, Harry said, "Hermione - aside from all that happened today, this is still your invitation."

"True." Hermione glanced at Almyra who returned the glance, then back at Harry. "Uhm - the reason was to give some information ... Only, this afternoon, when all of us were waiting - you outside ... Al and I were so nervous, we couldn't help starting to talk about it ... Somehow, it feels wrong what we did - I mean, we talked about Lupin too, but ..." She looked slightly guilty.

"No - it's good you did it already," said Harry, "because - I want to talk about him ... I want to tell you the story of the man for whom my father and Sirius worked three years to join him when he was a werewolf - my version of the story, that is, although ... You know already parts of it, but I must talk about him - that's the only way I can help him right now ... If you don't mind ..."

Viktor was quickest. "Yes, Harry, do it - I want to hear this story."

The others nodded empathically.

Harry didn't hesitate. "The first time I saw him was in the Hogwarts Express - two years ago. Ron and Hermione and I, we couldn't find an empty compartment, so we had to take the one where he was sleeping - it was pure luck ..." He spoke about his first encounter with a Dementor, how he had gone to Lupin for help after the disastrous Quidditch match, how he had worked with him to develop his Patronus, and how he had been successful in a first test against a fake Dementor, consisting of Crabbe and Draco Malfoy.

The next part was the most difficult. He had to tell how he had prevented Sirius and Lupin to kill Wormtail - with the subsequent events, resulting first in Sirius' escape, then in Lupin's dismissal, and finally in Voldemort's revival. He told them, pushed forward by an urge that held his voice steady, looking at the table, feeling Cho's arm holding him, comforting him.

"The next time I saw him was the evening I was invited to that meeting in Dumbledore's office - to discuss the details of the attack plan, and our own plans. It was ..." His voice broke for the first time.

Nobody spoke. He covered his face in his hands, breathing deeply, feeling the tears on his fingers.

Cho's hand stroking his head.

After a moment, he could continue. "I was so happy seeing him - and then he told me what I should do ... He was sitting there and was looking at me, as if there was no doubt I could do it ..." He described the training sessions, in particular the one in which the Golden Patronus had appeared for the first time. He explained how Lupin had taught him the basics of Zen, had honed his abilities as a fighter.

"The attack on the train - " Harry looked at Viktor, "we were all together except for you, so - this part is just for you ..."

Nonetheless, his audience listened as enthralled as before when he described the scene at the Hogwarts Express, how he had seen Lupin's Patronus wolf in trouble, and how they had crossed the plain to unite with Lupin and to beat the Dementors back into the forest.

"Since he has passed Defence over to Drilencu, I saw him twice - before this morning, I mean ... He told me about his work, and we - we dropped some formalities between us." He choked, steadied again. "I mean - we made clear how we feel to each other. He calls me Harry, and I call him Prof - although it's wrong ..." He explained Lupin's duty outside Hogwarts, how Lupin had refused any idea of Harry helping him, and why, and how Lupin had tried hard, so hard, to conjure a Golden Patronus.

"I guess he hasn't managed yet," Harry finished. "I don't know whether it would have saved him - probably not ... At least, it would have drained him less ... He's suffered before, and he's suffering now ... He can stand it, I know that - Voldemort can kill him, but he cannot break him." He looked up, his eyes dry, noticed the looks of the others at him.

Almyra's face showed determination, her eyes meeting his, an unspoken message, louder than a voice, clearer than words.

Viktor broke the silence. "Harry - this snake, this Nagini - what do you think of it? ... Is it true what she says?"

"Well - basically I think it's a trap ... Not necessarily Voldemort's - this snake doesn't think in a human way, she's completely selfish ... If that's possible, she's even more pitiless than he himself ... I don't trust any word she said."

Ron was thoughtful. "What she said about your blood in him, and that he cannot afford killing you - or that he cannot kill you, but you could do him ... I'd like to know what's that supposed to mean."

Cho's head had snapped around toward Ron, but Hermione was quicker. "We're not interested in figuring out whether he can afford it - that much's for sure!"

"That's not what I said," muttered Ron, seemingly intimidated by glaring looks from two sides - Hermione and Cho.

Harry came to help. "Ron's right - there *is* some meaning ... Except Nagini isn't a reliable source ... I know, there was - I don't know, something I've heard, or seen ..."

Ron was grateful, used the momentum immediately. "You see - Harry got me right ... Pity we cannot trance him."

It earned him indignant looks from three sides - Almyra had joined his opposition.

Hastily, Ron said, "Sorry - I didn't mean to scratch open wounds ... Maybe Fawkes could help ..."

"THAT'S IT!"

The others jumped, stared at Harry.

"Sorry - but I just remembered - Fawkes was sitting on my shoulder at that time. It was - yes, after my return from the maze, when I told Dumbledore what had happened - when I told him that Wormtail had taken my blood, there was a look in his face - only a moment ... he didn't say anything, but - he knows something."

"Ask him," suggested Ron.

Cho hissed, "If Dumbledore thought it a good idea to tell Harry, he'd done it already. But he didn't, so there's a good reason for it."

Harry said, "It's certainly a factor, but there are many other - anyway, for the next days, it's not the most important issue ... What I wanted to say - um, thank you - for listening to me."

Viktor said, "Thank *you*, Harry - for telling us."

After another order for fresh glasses, Hermione looked around. "Who can offer another story?" Her gaze fell on Almyra. "Al - what about your project? ... It feels as if there's a story behind."

Ron was staring. "Hermione - you're unbelievable! A day ago, you would have screamed at her, and today, you're digging holes for a story ... And judging me for rude remarks." He shook his head.

"True," admitted Hermione, "but we've settled it and buried it, so - " She looked at Almyra. "Was it wrong of me asking?"

"No," replied Almyra, "although - your speed is really breathtaking." She smiled. "And you're right, there is a story - only, for today, it's the wrong one ... I'll tell it if ... Well, another day."

A moment of silence. Everybody, most of all Almyra herself, realized her denial had already told a good part of the story, had left out names and details but not the end of it.

Hermione looked stricken. "I'm sorry, Al ... I didn't know."

"Listen to me!"

Viktor had spoken, catching the attention of the others. "I haff a story - it's not nice either, but it has a happy ending - the story of Durmstrang and our escape to Hogwarts."

Seeing the expectant looks of the others, he said, "But first, I want to tell you - Lupin is alive! ... If a dark wizard catches someone without killing him on the spot, he'll keep him for a longer time ... It's not a good time, but it's life - that's what counts. The critical moment will come when we'll try to rescue him ... Until then, relax as good as you can - it saves your strength."

Harry nodded. He fully agreed to Viktor's analysis, had come to the same conclusion earlier.

Then he listened to Viktor's story about a school that seemed the inverse of Hogwarts - with their teachers because the bad one was the rule rather than the exception, with their students which suffered from dozens of types like Draco Malfoy, with the general attitude according to which everything was forbidden unless it was allowed explicitly.

Karkaroff, as Viktor explained, had been just one out of many, not even the worst - there were several rivaling groups of dark wizards, not waiting for Voldemort, not willing to play subordinates of some foreign wizard who seemed more myth than reality, but dark and evil all the way.

After finishing school, Viktor had been busy looking for his own escape and return to a place where he had met a girl he couldn't forget. Then Drilencu had contacted him.

As it turned out, the complicated part was the planning, the gathering of the other students at the proper time, and the stealing of the ship, while the travel itself turned out easy - Viktor had done it only months before.

After Viktor had finished, it was time to end the evening. A last round, served by Arbogast, deepened the feeling this was some luxury version of a Hogsmeade pub.

It had been an endless day. Getting up from the comfortable chair, Harry felt how tired he was. They agreed that the Ravenclaws would pretend an evening spent in the Gryffindor tower, and the Gryffindors vice versa, then they left the suite.

25 - Killing Time

Monday morning, Harry woke after disquieting dreams, not remembering any of them. His scar didn't hurt, he took it as a sign Lupin was alive - not as an omen, more as a kind of bell that hadn't rung.

A night's sleep had done its work, sensing into himself, he felt refreshed strength, together with this new determination - and this even newer certainty.

Still before breakfast, he climbed the stairs to Professor Trelawney's office, to deliver his five pages. Eons ago, he had played Parrot Tarot in a Divination class ... How unimportant this sounded now!

The office was closed, nobody answered - of course, early morning wasn't Trelawney's time.

What to do? He'd done his duty, wasn't willing to waste any more time with this legacy from the past, only dropping the pages on the floor mat felt too rude. Pinning against the door? - There was a better idea.

Down the tower, up into his dormitory. Down the tower, up to the office. A moment later, his servant flying carpet hung in the air, chest-high, offering a roll of parchments with a long analysis of a Celtic Cross - actually, it had been pretty close to the real events.

Time for breakfast.

Coming into the hall, Harry checked the teachers' table. No Dumbledore, as expected.

The last true meal had been yesterday's breakfast. He ate for two.

Hermione noticed it, showing approval. "Back among the living?"

"Yes." How to talk without mentioning? "My head's clear - inside and out."

A moment of confusion in her face, then the understanding. "No - er, burning?"

"No. Everything's as fine as it can be."

Relief in her expression. "Good ... Sometimes, such a weather sensibility comes in quite handy, doesn't it?"

A sleepy Ron grumbled, "What nonsense are you talking about?"

Hermione blew air through her nose. "Ever heard of lightnings? - One that is, and another that wasn't?"

Ron stopped chewing, looked questioningly at Hermione, then at Harry, who rubbed his forehead and said, "No headache."

"Ah - ah, yes ... Of course, yes." Ron came slowly awake.

Hermione greeted him, "Morning, low-bulb," satisfied when noticing that Ron had caught this one immediately.

Harry faked reproach. "You shouldn't say that, Hermione ... He's saving energy - just what the doctor said."

Ron glanced at him suspiciously. "Harry, do me a favour - get back to your dimwit state, at least until *after* breakfast."

In Transfiguration, Professor McGonagall appeared with the infamous wood box. She had barely started to ask when Harry's arm was up - gone were the times of fussing around, worrying about other people's reactions toward his weird abilities. Determination was a strong force, although rivaled closely by another power ...

"Mr. Potter - your try."

He stepped forward, took his wand.

McGonagall asked, "Another Goblin hand, Mr. Potter?"

"No, Prof." He pointed at his right, outstretched arm. "*Manuserpeversa!*"

A whispering in the class. In place of his right arm, a snake was hanging in the air, bending, hissing, a brilliant shape of emerald green.

Harry didn't even try to move it with his shoulder - suddenly he knew why Neville had failed. He grabbed the snake behind the head, directed it toward the hole in the box, said, "Go - fetch the coin inside!"

Moaning and a choked cry behind him. The snake's head disappeared in the hole, Harry made a half-step forward to provide sufficient room - or body length - to let it move. Seconds later, the snake's body bent in arches, the head came out - a Galleon in its fang.

He held his palm open. "Give it to me!"

The coin dropped into his hand.

"Thanks - well done." He took his wand again. "*Refigurare!*" A snapping twist, then his arm was back.

There was no applause.

McGonagall said, "An impressive demonstration, Mr. Potter - although a bit nerve-racking, I have to admit ... Nevertheless - the galleon and the ten points are yours."

"Not quite," replied Harry. "The galleon and five points go to Neville - he had the idea ... I wouldn't have thought of it ... Anyway, I know why he failed - the snake has a head of its own, it's awfully complicated to control it from inside ... I wonder how you managed, Prof."

McGonagall said dryly, "Lacking your skill, I had to make do."

A giggling burst out of Harry. "Sorry, Prof." Still chuckling, he marched to Neville's seat, put the coin down. "Neville, that's rightfully yours."

Neville looked as pleased as Harry - in sharp contrast to the rest of the class. "You shouldn't do that, Harry - your snake was beautiful ... But I won't object." He sacked the coin happily.

Harry returned to his seat. Ron whispered, "How unfair - such a dirty trick early in the morning!"

From Ron, this felt like a compliment. "Play to your strengths," whispered Harry back, "and besides - the snake was pretty clean."

Minutes later, Hermione had earned the sickle with her claw hand - for once not grudging about someone else having been first. At Ron's remark, she said calmly, "What do you mean, second? - I won as many points as Harry and Neville, so we're on a par."

* * *

Coming to lunch, Harry checked the teacher's table. No Dumbledore. In his own calculations, this would have been the earliest possibility to find the Headmaster back, although a small one. So he felt no reason to worry.

Before he could sit down, Alicia reached him. "Harry - Katie and I are scheduled for after-lunch, but Katie's caught a horrible cold. Can you step in?" She grinned. "A threesome - you, Cho, and I?" Then her grin broadened. "Come to think of it - we could do it without Cho."

Harry grinned back. "What's wrong with your nose?"

"Nothing - why?"

"If you want to keep it that way, don't let me suggest your idea to Cho."

"Oh." Alicia glanced respectfully to the Ravenclaw table. "Only joking - but that might be what Cho'd say after the blow."

Harry walked over to ask Cho.

She studied his face suspiciously. "And why do you look like a cat that found the cream pot?"

"Er - something Alicia said."

"Indeed." Demonstrating angelic patience, Cho said, "Would you please repeat it, Harry?"

Almyra followed the conversation, her hands already covering her mouth.

Harry tried not to look at her, otherwise he would burst out. "Better not," he said.

"Why not?"

"I had the impression your response might hurt her nose."

It put Almyra over the edge. Her body was shaking from silent laughter while squeaking noises escaped her hands.

Cho gave up. "Surrounded by traitors - what can I do ... Tell Alicia it's okay - otherwise she might have the crazy idea to fly with you alone."

Unable to keep his face steady, Harry registered how Cho took the conclusion. He quickly jumped back, not entirely sure Cho's fist had been playful. Returning to his own table, he could see that Alicia had watched the spectacle.

She said, "Really, Harry - I would treat you more delicately."

"Stop it - you'll get both of us into serious trouble."

He could sign off right at the table. After Ron's nod, Harry caught his coat from the dormitory, then hurried down and out into the storage room. Taking his Steel Wing, he heard a sing-song from behind.

"T'lespasse'ls have to pay a b'lidge fee." A small figure blocked the entrance, her arms stretched to the door frame at both sides.

He stepped closer, put his broomstick aside, asked, "And what kind of payment would that be?"

"No cake - that's all I can tell ... A diligent young student like you should be able to figure it out." Cho's voice was purring.

Bending closer, seeing her head arching up, he asked, "Maybe something like ..."

"Mmhm."

A funny feeling - the vibration from the hummed sound. Next second, another voice made him twist back. "Heyheyhey - what's happening here?"

Alicia arrived, grinning. "Get up in the air - you two need some cooling down."

Harry took his Steel Wing, stepped out, jumped quickly into the air. In a way, Alicia was right - the slight breeze brought his burning cheeks back to normal.

They used the patrol for refreshing their fluency in squad manoeuvres, developed for triple teams and therefore unsuitable while flying as two and two.

Riding the Steel Wing had been a good preparation for the classes afterwards. It gave Harry something to think about, to hold in his mind which constantly drifted off to pictures of that house - real ones from inside, imagined views from outside. What the teachers had said, what his classmates might have answered - Harry couldn't remember.

Afterwards, he dumped his bag in the dormitory and returned to the hall. He would sit there, watching the people passing by, waiting for supper. Then, he would sit again, watching and waiting - until it would be time to go to bed, or until some people came through the door, whatever would occur first.

After a while, his mind reached a state of idleness, bare of any specific thought. Time passed. He came awake when somebody dropped into the opposite seat.

It was Fleur. "Salu, 'arry. - Why so alone?"

"Huh? ... Oh - just so."

"Just so - certainly." Fleur smiled. "So you're not waiting for someone to appear, which means we can talk."

"Yes, sure." He looked wondering at Fleur.

"It's three weeks until the Beauxbatons ball ..." Fleur stopped, slightly astonished at registering his lack of enthusiasm. "Do you remember, 'arry - it 'as to do with music, and danse ..."

He grinned. "Darkly ... It was some movement, right?"

Fleur shook her head in mock despair. "British students - a hopeless case ... Nevertheless - are you going to join the ball, Harry?"

"I hope so - why?"

"Because I've been ordered to invite you - Sunday after the ball - to a day at my parents' - um, estate." Fleur seemed a bit embarrassed.

"Ordered?"

Noticing her awkwardness, Harry had a sudden memory of some other parents who had sent somebody with an invitation. Carefully, he asked, "Whose order is this?"

Beaming, Fleur answered, "Guess who? - Who's collecting all stories about you, asking me each time 'ow you're doing?"

Oh no, thought Harry. "Er - Gabrielle?"

"Yes - who else! ... She's waiting for that day - meeting 'er 'ero at home ..."

"Her hero?? ... What ..." Desperately, he searched for tactful words. "This invitation - me alone?"

Something in his expression told Fleur what he was afraid of. She laughed, "No - of course not! Cho's also invited - Gabrielle will be delighted to meet you both - although you'll be the main guest for her."

"That's good." Harry felt relief. "You know - for a moment, it sounded very much like the Ginny syndrome."

"I just realized why you were so reluctant." Fleur shook her head. "No - Gabrielle won't blush and fall silent because you're around - quite the contrary ... She'll take you by the 'and and

show you everything - show off with you at her friends - that's what you should be prepared for."

"That'll be fun."

Still, Harry couldn't imagine why Fleur had been so embarrassed. It wasn't because of her sister. Maybe ... "This estate," he asked, "where is it - or what is it?"

Hit at first guess - the strange expression was back in Fleur's face. "It's a - a property in the Bretagne," she said, "with - er, a park around ... Lots of green - although not yet at this time of the year."

"A park? ... Is this a farm?"

"No - not exactly."

"Fleur - what is it??"

"Er - a castle." Fleur's cheeks looked pink - a rare view.

"And your parents are rich - right?"

Fleur nodded.

"That's the day," said Harry grinning, "Fleur embarrassed - just because her parents are swimming in money ..."

"They don't swim in it!" protested Fleur.

"Sorry - I shouldn't tease you ... Anyway, I have no problem with that - not at all, it sounds very nice actually ... Are you going to ask Cho by yourself?"

"Yes." Fleur hesitated. "I was wondering - 'arry, should I invite Ron? - And 'ermione?"

It was a strange question. "Why do you ask me? ... All I can say, they would be happy - a castle in France, a park around ... What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing, it's beautiful - only, sometimes I find it difficult to talk about ... Toward people who are - er, less privileged."

Harry smiled. "I don't know how it feels to grow up in a castle with a park around, but - I know exactly what you mean."

Fleur walked off.

Harry thought about a time three weeks ahead. Until then, Lupin would be back or ... He stopped the thought, forcing his mind toward the current time. Right now, everything was possible - Dumbledore might come through the entrance any second.

Dumbledore didn't come, wasn't there during supper. The other students, the other teachers arrived, ate, disappeared. Eventually, Harry was the only student left sitting in the hall.

Still, he didn't feel lonely, or bored. There was a lot to think about - for example, how it might feel if this was a guard in some distance from a house, rather than in the Great Hall of Hogwarts.

Half an hour passed. Then he heard somebody crossing the hall, approaching his seat. Not in the mood for a conversation, he avoided to look around. However, the steps stopped behind him.

He turned.

Cho stood there, a box in her arm. "Waiting, Harry?"

"Yes."

"Are you interested in a lesson about strategy?"

Cho as a strategy teacher? This promised to show an entirely new aspect. He examined her face, the box in her arm, not learning anything. "Here?"

She nodded.

"Yes, why not ... What's in the box?"

Cho walked around the table, took the opposite seat. She put the box on the table, opened it.

Harry saw a board, about the size of a chessboard, only with a pattern of lines rather than fields of alternate colours.

Cho placed the board on the table, extracted two trays with lens-shaped stones. Those in the first tray were almost white and looked like peppermint pills, the others were licorice-black.

"That's our training material," she said. "It's a game - Go."

Harry had heard that name before. Go was called the far-east version of chess, that was all he knew. He examined the board, took one of the stones, sensing the hard material with the polished surface. He placed it in one of the fields that were formed by the lines.

"It's not chess, Harry - you place the stones on the crossing of two lines."

He shifted the stone until it covered a crossing.

"Good." Cho took a black stone - contrasting to his white one - and placed it on the board, a few lines away from his own.

He stared at the two stones, couldn't see a meaning, looked up. "And now?"

"Now it's your turn again - place a stone!"

Harry took another stone and placed it next to his first.

Cho's next stone was far away from her first.

He took a third stone, placed it next to her's.

Cho's following stone was placed as a neighbour to his, diagonally across her previous one.

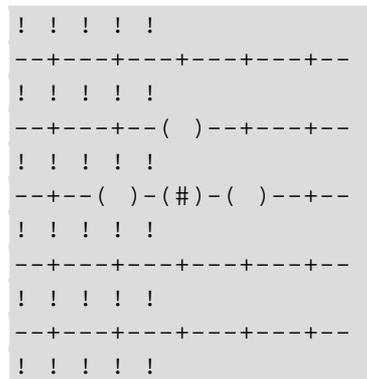
Harry looked at her. "I don't know what we're doing here - what about a bit of explanation?"

"Go has only three rules," was the answer. "You've mastered the first one already - we place stones in alternating sequence ... In a moment, I can explain the second rule - the most important one."

Harry shrugged, suppressing a remark about this seemingly ridiculous game. It looked simpler than child's play, no comparison to chess. His next stone was placed in the middle of the board, away from all others.

Cho's stone made a third neighbour of his own. "That's it," she said. "Look at this, Harry."

He studied the constellation of the four stones, three white ones from Cho around his single black one.



"The second rule," said Cho, "is about freedom."

A shiver ran through Harry. He still didn't know what Cho was talking about, however this word alone offered enough to catch his attention. So Go was more than child's play - actually, some people claimed that chess was child's play compared to Go.

"Stones have degrees of freedom," explained Cho. "Each empty crossing next to a stone - where you could place another stone - counts as one degree. A single stone like that one - " she pointed at Harry's stone alone in the middle, "has four degrees of freedom ... What's important - if stones form a contiguous pattern, like your two stones together here, they share their degrees of freedom ... Harry, how many degrees have your two stones together?"

He counted. "Six."

"Right. - You see, when putting a stone adjacent to another stone of your colour, you take one degree away but you add the other degrees of the new stone ... Got it so far?"

"Let me see ... A single stone in the middle has four degrees. A stone at the border has three, and a corner stone has only two." He counted. "Each of your three stones around mine has three degrees, and mine has just one left."

"Correct ... Now look at your stone surrounded by mine. Assume it's your turn - what can you do?"

"I can put another stone adjacent to it, and then - then they have three degrees together."

"Right ... And if it's my turn?"

"You can put a stone which takes the last degree of freedom from mine ..." Feeling excitement, he asked, "What happens when a stone loses its last degree?"

"That's rule number two. A stone, or several stones together, which have lost all degrees of freedom are taken off the board ... Since it's my turn, I'll do it."

Cho placed her stone, took Harry's black one off the board. The resulting pattern was a star shape of white stones only, with a hole in the middle:

```
! ! ! ! !
---+---+---+---+---+---+---
! ! ! ! !
---+---+---( )---+---+---
! ! ! ! !
---+---( )---+---( )---+---
! ! ! ! !
---+---+---( )---+---+---
! ! ! ! !
---+---+---+---+---+---+---
! ! ! ! !
```

"What about this black stone?" asked Harry, staring at the removed stone in Cho's hand.

"That's my prisoner," she replied. "At the end of the game, we total up two things - our prisoners and those positions in the board which are counted as our territory ... This empty place here would probably be my territory ... Prisoners and territory positions count one each ... Who's won more is the winner. - Basically, that's all."

"This territory - is it always clear who's holding which territory?"

"Generally, yes," said Cho. "Territory consists of places the other player cannot use because these stones would be captured ... Now assume there's an array of four positions, and I claim them as my territory - only you disagree. Then we have to play until it's clear ... In this case, you would place two stones, I would place two stones, and my last one would capture your two - okay so far?"

"Yes."

"Now count again ... I have a territory of only two left, but I have two more prisoners. So the sum's the same as before - four."

Freedom, prisoners, territory ... This was just a board game, even so - Harry, still waiting to play his first game, felt fascinated. Of course, the current situation, in which freedom - or the lack of it - and a certain prisoner played the dominant roles, added a lot of thrill to the terminology. Still - this Go felt like the proper mix for a lifelong addiction.

"I want to show you the third rule and then an example for a *fortress* in Go, afterwards we can play," said Cho. "Put three of your stones opposite of mine."

Harry obeyed. The resulting pattern looked like the Go equivalent of two wrestlers.

```
! ! ! ! !
-+-----+-----+-----+
! ! ! ! !
-+-----+---( )---+-----+
! ! ! ! !
-+---( )---+---( )---+---+
! ! ! ! !
-+---( # )-( )-( # )---+---+
! ! ! ! !
-+-----+---( # )---+-----+
! ! ! ! !
```

Cho said, "Assume it's your turn, Harry - can you place a stone in the middle and capture my lower stone?"

"Sure - why not?"

"Yes - you can place it, but listen - a placement isn't allowed if it would be a *suicide*, that means if the placed stone - and maybe others - would be taken off immediately ... So, if your other stones weren't around, this move would be against the rules ... Got it?"

"Yes."

"But - a move is completed only *after* the captured stones are taken off - and that's why your stone can be placed although, in the first second, it has no degree of freedom ... A second later, you take off my stone, then it has one degree."

Studying the pattern, Harry said, "And then you do the same with mine, and I the same with yours, and on and on ... Until the trays are empty."

Cho grinned. "I'm very pleased with you as my student, Harry - you've found the reason for rule number three."

"Hey, wait a second - how do you count? ... Setting, degrees, prisoners, territory - these are many more rules than three!"

"Maybe so, if you want to be picky ..." Cho's face left no doubt about her preferring a Harry with more tolerance. "A Go master treats them as the elementary mechanisms, while a rule defines specific situations ... This one's called *Ko*."

"They're not making a fuss with long words, do they?"

"You're lucky there's no true Go master around - actually it's a Japanese game, we China people are not capable of the finer details, except that's another story ... Let's talk about *Ko*."

"Yo, Cho - *Ko*."

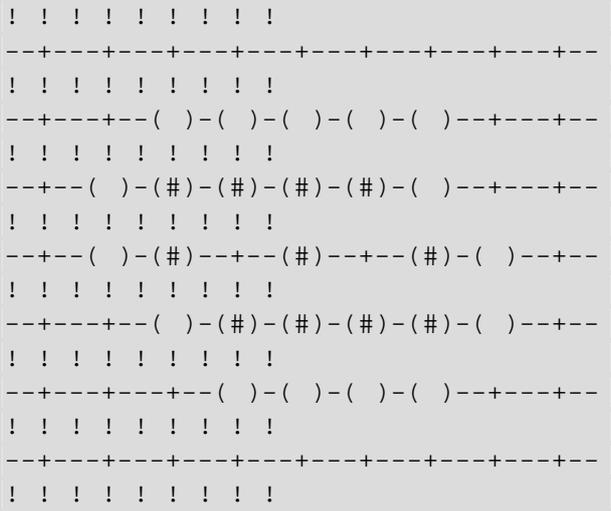
It took a moment longer until Cho had found the seriousness to explain more. "The Ko rule says - in such a pattern, you cannot place a stone immediately in the next move. You can do it in the move afterwards, giving the opponent the opportunity to close the Ko - that means filling the hole - or to leave it open."

Harry thought it over. To him, every second move still seemed enough to empty the tray quickly. Then he registered the full meaning. "And in this move, another threat can be established - right?"

"Yes - and that's why Go is such a wonderful training in strategy."

"Okay. Can we play now?"

"One more example - let me show you the fortress pattern." Cho took black and white stones and arranged a formation which indeed looked like a fortress, surrounded by enemies.



"A fortress," she said, "is a contiguous pattern with two eyes - like this one ... Can you see how it works?"

Harry grasped the idea immediately. "Sure - none of the two eyes can be closed because the first move would be suicide ... Which means, the entire pattern always keeps two degrees of freedom."

"Yup ... Now let's play." Cho placed four of Harry's stones close to the four corners of the board.

Astonished, Harry watched her movements. "Hey - what are you doing there?"

"You're a beginner - it's a help to balance out for your lack of skill."

In the first game, Harry was slaughtered by Cho.

He had expected that, had used the game to study her technique in constructing patterns. Cho placed stones in certain distances, always the same number of lines above or below and to the side. When he tried to attack, her next stone halved the distance between the two stones closest to his own. Then, with another stone, she was able to secure the exposed part.

Until the end of the game, he had already started to use the same strategy, except it was of course too late.

About to prepare for the second game, Harry saw Ron arriving from his office. He waved, "Ron - want to learn something better than chess?"

Ron reached the table, looked at the board, examined the stones. "What's this? ... Hoop-di-loop for first-years?"

"English barbarian," snorted Cho.

Harry grinned. "This is Go - sit down and watch ... Let's see whether your mouth is still that big at the end."

Ron took a seat next to Harry's.

While doing their moves, Harry and Cho explained the rules to Ron. After some more questions, Ron fell silent - as an experienced chess player, he could keep the watcher's rule - no talking.

The game ended with three points more for Cho. "Close enough," she said. "Harry - in the next game, there are no more beginner's stones for you."

"That's okay - you'll have trouble enough without them - I promise you." He turned to Ron. "So - what's your comment now?"

Ron grinned. "You're just looking for something you can win against me ... Well, this might be it - let me watch one more game."

"This is my last one," said Cho, "then I'll leave it to you ... I need some beauty sleep - lacking that, I need some sleep."

Neither Harry nor Ron took the chance for a remark - their eyes were fixed at the board.

For the first time, Harry felt on a par in the game, only then he became aware that Cho hadn't used her full skill in the two previous games. Within minutes, a silent battle of black and white stones took place, with attacks in one corner, answered with counter-attacks in another. It was a fight about minute details of advantage, including the first real Ko patterns. Suddenly, a single stone more or less became extremely important. Each time Harry thought the Ko could be closed, Cho found another move that had to be answered first.

Counting after the game, Harry found himself in second place - one point less than Cho.

He moaned, "Whew - almost ... At least, I know where I made the mistake ... One more, then ..."

Cho looked pleased. "There's nothing to complain about your learning speed, Harry ... Anyway, this here's Muggles Go - once you have beaten me the first time, I'll show you Wizard Go."

"What's the difference?"

She grinned. "Some magic, what else? ... Hone your skill with Ron - I'm done for today ... See you tomorrow."

Harry watched her leave, his eyes back at the game before she had reached the exit. Glancing at Ron, he asked, "Ready?"

"You bet." Ron's eyes were shining.

The first game was easy play. Even for Ron, watching and playing were still two different levels.

In the second game, Harry had to be more careful, then Ron made a mistake that cost him four stones. "Dammit!" he muttered.

"We can stop this one and start the next," offered Harry.

"No - I learn fastest when I'm mad about my own mistakes."

Ron was right. While chanceless in this game, he used it to the end to experiment with patterns and sequences. In the third game, obvious mistakes no longer occurred. Only toward the end, Harry took profit from better placements, winning by three points.

"One more, Harry - then I really have to go."

Ron had taken the lesson. His new placements were the slight nuance better than before, coming to full effect while the board was filling. Harry could hold against Ron's strategy, though not more.

Counting at the end, they realized it was a draw.

"To some degree, it's like in chess," said Ron. "If you don't make a mistake, you can hold it, only that's all ... To win, you have to take some risk - and find the better end for yourself."

It was true, and for the first time Harry had a feeling what it would mean in terms of stone placements - something he never had mastered in chess. Moreover, he could feel how his vision of strategy was shaped while playing Go - getting sharper and wider at the same time.

A single attack, no matter how courageous, didn't win the match. The absence of weak spots, plus some carefully placed anchor points, these were the cornerstones of a successful strategy. He would have to think about what this meant in the real world.

* * *

Waking late next morning, Harry stormed down ... No Dumbledore. It felt like a blow in the stomach, leaving a dent in his armour of patience and faith.

Through the morning classes, he steadied himself again, fixing his mind toward the evening as the next checkpoint. In History, he remembered the pending request for the Ollivander essay, admonished himself to settle back to a minimum degree of normal student's daywork - particularly so for a student with O.W.L.s coming closer.

After the class, he went to the library.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Potter - no luck." Madam Pince seemed more satisfied than disappointed. Probably, finding the essay in Beauxbatons might have caused serious damage to her self-esteem, or to her opinion of the Hogwarts library.

"I sent an owl to the NLML," she said. "You may check in again Thursday or Friday."

Coming down to lunch, Harry found Dumbledore's seat still empty - as expected, at least, still within the limits he had set himself mentally.

Another seat was also empty - that of McGonagall. It could mean something or nothing, anyway, Transfiguration was the first class after lunch.

Entering the classroom, the Gryffindors were surprised not to find Professor McGonagall ready and waiting for them. Seeing the empty space behind the desk, Harry's pulse quickened - something was going on, no doubt related to Lupin.

The students were still discussing this unusual beginning when the door opened and Mr. Filch, the caretaker, stepped in. Grumpily, he announced the class was cancelled because Professor McGonagall had other business, another teacher wasn't available to step in, and the students might spend the time somewhere and with something but, as far as he was concerned, without any noise, without causing any dirt, not in the corridors and most preferably nowhere else in Hogwarts.

Harry exchanged a glance with Ron, another with Hermione. "Let's have a look," he murmured.

They left the classroom, entered the staircase to Dumbledore's office without causing attention. At the upper landing, Harry hesitated a moment. "Let's check whether the gargoyle is open."

Climbing higher, he found the guarded door unlocked. It couldn't be by accident!

His heartbeat pounding, Harry climbed the steps, followed by Ron and Hermione. He reached the entrance to the office - closed, no murmuring from inside.

He knocked.

"Come in." Dumbledore's voice!

Entering, they found Dumbledore behind his desk. "I had no doubt you would find me," he said, "so I saved any public invitation."

Harry examined the Headmaster's face, tried to find an answer before asking. Dumbledore looked a bit tired, otherwise, Harry might as well have read tea leaves.

"Sit down," said Dumbledore, "and let me tell you what we know."

Harry found a seat, barely registering the phoenix which arrived to occupy its usual place - his left shoulder.

"We found the house."

Thoughts whirled through Harry's mind. The place known - then what was Dumbledore waiting for? Or was it already ...

"He is inside - alive. There is no question about that ... We heard - noises."

Harry felt a sharp pain in his stomach. Noises - these had been screams of a cruciated Lupin, for anything else, Dumbledore would have used other words. A glance sideways, toward the pale faces of the others, told him they had taken the same conclusion.

Before he could ask, Dumbledore spoke again. "The house - there is no way to break in with any prospect of success. It's a death trap ... We would be lucky coming out still alive - so forget any idea about me, or some Enforcement Squad, storming in to rescue Lupin ... This method doesn't work."

Feeling his throat narrowing, Harry told himself this was exactly what they had expected. McGonagall off, most likely near that house, Dumbledore alone - it had been clear the moment they entered the office. Not this method ... So there was another one!

He asked, "What's happening now, Professor Dumbledore?"

"The house is under surveillance - by a dog and a cat, taking turns ... If something happens, they'll be here within ten minutes - we have a two-way portkey connection."

"Something happens - " said Ron, "what do you mean, Professor?"

"Voldemort might leave the house - or he might send out Lupin under a curse ... In both cases, we would start some action ... However, I don't expect any such event. For me, there's little doubt Voldemort keeps Lupin as the cheese in a mouse-trap, waiting for any of us to do something foolish ... This is the only explanation that fits the facts - otherwise, he would have killed him already."

Dumbledore had said aloud what Harry had feared. With dry mouth, he asked, "Is ... is it hopeless, then?"

"The case isn't lost yet," replied Dumbledore. "Someone who had to wait twelve years asked me to tell you that, Harry ... For the next days, we will hold guard - that's all I can say for now."

Just in time, Harry remembered. "Professor - we have a third guard ... It's Almyra Benedict."

Dumbledore showed little surprise. "I expected this offer - we have to talk about it." He turned to the others. "Please don't feel offended if I want to discuss it with Harry alone."

Slightly surprised, Ron and Hermione nodded and left the office.

When they were alone, Dumbledore looked at Harry, a dry smile in his face. "This offer isn't the true reason why I sent them out, Harry - I have to tell you something nobody else must hear."

The Headmaster had a plan! Harry had felt there was something more than waiting and guarding. His head bent forward, waiting for Dumbledore's next words.

"I'm telling you - only you - because you'll be involved ... And because I want to be sure you're not trying something desperate ... For the next five days, it will be exactly as I said - we will guard that house. Then - according to public knowledge - you'll disappear from Hogwarts, Harry."

His eyes wide open, his pulse racing, Harry asked, "And secretly ..."

"Secretly, you will hide in a room - after having made another visit with Nagini - and after giving me some of your hair ... And your wand."

Harry's breath stopped. This meant - Dumbledore would enter that house, pretending to be Harry Potter ... In persona rather than mentally, as he himself had done twice and would do again. Obviously, Dumbledore was sure Voldemort knew about these visits - more, he considered the capturing of Lupin as a trap to catch Harry.

"Professor Dumbledore - can you ... Can you do it?"

A short smile. "Appearing in your shape - certainly ... Coming out alive, I think this is the first part of your question - that's why I need your wand, Harry ... Getting Remus out - I'm not sure."

"Why not immediately - why only after five more days?"

"Because a certain condition will be reached only then - more exactly, the day after that."

A condition ... Harry was lost. "Which, Professor?"

"Full moon."

The day on which Lupin could - would - turn into a werewolf. Suddenly, Harry realized how desperate Dumbledore's plan was. So many things could go wrong - rescuing Lupin seemed less a planned result than the possible outcome after a long streak of luck.

"How do you protect yourself against a werewolf?"

"I'll need Sirius' help - he knows already."

Another thought struck Harry. "Professor - do you know Parseltongue?"

Dumbledore smiled. "Unfortunately not, Harry - that's the weak point in my plan ... It's also the reason why Remus has to be a werewolf - the only way to pass that guarding snake ... Werewolves are highly resistant to normal attacks and poisons."

Five days - an incredibly long time when knowing a friend was held prisoner, most likely tortured, always at the risk to be killed because Voldemort no longer believed his trap could work.

"Coming to that offer, Harry ..." Dumbledore thought for a moment. "I have to admit, another Animagus - in particular a bird - would be a great help. The question is whether I have the right to accept the offer ... Please tell me what you think of it."

"Professor - do you know that Almyra can do an owl and a falcon?"

The Headmaster looked pleased. "I knew about the owl - and I had a feeling this wasn't the full truth ... But it doesn't answer the most important question, Harry."

"No - although it shows how qualified she is for the task ... Otherwise - she knows what she's going to risk, Sirius made this very clear, Professor ... She was scared a lot, then we meditated - her main question was whether she was ready to do it ... Afterwards, her answer was yes."

"So you are confident she's up to it?"

Something in Dumbledore's question let Harry hesitate. After a moment, he said, "Al and I - we've found out we think in similar ways, Professor ... She's ready to do the part I cannot do ... She knows it, and I know it ... I could send her."

The approval showed in the Dumbledore's voice. "You have found the unspoken question, Harry - which tells me you know what you are talking about ... Good, I will do it."

Harry wasn't ready to leave yet. There was something else he wanted to discuss, or maybe two things. He looked at the Headmaster. "Professor Dumbledore - you won't enter that house to kill Voldemort, right?"

Calmly, Dumbledore answered, "You know the answer, Harry, so why do you ask?"

"Because ..." Harry didn't continue.

Dumbledore said, "It isn't *my* fate to confront Voldemort in the final decision - I'm merely a tutor of the one who has been selected by fate - you."

"How long do you know, Professor?"

"When I heard about Voldemort's attempt to kill you, this was my first thought - more so because he failed ... See - regardless of how easily Voldemort kills people, he never did it without a reason - that's why I asked myself immediately what was the reason to kill a baby - more exactly, to try it, and to fail so miserably ... I examined the question again and again, without finding another answer."

"I didn't know ... I didn't know even some days ago when I decided I would be the one to do it ... But Cho knew - she said she knew it since I returned from the tournament ... How can that be, Professor?"

Dumbledore smiled. "You should be the last to whom I have to explain the power of love, Harry."

"Yes ... I promised - " Harry blushed. "I promised Cho to do it only when I'll be ready to do it *and* come back to her."

The smile deepened to a beaming. "A decision that's remarkable for any age - not to mention yours, Harry ... You see how this power finds many ways to enforce you, and to protect you."

"There's still another question I'd like to ask, Professor."

In an instant, the Headmaster's expression changed to a non-committal smile. "Ask you may, Harry."

It was obvious - Dumbledore knew what he wanted to know, and the answer wouldn't tell him anything. Still, Harry had to speak it out. "My blood in Voldemort - what does it mean?"

"You'll find the answer by yourself, Harry - this will be another step on your path toward the state which is required to achieve your goal ... All I'm ready to tell you is this - if it would protect you, if its effect would be that Voldemort cannot kill you, I would send you into that house right now."

26 - Shapes and Bodies

Harry hadn't asked Dumbledore about the time when Almyra would start her task. However, at the supper table he saw she was missing. Thinking about the evening ahead, he turned to Ron. "Have you planned something for this evening?"

"Yes, indeed - to come out some stones better than you in a Go match."

"Well," grinned Harry, "just by accident, I had the same idea. Seeing Ron's expression, he added, "From my point of view, that is."

Hermione wasn't interested. She omitted to explain whether she had some work or some other company in mind, and Harry didn't ask.

In contrast, Cho was eager to join - without Almyra around, and knowing what Almyra would do at that time, Cho had obviously dreaded the evening like Harry himself.

As there was no longer a reason to watch for incoming people in the hall, the suite seemed the natural place for playing Go - exactly where Harry had stored board and stones the evening before. They decided to play three-game matches, each of them against the two others.

The first match was won by Cho. Although Harry had scored his first victory against her, it had been the smallest one possible - one point. On the other side, Cho had beaten Ron by three points, while Harry and Ron had finished with another draw.

Checking the time, they found themselves in a conflict - it was too early for sleep, they were still too excited from the match, while another one would take too long.

Cho found the solution. "We'll play Rapid Go," she said, "with twenty minutes per game - giving the players ten minutes each ... Exceeding the time means losing by three points."

"My chance," shouted Ron. "I'll be back in a minute with a chess clock."

The thing he came back with was a double clock with two buttons. Having done his move, a player would press his own button, to stop his own clock and to start the opponent's clock. In the last two minutes of a player's time, the big hand would lift a small flag inside the clock - when this flag came down again, after the hand had moved through, the time was over. The clock, intended for Rapid Chess, wouldn't mind ticking for Go instead.

The time pressure added a new thrill to the game, with unexpected effects toward their style and strategic quality.

Ron, as an experienced Rapid Chess player, could beat Harry by three points, making true what he had intended for the evening. However, in his second game against Cho, he was trapped by his own greed. Quickly in a better position, he recognized a chance to defeat her big-style - at the scale of ten points. While his analysis was basically correct, the manoeuver turned out too complicated - the flag in Ron's clock fell down before the game was over.

His game against Ron had been Harry's first lesson in Rapid Go. Watching Ron's mistake became the second one. Avoiding the pitfalls of his game against Cho, he found her still

suffering from the disaster she had barely escaped, angry about herself, lacking her normal precision. Without any spectacular move, he came out four points in advance - match winner.

"I should have won that match," growled Ron. "What a stupid mistake ... Worse, I did it myself - I, the veteran of so many Rapid Chess battles." He looked at Cho. "What about the magic version? - You said you'll show it once Harry has won against you."

"Yes ... Today is too late ... Tomorrow's reserved for school work - Wednesday evening, here again."

Ron nodded. "I'm looking forward to it ... Good night everybody."

Despite his big mouth, Ron could be surprisingly tactful - as Harry realized when his friend left without waiting for him.

Cho rose from her chair, turned to the servant picture, and said, "You may go to sleep, Arbogast."

"I'm never ... Very well, Miss."

Cho strolled to Harry's chair, sat herself on the broad armrest, bent closer, and whispered, "In a minute, I'll be gone, Harry - so use it." Then she bent still closer.

Had this minute been timed by a chess clock, the flag would have fallen down a little while before Cho's head turned back again. "See you tomorrow ... Good night."

She had almost reached the door when he stopped her. "Cho?"

"Hm?"

"In a few days, something will happen ... You must know then - it's not what it seems to be. But in public, you must behave as if."

She looked sharply at him, then smiled. "I didn't understand a bit - except for one thing ... I love you too." An instant later, she was gone.

* * *

During the next day, Harry learned that waiting for an event of an unknown date and time, as he had done after sending his letter to the Goblins, was definitely not the worst. Waiting for five days to pass, unable to help, not having anything to prepare like before the exam patrol, hurt worse.

During Astronomy, he felt tempted to ask how to accelerate the moon. Thinking the question over, he became aware how stupid it would have been - not only for the thought but even more for confusing the elementary astronomical facts of the moon phases.

He and Ron decided to spend the evening in the suite, playing Go. He won the first game, then lost the second twice as badly. They were in the midst of their third game when a knocking came from the door.

Harry twisted up, hurried to the door. Should he ... No, it could only be someone who knew about this room. He opened.

Almyra stood there, looking at him with tension in her face.

"Come in."

She stepped into the room, stopped, as though not knowing what do.

Harry reached her. "Al - is something wrong?"

Quickly, Almyra shook her head. "No - he's still there ... I just came up hoping to find you here ... I need a moment before meeting Cho ..." She started to tremble.

Harry grabbed her shoulders. "Al??"

"Harry - hold me, please ... I ... I heard him ..." Next moment, she was clinging to him, her body shaking in desperate sobs, her head buried at his shoulder.

Harry held her, hugged her, took her head, stroked her hair, feeling surprise at how much smoother it felt than it looked, murmuring comforting words, instinctively avoiding the senseless phrase, 'It's okay' - nothing was okay, except that he could feel how Almyra was slowly recovering.

After a while, her sobs ebbed. He guided her to a chair, made her sit down. Ron was there with a glass.

Almyra took it, gulped it down. She looked up, tears still glittering. "Thank you ... You know, it wasn't that long - only I couldn't do anything, had to stay there ..."

"I know," replied Harry. "In a way, it's as terrible as - being cruciated yourself ... He's alive, Al - that's what counts ... And he's tougher than he looks."

"Yes, I know." The slightest hint of a smile. "Remember - he's my case number one ... I'm okay now - don't worry ... I can stand it." She held the glass. "Can I have another one?"

Ron passed the order to Arbogast. When the new glass appeared, Almyra took it and sipped, then said, "Ron, please - ask him for a tissue."

Harry stopped his friend. "Wait - there's something better." He walked to the bedroom door that matched his card, opened it. "Al - there's a bathroom inside."

Almyra disappeared through the door, closing it.

Ron glanced at Harry. "You didn't bother to tell us."

Harry shrugged. "What for?" He pointed to the doors. "The others don't open with that card, anyway I think each of them is a bedroom with its own bathroom ... What you might expect in a guest suite."

Ron grinned. "Wouldn't it be nice if we could hold that card? ... Might come in handy some day."

The door opened again. Almyra came out, saving Harry from an answer. She looked better, although everybody could see she had cried.

Reaching the table, Almyra took her glass and emptied it. "Okay," she said, "I'm ready to meet Cho ... Thanks again - good night."

When Almyra was gone, Ron asked, "Harry - you've been ... How bad is it?"

Startled, Harry realized that Ron had never been cruciated. "Pretty bad," he said, "but I don't think it can break your will - provided you have a strong will ... Remember the Longbottoms - they were driven mad before they succumbed ... It's white hot pain - pure and simple ... Sure, it takes a lot of energy ..."

"If you had a choice," interrupted Ron, "which role would be your's - Al's or Lupin's?"

Harry shuddered. "Sitting here, I'd say Lupin's ... Although I know - afterwards, it would definitely feel like the wrong choice."

Was it from the encounter, from Ron's imagination that lacked the real experience, or just by accident - for whichever reason, Harry defeated him in the running game and in the subsequent one.

Cleaning the board, Ron said, "Just for my self-esteem, Harry - a last rapid one to finish the evening?"

Harry grinned. "What makes you think you'll win this one?"

"I'll answer that question afterwards - if there's still a need to answer."

There was no need. After his two glorious victories, Harry couldn't muster the energy for fast-thinking Go. Ron beat him big-style, so badly that Harry was almost laughing at his last moves, while his patterns were blasted away like dust in a storm.

* * *

Almyra was still there during breakfast next morning, Harry could see her at the Ravenclaw table. By lunch, however, she was gone. He wondered how the three Animagi would organizing their shifts, obviously, human conditions were prevailing over the natures of the animals - although, of course, a cat might be counted for the day as well as for the night. On the other hand, he didn't know whether the guard was held around the clock or with a break during the night hours.

Classes left as little impression as the day before, tomorrow would certainly show the same. Harry waited impatiently for the evening, fixing his mind on this manageable time span. He would use the same trick tomorrow, and the day after tomorrow - then, the five days would be over.

Cho arrived with two other trays of Go stones. Those in the first tray were light green, looking like jade.

"It's all fake," she said, "you'll see in a moment."

The other stones were black, with streaks and spots that looked like gold. As beautiful as these stones were - after days of playing with the pure sets of white and black, for Harry it felt like a sacrilege to use coloured stones, no matter how precious.

Cho sat down opposite him. She moved the tray with the green stones to her side, grabbed one, laid it on the table in front of her. "Now watch," she said.

After a second, the stone rose an inch or two, floated through the air, and landed with a click on the board.

Cho grinned maliciously. "Your turn, Harry."

For an instant, Harry felt dumbfounded. Cho hadn't used her wand!

Then he knew - these stones were prepared somehow. Still ... Swallowing any comment, he took a black stone, placed it on the table - isolated, the object of his undivided concentration.

For some seconds, he didn't know how to approach the stone mentally. It had to be willpower ... He focused his mind to move the stone. It felt ridiculous ...

Suddenly, the stone jumped up, hung a moment in the air, then whooshed straight to the board, banged down and, driven by the momentum, glid across several lines. It came to a halt almost in the middle between the marking lines.

Cho asked sweetly, "What place did you have in - er, mind?"

Ron was giggling madly.

Harry suppressed another remark - any word from him, and Ron would roll over. He glanced at the stone, trying to imagine a technique of smoother movement. Less force? A voice came up in his mind ... *Steady does the job*, that man with the office furniture had said. These were small stones, not furniture, but otherwise ...

The stone rose, made a few jumps in mid-air, the first of them more abruptly, then slowing down. Harry blocked his mind against the snorting noises coming from Ron's direction, trained his mental grip. Finally, the stone moved the last inches across the board and landed at the proper place - not exactly at the intersection, however unmistakably positioned.

"Not bad," said Cho. "Still a little clumsy, but ..."

Suddenly, the stone was lying exactly at the intersection.

After a few more stones, Harry had mastered the skill to place his stones accurately. The trick was to think of the lines as a grid, as a network beyond which there was no board of fine wood but empty space. It was also quite helpful that Ron had stopped making noises.

Some minutes later, Harry was about to make his next move when he stopped, wondering. This pattern - he could swear he had placed it differently. He checked again - how could he have made such a stupid mistake?

"Something wrong?" asked Cho.

Harry pointed. "This formation - I can't believe I built it like that! ... It's so obviously wrong ..."

"Funny ... Maybe the stone had its own thoughts."

Ron's giggling started again.

Angrily, Harry glanced at his friend, only to see Ron looking at another corner of the board. Checking that spot, he found a similar misconception. Suddenly, he knew.

Accusingly, he glanced at Cho. "It wasn't the stone - it was you!"

No longer able to resist, Cho joined Ron in the giggling. "It's wizard Go, Harry - magic moves and miraculous misfits."

"Ha - that's cheating!"

Cho shook her head. "You can do the same - if you can."

Harry tried. The stone really moved to a neighbour place - except that it jumped like a frog through wet grass.

"Now *that's* cheating," shouted Cho.

Ron was hanging in the chair, gasping for breath, eyes watering.

It was impossible to remain serious under these conditions. Chuckling all the time, Harry placed his other stones carelessly, only trying to catch Cho while she was changing positions. While he didn't recognize any of her *corrections*, Ron's outbursts clearly told him she was doing it again and again.

Toward the end, the stones kept their places, simply because there were no more empty crossings in the neighbourhood. Harry's stones were blocked, surrounded, diminished quickly, while Cho's patterns had lots of room. When the game was over, Cho stopped counting at a surplus of thirty points.

At least, Harry had found out how she did it. "You're moving them while I'm busy setting my stone - right?"

"Of course!" Cho glanced at him disbelieving. "It's the wizard rule number one - do it while the spectator is distracted."

"And how do you manage doing it so smoothly?"

"You have to think of the lines as railroad tracks - as the only ways they can use. The track only leads from the current position to the new one - that's the image you have to build ... Then, it's just a decent lifting, a slight push - and the stone shifts over ... Only neighbour positions - that's the rule."

"Hmm." Harry examined a stone to see whether he could detect a visible sign of the magical improvement. "I don't like it much - normal Go's more my style."

"It depends on what you want to do," replied Cho. "For playing Go, this is certainly a blow in the face of any tradition ... As a lesson in strategy, it's as important as the standard rules."

"It feels like a dirty trick."

Angrily, Cho snapped, "So? - Are you too proud for that?"

With astonishment, Harry became aware that Dumbledore's plan was very much the same as Cho's trick - a faked position here, a faked identity there. Apologetically, he said, "No, I'm not - only I'm not used to it."

Cho smiled at him. "It's always a question against whom to play them - don't you ever forget that!"

Ron, listening to that advice, showed a deep and gloating grin. It disappeared quickly when Cho turned to him. "Okay, Ron - get ready."

"Oh no - I don't have to learn that ..." Ron's hands were up. "I'm not a crusader like Harry - just an ordinary Go player ... Trying to become extraordinary."

"Coward!"

"That's not true! ... Besides - if anyone else had said that, I would ..." Ron couldn't find the words to express the horrible accident Cho seemed to have avoided just barely.

She wasn't impressed. "Stop playing the gentleman - it's about wizard Go ... C'mon!"

Still muttering, Ron switched seats with Harry.

Then it was Harry's turn to watch, deeply satisfied, how Ron went through the same difficulties, how he failed to move any of Cho's stones, how his patterns were dismantled as swiftly as Harry's only minutes ago.

Afterwards, Harry and Ron trained to move stones a half inch across the board, from one crossing to the next, noiselessly, smoothly, unobtrusively. Ron had accepted only with the promise of a regular match as a reward.

When the training session ended, Harry could move stones to the next crossing, but only in a ragged style, making an audible sound. At least, he was ahead of Ron, who still had trouble stopping the stone at the destination.

In the three-game match, the only one left with sufficient energy for serious playing was Ron. So to nobody's surprise, he scored a triumphant success - four points against Harry, two

against Cho. In his last game against Cho, Harry had no competitive mood left, only tried to lose not too high, so Ron's triumph wouldn't be spoiled.

Instead, he weighed each stone as a piece of material rather than a game item. Close to the end, he made a serious try. The stone glid through the air, then fell down at the board.

"Hey!" Cho was beaming. "Very good, Harry!"

"No - not really ... I lost it - that's why it dropped ... Anyway, it's just a game."

Seriously again, Cho replied, "Only here ... Imagine - it's not a Go stone but a door lock."

* * *

Two days later - days which had lasted forever and appeared of normal length only in retrospect - Harry crossed the hall, having completed the classes of the day and on his way to the library. He wanted to ask Madam Pince if the inquiry had yielded any result.

Glancing toward the entrance to the guest suite, a figure caught his attention - an instant later, it had disappeared around the corner.

These hairs - had it been Sirius?

He changed course and walked over. Coming around the same corner, he saw the figure waiting at the next landing - it was really Sirius.

He climbed the stairs. "Sirius - you here?"

"Sssht - softly, Harry." Sirius bent closer. "Listen carefully - I'm going to tell you how you'll disappear."

Harry nodded.

"You have to fetch your coat, gloves, and your Invisibility Cloak - if you're seen by somebody, it's okay - as long as it's none of your close friends ... You mustn't be asked what you're doing, okay?"

"Yes."

"Then you take your broomstick, and then you fly up to the side of the building that looks toward the lake ... For this part, *nobody* must see you ... Check the front - when you see a lighted window with a red shawl, come to that window ... I'm waiting for you inside ... Got it?"

Harry whispered, "Coat, gloves, cloak - Steel Wing - red shawl ... Okay."

"Go!"

Harry crossed the hall, climbed upstairs to his dormitory. No Ron around, no Hermione - he donned the coat, stuffed the cloak and the gloves inside, went out ... The staircase was the first critical part - he passed only Seamus.

Reaching the hall, he checked, trying to get an overview without looking like someone playing hide-and-seek. Across the hall, Ron was walking - to his office, probably. A moment later, he was out of sight. Harry moved forward, crossed the hall, reached the exit. Seconds later, he was in the storage room.

In a few minutes, the pre-supper patrol would come in. Would they take notice of his empty rack? If so - was it good or bad?

He took his Steel Wing, mounted outside, jumped up.

Flying a wide arc, careful not to be seen, he approached the building from the lakeside. Lighted window ... There were several, none of them showing a red shawl. Coming closer, he recognized an irregular shape in one of them, however dark rather than red. Still, it was the only one showing something. Holding to the side, he slid closer, finally saw a red shimmer - in broad daylight, that thing was certainly red ... Anyway, this had to be the right window.

He slid forward, making himself visible from inside.

A figure appeared, opened the window.

Harry inched inside - the first time he was landing with a broomstick in a room. He touched down and dismounted.

Sirius asked, "Could you manage unnoticed?"

"Seamus Finnigan saw me on the stairs, that's all ... The patrol might see the empty rack!"

Sirius grinned. "That's just fine - the sooner people recognize you're gone, the better ... Wait here." Sirius disappeared through the door.

Harry glanced around. The room, although smaller, reminded him of the guest suite. Two doors, the exit and ... He walked to the other, tried the handle. It opened - to a bedroom, as expected.

Coming back, he saw another servant picture, looked up. "Good evening."

"Good evening, sir ... What can I do for you, sir?"

"You can tell me your name."

"Yes, sir - Nicodemus, at your service, sir ... I feel honoured to have you as my guest, Mr. Potter."

At this moment, the door to the outside clicked. Sirius came in, followed by Dumbledore, who went straight to Harry. "The time has come, Harry - for your visit with Nagini ... Ready?"

"Yes, Professor ... Where's Almyra?"

Dumbledore's eyes were sparkling. "Would you accept the thought to be tranced by myself, Harry?"

"Er - yes, of course." Harry blushed - what a stupid question.

"Good ... What I want you to do, Harry - your visit should be as short as possible. If you find Nagini guarding the cell - that means if it's obvious Lupin is still there, you can return as soon as Nagini has sensed you ... Otherwise, your only question should be 'Is Lupin still there?' ... If Nagini asks you why you are there, your answer should be something like, 'Just checking,' at any rate, no clear statement ... Do you understand what I want?"

"I'll arrive - look for Lupin - and disappear."

"Exactly." The Headmaster seized for his wand. "Sit down, Harry ... Ready?"

"Yes."

Dumbledore's wand pointed at him. "*Mesmerisio!*"

The room was replaced by a misty void. Sensing around, Harry scanned for a sign. No voice ... No mark - no clear one, at least. Only an irregularity in the void, like a dent ... He aimed toward it, felt it grow, sensed something faintly familiar ... He made contact by thinking acceptance.

A room ... A table, long, narrow - maybe a dinner table, although only a part of it was in his view. A figure on a chair - Lupin, seen in profile, a plate in front of him. At his feet, curled on the rug, Nagini.

"Another visit, Harry Potter?"

"Not really."

He was not to be there - the room faded, he was back in the void ... Sensing, he felt something like a drumbeat, pounding, unmistakably. He concentrated on it, was approaching, feeling the resonance stronger ... At the moment when the next pounding was due, his mind stretched out.

Light, colours ... Dumbledore in front of him, Sirius at the Headmaster's side. His focus stabilized. Harry said, "Done."

"What did you see?"

Harry described the scene, repeated the question and his answer. "Nagini's mark was weaker than last time, Professor."

"She might be suffering from long guards in a cold cellar," replied Dumbledore. "Well - that's a problem we are going to solve now - hopefully."

"Professor - what can I do here?" The prospect of hours, maybe days in that room suddenly looked more horrible than the idea of visiting Nagini personally.

"I can offer some books that might be interesting - and patience."

"Yes, sure, Professor ..."

Dumbledore smiled. "I'm talking about card games, Harry - a patience is a solitary game ... I have a nice book about them."

Card games ... The last card game Harry had played had cost him five pages - on the other hand, a task like that, time-consuming without requiring too much thought, would have been welcome now.

Dumbledore headed out, was back a minute later with some books, a card game - and a scissor. "Harry, may I ask you for some hairs - and your wand?"

Of course ... Seeing the cards, Harry had decided to train Ron's shuffling spell - forgetting he would be here without his wand ... It felt like being naked.

"Professor - how long will it take?"

"You've just disappeared, Harry. It'll take a day for you to reach the house - the same time it takes to pass the news to Voldemort ... Tomorrow evening will be the time ... We'll be back the next morning - if everything works out as planned - we have to wait until Remus has regained his human shape."

"But ... how can the news pass to Voldemort?"

A smile appeared on Dumbledore's face, though not a friendly one. "A rumour that goes through Hogwarts will reach him ... I'm pretty sure of that."

Harry stared at the Headmaster, eyes widening. "You mean - a traitor?"

"Yes and no ... According to my guess, it's a rat - with a discoloured paw."

Wormtail!

The thought seemed logical - Nagini hadn't mentioned Wormtail once, while this was no proof, Voldemort's interest in everything related to Hogwarts and its occupants was obvious.

Dumbledore cut a string of hairs from Harry's head, took his wand, said, "Wish us luck, Harry," and was gone, together with Sirius.

Harry was alone.

The first he did was to ordering a drink. Then he inspected the bedroom, the bathroom, became aware he had no night dress, no toothbrush ... Nicodemus had all that, had also answers to his questions - until he asked about former guests in this room.

He ordered food, identifying a nagging pain in his stomach as hunger. His supper proved as first quality, but then so did the supper in the hall, and the precious pieces of glassware and cutlery didn't compensate for the lack of company.

Then he examined the book about patiences, tried some of them. Building families - up from the ace, down from the king ... Boring.

He grabbed the next book. *Magic in the Middle Empire*. Probably some history volume ... About to drop it, he saw the name of the author - Feng'Shui Pei. Opening it, he realized the book was about Chinese wizard traditions and myths - very kind of Dumbledore. A really fascinating literature, kept him captivated until he felt ready to sleep.

He slept as long as he could, took his time in the bathroom, came out for a leisurely breakfast.

As soon as the table looked empty again, boredom jumped at him.

He checked the two other books from Dumbledore - a collection of Animagus stories and a novel, about a wizard who had decided to live as a Muggle but constantly failed to suppress his magical powers. Both would have been entertaining literature any other day - not so here in this luxury room, alone, waiting for the clock to turn, for the evening to arrive, for the night to pass.

After another try with patiences, Harry felt desperate.

There was a desk in the room - he sat down, found pen, ink, parchments, started to write. Not knowing anything better, he filled parchment after parchment with descriptions of his Parseltongue encounters, starting with the Boa Constrictor in the zoo, carefully describing every detail. This work might be used for his O.W.L., although he didn't really care - if only the time passed.

When he finished with yesterday's visit toward Nagini, dusk had fallen outside. His hand and wrist were hurting badly, he decided to take a bath - the hot water would ease the pain away.

It did, moreover, it also calmed his nerves.

He was lying in the bathtub, dizzying, when a hot pain rushed through his scar. After seconds, it faded.

Still feeling sick, he rose, climbed out, seized for a towel when another wave hit him - as hard as before, only longer this time, ebbing, growing, then steady, lasting forever ... He went down, kneeling, holding his head, losing all feeling for time, the surroundings, only this razor-sharp burning - too much to stand, not enough to faint.

After an eternity, it faded.

Grateful to be there, he bent forward to the toilet sink and retched, then used water and towel to clean himself, to dry the film of sweat.

Trembling, shivering, he staggered out of the bathroom, halfway expecting another attack. It didn't come.

He dressed, went out of the bedroom, walked to the window. A large, shining moon, perfectly round, hung in the sky.

He knew what the pain attacks had been - a resonance of a duel between Dumbledore and Voldemort ... Or maybe a duel between the two sibling wands. Dumbledore had attacked as soon as possible, waiting only for the moon to appear - to which result?

Reluctantly, Harry reconsidered the two waves of pain ... Dumbledore was alive, he was sure, he could almost feel it ... What he didn't know was Lupin's state.

Still too dreary to eat, he sat down. Mechanically, his hands grabbed the cards, shuffled, shuffled, his mind far away, imagining the picture he hoped was true - a wolf, running side by side with a large dog, stopping, sniffing, resting, enjoying freedom.

* * *

He came awake with a jolt. What ... A sound, outside, at the door, a click - the door swinging open, Dumbledore in the frame - smudges in his face, his moustache, his hair - almost gone, burn marks on the scalp, battered all over, except for the eyes, shining, sparkling ...

Harry was up. "And??"

"He's free! ... Hurt, but alive!"

Harry jumped forward, reached Dumbledore, held him, buried his face at the Headmaster's chest, smelling smoke, dirt, feeling his own tears, after seconds, sensing the first laps of a wave in which he was drowning an instant later - joy, exultation, triumph ... "He's free ... he's free - yes, free ..."

He felt guided to a chair, sat down, calming enough to ask a million questions. "Where's he now? When do you expect him? Is Sirius ..."

"Sirius is with him - he's all right ... Let me just settle a bit."

Dumbledore ordered a glass of juice, emptied it, ordered two more, took the second.

Harry walked to the window. Early morning, still dark outside. He turned back.

Dumbledore reached into his robe, came up with Harry's wand. "Thank you for borrowing ... A wonderful instrument to keep Voldemort at bay - although it doesn't mean you should look for opportunities, Harry."

"How was it, Professor?"

"Quick and clean - well, almost ..." Dumbledore touched the remnants of his burned hair. "He expected me all right - told me where I could find Remus ... Well, and then came the unexpected part - starting with a blow that put a hole in the walls of that cell, so the moon could shine in ... And Remus could escape - hadn't even to pass that snake, for which I was grateful - because he didn't pass me ... Then I was quite busy to find my own way out."

"How did you ..." Harry pointed. "What happened with your hair, Professor?"

"Oh that ... After that little explosion, Voldemort of course knew it wasn't you, Harry ... I guess he knew by then with whom he was fighting ... What he didn't like at all - what still surprised him badly, was your wand ... Then he tried some tricks, quite spectacular ones actually ... I wonder whether I should wear it short for a while."

Harry twisted. A short-haired Dumbledore? He, the symbol of Hogwarts ... "Please don't do it, Professor - your hair is ..."

"You're right, Harry ... It would frighten students and teachers alike."

Dumbledore walked into the bathroom. When he returned after some minutes, he looked normal again.

"It's still hours until the regular breakfast will be served," said Dumbledore, "but I'm hungry now ... Harry - would you join me in an early-dawn meal?"

At these words, Harry's stomach reminded him with growling protest there had been no food in the evening. A moment later, he was sitting across Dumbledore, biting large chunks off a cold chicken wing ... Except for the circumstances, one could get used to a guest suite with a servant picture.

"What will happen now?" he asked between two bites.

The answer came in pieces, as even Dumbledore, this great wizard, hadn't mastered the art of talking and chewing at the same time. "Once the moon has set, we should expect Sirius and Remus soon ... He'll be a case for Madam Pomfrey first ..."

"How badly is he hurt?"

"Wounds in the face and at the hands - that's all I could see." Seeing Harry's expression, Dumbledore added, "Don't worry - you know how rapidly patients recover in Madam Pomfrey's care."

"And Voldemort - what will he do?"

Dumbledore chuckled. "He'll look for another house ... What I didn't destroy by opening a path for Remus, he blew up by himself while trying to get me ... I guess it burned down to the ground ... He'll be mad - particularly so after we have made sure the Daily Prophet knows about what happened."

Harry looked surprised. "You'll make it public?"

"Certainly ... Without names - except that of Voldemort, of course ... Otherwise, it should be described as an *action performed by people from Hogwarts* - to let everybody know what he should expect from us." At these words, the Headmaster's face showed a hard glare.

Thinking about the scenes Dumbledore had described so scarcely, Harry remembered his sibling wands problem. "Professor - er, the fighting of the two wands ... Could you please describe it in - in some more detail?"

"Why?" Dumbledore examined him. "You saw it in your own fight, Harry."

"Yes ..." Harry explained his exchange of letters with Mr. Ollivander, and that a library in London seemed the only place that offered basic literature for his O.W.L.

The Headmaster made a wry face. "So if I don't tell you more, I have to send you to London? ... I don't like either of these alternatives, Harry ... Let us discuss the issue again after Madam Pince has got an answer from them."

The first signs of the coming day appeared outside. Harry wanted to stay in the Entrance Hall, waiting for the return of his two friends who had known his parents personally.

After confirming with Dumbledore that the full story could be told, he mounted his Steel Wing, rose carefully, and inched out of the window. A last wave to the Headmaster, then he pushed forward - eager to check the pathway on which they would arrive. Of course, everything he saw was empty and quiet.

He flew back, stored the broomstick, went inside.

Waiting again - but how different this was, compared to the recent days. Could something still happen? ... He didn't know, although - in this case, Dumbledore wouldn't have been sitting with him so calmly.

The dark grey outside faded to light grey, to light ... The first sun rays would appear any minute now.

A clank.

The door swung open. Three figures in the entrance - Sirius, Almyra, holding - almost carrying - a slumpy body in their middle. Lupin.

Harry jumped up, rushed forward, noticing bandages covering a hand, the side of the face. Lupin seemed barely conscious, unaware of his surroundings, not recognizing him.

At this moment, McGonagall came through the door.

Sirius showed a short smile. "Harry ... Let's talk later." He didn't stop, didn't ask for help, McGonagall passed them to open the next door - seconds later, Harry again was alone in the hall.

Still an hour's time to kill before breakfast was due - and he was wearing too much garment for the warm hall.

He reached the guest suite, dropped his coat, his cloak, stepped down, positioned himself in the entrance to the staircase. He had a distinct feeling some students would come down early today.

His breath hadn't calmed yet when a small figure appeared at the other side, wearing a bathrobe, not fully covering the legs of a pyjama - Cho.

She looked around, recognized him, hurried over.

He had just time to rise, then she was there, flew in his arms, held him - he still could smell the sleep from her body.

"Harry - where have you been?" The words came muffled; her head was still on his chest.

"Here in Hogwarts - hidden in a room ... Did Al tell you I'm here?"

Finally, she looked up. "Yes - I told her to wake me any time she's back ... I was always thinking about what you said ... Had no trouble looking worried - none at all!"

"What was the official version?"

"You were gone, probably to rescue Lupin ... It was no announcement, but people were looking for you, asking for your whereabouts ... The rumour was around early in the evening ... Why, Harry?"

"Dumbledore did it - in my shape, and with my wand ... He suspected Wormtail around - he was the one that had to take the news to Voldemort ... And he was right."

Somewhere, footsteps could be heard.

Cho twisted. "I have to dress ... no need to be seen like that."

"Why - you look nice," Harry said, grinning.

"A-hem ... Early morning compliments ..." She turned.

"We'll have breakfast in the suite ... I'm still waiting for Ron and Hermione - please inform Al."

"Okay - although she's more interested in sleep." Cho disappeared.

The hall had just started to fill when Hermione appeared, recognized him, and came over. Watched by some first-years, Harry was hugged again, once more when Hermione heard Lupin was alive.

A minute later, Ron joined them, beaming, slapping Harry, "You dirtbag ... you bloody ..."

Not caring the open-mouthed students around, Harry grabbed his friend for another hug.

"Let's go upstairs," he said, "for a private breakfast - it's the last chance before I have to return the card." He looked at Hermione. "Leave a note for Viktor."

She nodded. "What about Cho?"

"She knows already."

Ron glanced at him. "We weren't the first, huh?"

How good that Harry had gathered some food with Dumbledore. During a long and splendid breakfast, he had to tell the story three times - a short version first, with all details then, and by answering many questions for good measure.

Then the others described what had taken place while Harry was hiding in the guest room - how the dormitory was scanned, registering the missing coat, the cloak gone, until a check in the storage room confirmed his Steel Wing was gone as well.

Harry glanced at Ron. "What did you think?"

"Well ... I had some feeling - but then again, Harry - you're good for any kind of surprise ... I was sure for just one thing - it wasn't blind panic ... It was planned."

Hermione turned to Cho. "Did you know?"

"I had the smaller half of a warning ... *It's not what it looks*, he'd said - so I could imagine all sorts of horror stories."

After the breakfast, Harry made a first attempt to visit Lupin. He was stopped by Madam Pomfrey, who informed him the first chance would be in the evening.

Almyra appeared for lunch. Afterwards, joining again in the suite, it was her turn to describe what she had witnessed.

In safe distance from the house, she had waited, watching Sirius who had been closer. When she saw him move, a moment after the first explosion, she followed Sirius into the forest, to find a werewolf there, and thus missing the other events at the house completely. In spite of his limping, the wolf jumped and danced like a welp, then, after a while, all three found a place not too far from the portkey where they awaited the setting of the moon.

In the evening, Harry was allowed to see Lupin - "Ten minutes, Mr. Potter." He came alone, with greetings from his friends who had been very determined to let him do this first visit privately.

Entering the room, he saw Lupin lying in the bed, awake, a clean bandage covering the left eye.

"Prof!" Lupin looked so weak and vulnerable, Harry didn't dare to touch him.

"Harry - here we meet again."

Examining the bandage, Harry asked, "How bad is it?"

"Could be worse ... One eye's gone. I lost it in the fight when I was captured."

"Oh no! ... Is it possible ..."

"No - that's even beyond Madam Pomfrey's skill ... However - look here."

Lupin's right hand appeared from under the bedcover. The index and the middle finger were stumps, slightly swollen, shimmering in a healthy-looking red. "Until tomorrow morning," explained Lupin, "they'll be back - what you see is the result of the growth since I'm here."

"How did you ..."

Lupin's answer was short. "Voldemort."

Harry swallowed, feeling sickness in his stomach, a metallic taste in his mouth.

Lupin said, "Drop it, Harry - it's over ... Thanks to you, and Dumbledore, Sirius, and the others."

"Do you know already what happened here?"

"Yes." Lupin smiled. "In the cell there, I didn't know what was going on - only I had watched the behaviour of that snake the first morning ... I had no explanation, but it was something to think about - a snake hissing toward thin air ... It was enough to hold yourself ... And then again in the dining room - then I was pretty sure, something was going on."

Madam Pomfrey appeared in the door. "Mr. Potter - time's over."

Harry stood up. "Before I forget - the best wishes from all the others ... I'll be back tomorrow as soon as possible."

Lupin shook his head. "Tomorrow I'll be up - then I have to make a visit in London ... You know, I need a new wand - and a glass eye."

* * *

Harry saw Lupin again three days later. Lupin was sitting at the teachers' table, the bandage gone, a new energy in his face. After the meal, Harry waited until most other teachers had left, then he hurried over.

Lupin looked at him, his good eye sparkling. "Harry - we have to talk."

In Lupin's office, Harry waited to receive his usual mug, then he said, "You look like newborn, Prof."

"Yeah - it's almost true ... A new eye, a new wand, and - " Lupin beamed, "something else is new ... Guess what, Harry!"

Harry glanced at Lupin's fingers - did he mean them? "What ..."

"My Patronus! - It's still a wolf, but ... A golden wolf."

"You ..." A hot rush of joy waved through Harry.

"Yes - it might have to do with the new wand, but I guess it's the memory I'm using since recently ... You know what I mean - the happiest wrapped in the worst."

"Oh, Prof - that's super! - That's ... When did you find out?"

"With the new wand, I went for an opportunity on purpose." Lupin's expression changed. "Harry - there's one aspect in which I didn't tell you the truth. At least, I didn't know better then ... You *can* scale the attacking force of a Golden Patronus."

Harry felt the hairs in his neck rise. "You mean ..."

Lupin nodded. "In London, I checked around which wizard was currently under pressure from the Dark Forces, got visits from Dementors ... Then I went to that place and waited - and last night, I met them ... Three."

"And?"

The lines in Lupin's face sharpened. "You must know - this was not only the test for my Patronus, it was also the first time after I was captured ... Soon enough before I would develop a trauma ... Anyway, I was frightened enough and furious enough ..." Lupin's eyes met Harry's. "The Golden Patronus came up ... A moment later, the three Dementors were dead."

27 - Fairy Tales

From Lupin, Harry had received an issue of yesterday's *Daily Prophet*, brought back from Lupin's trip to London. The article about the events in the Riddle house had made it to the front page, draped around a picture of a burned-down ruin.

- **Voldemort Homeless?**

The-one-who-must-not-be-named, better known as Lord (!) Voldemort, has lost a fight as well as his residence - these are the facts in a rumour which currently is spreading through the wizard community. According to a reliable source, the house burned down after a fire spreading from a fight between Voldemort and people from Hogwarts - the school of witchcraft, recently still more famous for its role as a 'fortress' against the Dark Forces. According to this source, a prisoner - also from Hogwarts - which had been captured by Voldemort while doing outside work, was rescued immediately before the accident.

As investigations confirmed, there is indeed a building that has been destroyed by fire and by some explosion (see picture). This building, called 'The Riddle House' by the townfolks around, became notorious some years ago when the Muggles police found the dead bodies of the three residents, the Riddle family. Since then, the house was called 'haunted' by the Muggles of this area.

A closer inspection of the remnants from the fire revealed a cell-like room in the ground - just in the part which has suffered most from the explosion. Quoting the police report, the accident did not cause any casualties - which exactly matches the report from the reliable source, who claims that nobody has been killed.

When asked for names and additional proof, the source refused to give further details. So it may be left to everybody's guess whether the story is true or just a clever hoax. However, before guessing, dear reader, keep in mind there are just two people with a reputation to survive an encounter with Voldemort unharmed, and both of them in Hogwarts! One is the school's Headmaster, Albus Dumbledore, the other is Harry Potter - famous for his defeating the Dark Lord at the age of just one year, and winner of last year's Wizards Tournament, which ended so tragically with the death of another competitor. Neither of these two were available for comments.

Not available for comments? Harry hadn't been asked, but then, he would have left it to Dumbledore anyway. The horrible days were over, Lupin was back, had - in his own words - "paid an eye for a Golden Patronus - not the worst deal you can think of."

So Harry's mind was free for other things, for example, a ball in Beauxbatons ten days from now, a visit in a castle eleven days from now, playing Go as much as possible, some O.W.L.s a few months from now, to count them in order of his personal priority.

No, Cho wasn't missing in the list. She was an integral part of every item, maybe with the exception of O.W.L.s.

A visit in a castle, playing the hero for a girl of ten years - Harry was determined not to disappoint her, and to have fun himself.

He tried to imagine how this day would be, suddenly stopped in his dreams when remembering a terrible weakness - he didn't know French. What could he do in little more than a week?

At the least, he should be able to say 'Yes' and 'No' and 'Thank you' in French ... Then he remembered Drilencu - the Bulgarian teacher had learned an excellent English in an

amazingly short period of time. Asking him - the thought felt less appealing than asking someone else.

So Harry visited this someone else.

"Learning French?" Fleur beamed. "C'est une idée merveilleuse!"

"Come again?"

"I said that's a wonderful idea, 'arry."

"Well, yes - except the time is so short ... But I just remembered how Drilencu learned English so quickly. Do you know how it's done?"

"A crash course ... 'arry, this is awfully expensive - I could translate for you with Gabrielle."

"Thanks, but - you know, I'd like to appear as a true hero ..."

It sounded ridiculous, however, Fleur looked very pleased. There seemed nothing too exaggerated when dealing with her little sister. Harry asked, "How far can you come within a week? ... And what does it cost?"

"It's something like a lesson around the clock - day and night," explained Fleur, "so after one week, you certainly could do some conversation." She reached into her desk for some parchments. "Let me check the prices - one week ... Oh-la-la!"

"How much is that?"

Fleur giggled, then said apologetically, "Sixty galleons ... 'arry, that's too much."

Sixty ... A lot indeed, while on the other side ... "I haven't spent a sickle for myself this year ... No visit in Hogsmeade - no shopping tour in the Diagon Alley ..."

True - he had only spent a slim million or two for some Steel Wings, but it hadn't been his own money. Having found his decision, Harry looked at Fleur. "Can you order it?"

"Mais oui - I mean, yes, 'arry." Fleur's face showed a weird expression. "I can 'ave the trainer team ready tomorrow ... if you're sure."

"Trainer team??"

"Yes - what did you think?" Fleur's eyes were sparkling. "These are no wizards, 'arry - some magical creatures ... very nice, it'll be a surprise - and they'll be the show of Hogwarts." She watched his face at these words.

Two weeks before, a remark like this would have been enough to stop him cold - not any longer. Being the talk of the school for some language was old stuff to him. He nodded. "Okay - let them show up."

This left the question how to transfer the money from his vault to Fleur. As he learned, he had to send a letter to Gringotts, with the sum and the name of the recipient, and that he had to expect a hefty fee for international money transfer - about five more galleons.

Well, he thought, if the Goblins did this all the time in their business, no wonder they could afford some million or other for Requests.

He wrote the account note and walked up to the Owlery - something to do for Hedwig.

His owl seemed more than ready to enjoy a flight through the early spring night, greeted him warmly enough, although Hedwig seemed to look round him whether somebody else had come as well. More, his refusal to give her a jump start was rewarded with a disappointed glance before she spread her wings - very ostentatively so - and disappeared into the sky.

* * *

Another project crossed Harry's mind while sitting at the Gryffindor table in the Great Hall. It had to do with Lupin, who could be found meal after meal sitting at the teacher's table.

As much as this man would benefit from a few days of recovery, maybe also from second helpings to gain some fat on his bones, Harry knew that the main reason was another - harassments by Dementors had stopped quite suddenly, after the last night gang having found such a fatal end.

It offered him the chance to ask Lupin for a regular - or irregular - training in advanced techniques of wizard combat, and he knew already what he would like to train, provided he could muster the courage to ask, and provided Lupin would agree.

The Killing Curse.

Thinking about such a training made him feel rather uneasy, particularly so when trying to imagine an *affordable* training object more significant than house-flies ... On the other hand, there was no denying he had to learn it.

Still, this had to wait until the Beauxbatons ball was over, more exactly, until his French training was done.

A crash course around the clock - Harry felt a thrill of excitement when he entered Fleur's office the next day, not knowing what to expect.

Fleur's face was shining, like a kid at Christmas. "Look 'ere," she said, "your trainer team!"

Harry stared, speechless.

At Fleur's desk, two tiny creatures were sitting, almost like miniature versions of two young women, very feminine indeed, no doubt about that, but smaller than his wand was long - fairies!

The first of them stood up, not getting much higher. "Good afternoon, Mr. Potter - nice to meet you. My name is Muriel."

Now Harry felt like at Christmas too because her voice sounded pretty much like a little silver bell.

The second fairy stood up. "Bonjour, Monsieur Pottère - très enchanté. Moi, c'est Céline."

Harry gawked.

The first fairy - Muriel - smiled and chirped, "She will repeat everything I will say in French."

He nodded - just in time before the other said. "Moi je répétais tous ce qu'elle dira en Français."

Fleur clapped her hand, laughed joyously.

The two fairies rose into the air, floated to his shoulder, and sat down. They were feathery light.

Harry felt his head swimming. If he had known, truly known, what it meant to go through a crash course - in public - he would have run. Now it was too late.

Fleur handed him a box - no, a suitcase, except it was also miniature, however large compared to the fairies on his shoulders. She said, "This is their luggage, 'arry - if you would carry it to a fixed place - maybe some space in your wardrobe?"

"Yeah ... sure ..."

The silver bell at his left ear chimed, "Mais naturellement."

He twisted, glanced at Fleur. "Thank you ... See you later."

The echo didn't let him wait. "Merci beaucoup. A bientôt."

Fleur waved, beaming. "A bientôt, mon ami."

His right ear-bell said, "See you later, my friend."

Walking along the corridor, that ridiculously small suitcase in his hand, Harry heard Muriel say, "Thank you for taking our luggage, Mr. Potter." A second later, Céline at his left ear said, "Merci pour prendre notre bagage, Monsieur Pottère."

"You're welcome ... Er - call me Harry, please."

The silvery echo said, "Pas du tout ... Appelez-moi 'arry, s'il vous plaît."

Only then came the answer, "Certainly, Harry," and its own echo, "Bien sûr, 'arry."

A moment later, Muriel said, "This is a corridor," and Céline repeated, "C'est un couloir."

Harry could see how it worked, had a feeling even if he might forget all French he was going to learn, the word for corridor would last in his memory forever. Then a thought struck him. "How am I going to learn how it's written?"

For once, his words weren't repeated in his left, his French ear. Instead, a small arm came round his vision, held something like a glassy film close to his eye, with the effect that the word seemed projected in the air.

couloir

"Ah ... okay."

"Eh bien," said Céline on his left shoulder. Next moment, the words were projected across the entrance to the staircase leading to his dormitory.

Walking up the staircase, Harry passed Neville, said "Hi," without stopping.

A whisper in his ear. "Salu."

Neville smiled, stopped, his eyes getting big. Then he shook his head, opened his eyes still wider - as if some mist was hanging in his vision.

Not turning, Harry heard Neville hesitantly moving forward, obviously considering himself the victim of some optical illusion.

"Can't he see you?"

"Not very well," replied Muriel. "While working, we change into a semi-transparent state - it's simpler for the client and his environment."

"That's a clever trick," he said, to be rewarded with the echo, "C'est un truc raffiné."

The dormitory was empty - luckily so because Harry had to clarify some things with the fairies. For starters - where they would like to have their luggage?. As it turned out, a small table near his four-poster suited them better than the dark place in his wardrobe.

Then, they agreed he would go to the bathroom alone. Apart from that, they would sit on his shoulders, semi-transparent unless he asked them to *show* themselves. In addition, they established a few commands so he could control the flow of French.

To stop the stream of bi-lingual descriptions of the things around, he had to say "Wait" and, at the same time, to cover his left eye with a hand. To stop the French translations entirely, for example in classes, he had to say "Stop", also with the hand over his left eye.

Muriel informed him that the most efficient phases would be those with Harry seated comfortably, half-asleep, tranced by a decent amount of fairy dust. She also warned him that his dreams in the nights to come would be long, vivid, and filled with French conversations from dusk till dawn.

It astonished him. "What about you? Will you never sleep?"

"Not much," was the answer. "But that's no problem - fairies have a different day rhythm anyway."

After a last question about their nourishment, learning they had sufficient supply of nectar in their suitcase, Harry felt ready to go downstairs and have his first supper with two fairies on his shoulders. He prepared himself mentally, then said, "Let's go."

"Allons-y."

He walked down, learning, "That's a staircase." ... "C'est un escalier."

Neither Ron nor Hermione had arrived yet. Harry sat down, hearing this was still a table even in French, although pronounced differently. Glancing over, he saw Fleur smiling and waving. She really had fun.

Hermione came along, sat down opposite him. "Hello, Ha ..." She blinked, blinked again. "Is there something around your head, Harry? ... It looks like an invisible scarf ... no, something else ..."

"Yes - something else ... What you see are two fairies - they teach me French ... Just a second."

He told them to show up for a moment, then said, "Hermione - meet Muriel - at my right shoulder ... and Céline, at my left shoulder."

Hermione gasped. "Very impressive ... I read about this technique - fulltime-teaching and trance-teaching ... There's no faster way to learn."

"How is your French, Hermione?"

"*Un peu* - just enough to order a meal in a restaurant." Hermione looked expectantly. "Maybe we can talk some French during the next days ... Just to refresh it a bit."

"Sure - why not?" After listening to the echo, he said, "Mais oui - pourquoi pas?"

Hermione's face showed surprise and approval. "Good, Harry ... Your accent is excellent for a beginner - as far as I can judge."

"Yes, it is." ... "Oui, c'est vrai."

Feeling pleased, Harry shrugged. "Maybe it's because of my Parseltongue - although I'm the only one around who doesn't know how it sounds."

Something happened to his translation - the change in the silvery voice was unmistakable. "Peut-être c'est a cause de mon Parseltongue ... 'arry - est-il vrai? Vous savez Parseltongue?"

"Huh - come again?"

Hermione's look expressed consternation. "I said ... But you ..." She stopped, waved off by him.

Next instant, the confusion was perfect. In his right ear, he heard, "Céline asked whether it's true you can ..." before the voice in his left ear chirped, "Excusez-moi, 'arry - ma faute ... Impardonnable ..."

"It's okay," he murmured, "calm down ... I know, Parseltongue is always good for some excitement - why should it be different with fairies?"

Hermione had a strange look in her face.

Before Harry had a chance to explain, Ron arrived at the table. He sat down next to Harry, filled his dish, and started to eat - obviously too hungry to notice details as vague as semi-transparent fairies on Harry's shoulders.

While eating, Harry listened to descriptions. A dish was an *assiette*, a knife was a *couteau*, a fork a *fourchette*, a cup a *gobelet* or a *verre* depending on the material, and so forth.

Ron still didn't notice, what he noticed instead were the glances Hermione shot toward Harry. After a while, he asked, "What's up, Hermione? ... Did Harry grow a second nose?"

"Are you blind?"

"Not that I know of." Ron glanced at Harry, blinked. "Although I have to admit - there is something ... Harry - what is this?"

"These are my French trainers - actually fairies." Harry asked Muriel and Céline to show themselves for a moment, then said, "Ron - that's Céline on my left shoulder, and Muriel on my right."

"Oh - hello, nice to meet you."

Looking relieved, Ron bent closer and whispered, "You know, Harry, for a moment - well, it looked as if you had developed a halo ... I'm awfully glad there's a natural explanation."

For a second, Harry could keep serious, then his composure was washed off by a helpless giggle in both ears - highly addictive they were, fairy giggles ...

It wasn't helpful either when Hermione, who hadn't heard Ron's remark, looked very suspiciously and asked, "What's this? - Are they telling you French jokes?"

Glancing over to the Ravenclaw table, Harry could see that Cho had watched the outburst of laughter. Surely enough, after the meal, when the other students left, she came over, followed by Almyra.

Harry had a quick consultation with his teachers, preparing with a French phrase still missing in his small repertoire.

Cho examined him. She didn't blink, knowing him too well as to think of an optical illusion. "What's around your head, Harry?"

Grinning, he said, "Mesdemoiselles, je vous présente - Muriel et Céline." It was the signal for the two fairies to show themselves.

Almyra's eyes turned wide. After a moment, she said admiringly, "Magnifique - très professionnel ... Bonsoir, Muriel, Céline - moi je suis Almyra."

Watching Cho, Harry learned two things very quickly.

First, Cho knew French - at least some, obviously she understood what Almyra was saying. Second, Cho didn't like the idea of two young women, no matter which category, sitting on Harry's shoulders, their miniature but remarkable legs dangling at his collarbones.

She looked downright furious.

Astonished, Harry asked, "Hey - what's wrong? ... These are my French teachers."

"French teachers - ha! ... All I can see are two women, whispering in your ears all the time ... After all, I thought that was supposed to be my job!"

Almyra glanced at Cho, disbelieving for an instant, then showing all signs of suppressed laughter. Nonetheless, she had the good sense not to interfere at this critical moment.

Still smiling, Harry said, "Please, Cho - don't you think this is a bit ridiculous?"

It was definitely the worst he could have found. There wasn't really fume rising from Cho's head, she didn't actually jump into the air to express her rage and fury, only the differences were negligible. No, it wasn't ridiculous, he was told, not the least bit ... Not at all, quite the contrary - how dare he, and he better wipe that smirky grin off his face before ...

At this moment, Fleur met the group. "arry," she said, "comment ca va?"

"Er - well, there seems to be a misunderstanding ... Cho isn't happy with the idea - maybe you could explain it to her."

Fleur turned toward Cho, grasping her mood instantly, a task of limited complexity at this moment. Fleur took Cho by the shoulders, moved her a step aside, and whispered something in her ear.

Cho shook her head, stood still, listening to another whisper Harry couldn't understand. Then she calmed down visibly, nodded, and walked away.

Stunned, Harry looked at Almyra. "Al - can you explain to me what's going on here?"

"Cho has a hot temper, Harry - that shouldn't be entirely new to you." Almyra tried to look serious, not quite successfully so.

"Yes, but ... Why did she go away?"

"Oh, that ..." Almyra's grin deepened. "She can be mad at herself as much as at anybody else - that's what makes it so appeasing, after all ... I'd say, right now she's very embarrassed - to put it mildly ... You must know, Harry - Cho doesn't like to be mad at herself in public."

* * *

Following the fairies' suggestion, Harry decided to spend the evening in a learning trance. It was time for some French basics, elementary grammar, fundamental differences between

English and French - like this weird distinction between the personal you - *tu* - and the formal one, *vous*.

After a short visit in his dormitory, where Muriel and Céline got some items out of their suitcase, he went to the lesson room. Here it was certainly less comfortable than in the Gryffindor tower, however he had no intention to sit in public, tranced by some fairy dust, as the subject of other students' comments while murmuring French declinations or phrases.

He sat down, as leisurely as possible with the chairs in this room.

Muriel said, "We are going to trance you now, Harry."

At the first moment, he tensed, not quite sure whether this form of trancing would have the desired effect, then he relaxed. For an instant, something glittery hung in his vision, making him wonder where fairies got this dust, and how Dobby had been able to provide quantities as large as required for dust bombs. He imagined a mine deep in some magic mountain, run by dwarfs, using Hinkypunks to light their way in tunnels and paths, then every individual thought faded.

It felt like dreaming open-eyed. He still could see the opposite wall, although filmy writings appeared in his vision every other moment. As in a real dream, he was not master of his own mind, could only follow without a will of his own. There wasn't much of a plot in this dream, still, he didn't feel bored - somehow it reminded him of his first days in Hogwarts.

For a while, he could hear English and French speaking, then the amount of English words became smaller and smaller, faded to nothing, leaving only French ... Still some time later, he was no longer sure this was French - it sounded too familiar, although every now and then words came up he didn't know, had never heard before. Then another voice explained to him what it meant, using the same language, sometimes little pictures appeared like drawn all over the wall across the table.

Hours later, he came awake from a sharp smell under his nose. Some seconds passed, then the smell was gone.

"How was it?" he asked.

"Très, très bien ... Vous apprenez si rapidement, c'est un miracle."

He nodded, too tired to feel pleased or to be surprised he had understood. "Quel heure est-il?"

It was past midnight.

He stood up, yawning. "Temps de ..." He stopped, wondering how he could have lost the word for sleep, only then realizing he had spoken French.

"Dormir ... et rêver," the voice said.

He nodded again. If he waited a moment longer, he would do it here rather than in his bed.

Coming into his dormitory, he found the others asleep.

He left the fairies on the table with their luggage, went into the bathroom to undress and to prepare for the night.

Climbing into his four-poster, he asked, "Can you control my dreams?"

"No - of course not ... We do not interfere with your real dreams - we use only the lighter phases of your sleep to induce dream-like scenes in which you will listen to French, and talk French."

"Okay," he said, "pick something nice."

Seconds later, he was asleep.

* * *

The next morning, Harry became aware - he could think in French rather than in English. It was still a small world, this way of thinking quickly encountered borders and limits - but it was exciting, and the borders were driven farther away with every minute.

At breakfast, he spoke French with Hermione, annoying Ron considerably.

After breakfast, he talked with Fleur - the first time in her native language. She had to slow down a bit, and she used words still foreign to him, nonetheless - it really worked!

The training didn't stop during classes. He learned magic terminology, learned also that this language had a tendency to rattle quite a lot of words where a single syllable was all you needed in English. A wand was a *baguette magique* - funny how something as essential as that hadn't found a shorter term.

Drilencu recognized the fairies immediately - small surprise, he had used the same technique, only for English.

The other teachers didn't notice, or if so, they didn't ask. Harry was unsure whether this was a special Potter bonus or just the teachers' way to avoid the trap of a students' joke.

After lunch, he was scheduled for a patrol flight with Cho. When he informed Muriel and Céline, asking what to do with them, he learned a new aspect of the fairy world.

"*We're waiting for it,*" said Muriel, and Céline added, "*Voler avec cette vitesse - c'est magnifique!* - *Nous ne savons pas voler plus vite qu'un papillon.*"

He had to ask for *papillon*, learning that butterfly speed was the best they could do by themselves. When he asked whether they would be able to hold to him, or if the wind would hurt them, they just laughed.

That left only the question how Cho would react. He walked over to the Ravenclaw table. "Hi ... Ready for the patrol?"

Cho eyed him suspiciously. "A quad patrol - me and you three?"

"Er - yes, so to speak."

"Hmm." She looked grim. "I'm flying head - don't get lost."

She did - pushing the Steel Wing from the first moment, far beyond regular patrol speed, balancing out by cutting arcs, driving loops without slowing down, thundering through the Giants' camp, whooshing past Hogsmeade, blazing over the plain toward the dragons' nests, braking there as hard as she could.

No sooner had Harry stopped, barely holding the distance, Cho was up again, pushing to maximum speed.

They reached the buildings of the school. Harry watched Cho diving down, toward the spot where the entrance to the storage room was growing bigger and bigger. For a second, it looked as if she would crash through the door at undiminished speed, then Cho braked at full force, showing how precisely she had calculated the delay. Her Steel Wing came to a halt less than two yards from the door.

Harry's manoeuver was more conventional. He touched down, dismounted, walked into the room with his Steel Wing.

Cho stood there, looking expectantly. "Everybody back home?"

Slightly angry, he replied, "Yes - nobody got lost, if that's your question."

"Not bad." Something like grudging respect in her voice. "Actually - better than I expected." She walked off, not waiting for him.

Well - at least, it was an improvement from the day before.

"How was it for you?" he asked the two fairies.

The two bells in his ears sounded a bit breathlessly. "Ohh - it was wonderful ... When will we do it again?" was Muriel's answer, and Céline added, "Moi j'aime bien vitesse ... c'est comme ..." To Harry's dismay, the rest of her statement drowned in a giggle.

* * *

During the next days, his second-language world kept deepening. Technically, of course, this had to be counted as his third language, but in contrast to Parseltongue, he was aware that his thinking and speaking used French.

Table conversations with Hermione were no longer constrained by the initial limits of missing words - as long as he wasn't discussing complex Potions recipes with her. In fact, he had surpassed her skill, Hermione was eager to use him and his fairies as teachers while he enjoyed tests like that - Hermione asking him how to express certain thoughts in French, and he answering without a correction from Céline, or with only a minor adjustment.

Ron wasn't happy with this development. He complained, "Can't you talk plain English? I don't know why I'm sitting here - aside from getting some food. I might as well be in a foreign country."

"Then it's a training for you like for us," replied Harry. "Remember - we have an invitation to a foreign country."

Ron's showed an ill-humoured expression. "Yes ... that's why I don't think I'll follow the invitation."

Both Harry and Hermione looked at him with surprise. Harry asked, "Hey, Ron - what's wrong with you?"

"It just doesn't fit." Ron blushed a bit. "Fleur said, I'm invited with or without my ball partner - that's my first problem. If I come with her ..."

Hermione interrupted him, "Who is it - Padma?"

"Yeah, who else?"

According to Ron's voice, Padma seemed the last resort of the desperate ball-goer, rather than a good-looking girl who wouldn't drop out before the final round of any contest for manners and appearance, or not at all.

"She's okay," said Ron, "only I just don't see a reason to include her in the invitation ... Then I'll sit there, not knowing what to do or what to say - I'm the only one who cannot speak French ... You're better off without me."

Fleur had invited Harry and Cho, Hermione and Viktor, Ron, and Almyra - the last two with or without partner. Almyra's partner was Charlie, who had declined immediately because he was scheduled for dragon guard on Sunday after the ball, so Almyra had accepted the invitation alone.

Viktor's French was at least as good as Hermione's, for Bulgarians, French appeared more common than English. Therefore, Harry and Ron had been the only ones without this knowledge, and Harry had found a way to close the gap within the last days before the event.

Harry examined his friend's face. "Say, Ron - basically, would you like to come?"

"What a ..." Ron stopped himself. "Yes - of course ... How often do you get an invitation to a French castle - and from Fleur's family ..."

Harry nodded. "That's what I thought - so it would be stupid *not* to come ... You know, my crash course - the main reason for me was to be prepared for Gabrielle because - when looking at it from the other side, she's the only one who cannot speak English."

Ron's expression lightened up.

Hermione said, "You should tell Fleur that you'll come alone - since Almyra's alone too, it's again an even number at the table ... I'm sure she'll be grateful to know that."

At this moment, Céline started to talk in Harry's ear.

After listening for a moment, he turned to Ron. "Céline just told me - for reasons of etiquette, she recommends to have a few sentences ready like 'Good day', 'Good-bye', 'Thank you' ... She says that's enough to honour the hosts - otherwise, you can speak English as usual."

Hermione was unable to suppress a remark. "Or maybe not quite as usual."

Ron didn't take offense. "Yeah - I guess I know what you mean, but don't you worry - I can hold my tongue." He glanced at Harry. "And how do I learn these few sentences? ... Can you teach me?"

With a dismissive look toward Hermione, he added, "I know Hermione would like to do it, but she always mixes up with some advice nobody has asked for."

According to Hermione's expression, Ron's reply had scored better than her own remark.

Harry grinned. "Sure - no problem."

Then a thought crossed his mind. After consulting with Muriel and Céline, he turned to Ron again. "I have a better idea. For one evening session, from supper till bedtime, you can have the fairies ... I just checked with them - they agree."

Ron looked uneasy. "No, Harry - I don't want this ... You're the one who ordered them, and paid them ..."

"They said it's a good idea for me to have a break ... This way, I can check for myself how it is to talk French *without* them ready to help me, or to correct me ... The dream lesson will then be mine again."

What Harry didn't report was the other half of the fairies' answer to his question whether they would mind having another client for a few hours - that his learning speed scaled beyond any mark they had expected, or guessed, even considering his age and environment. The initial goal - sufficient skill to perform a simple conversation - had been reached, passed, and left behind, Harry's offer toward Ron was no sacrifice at all.

After some more objections, Ron finally agreed to spend the evening in a fairy trance session. He also agreed, quite gratefully so, to let Harry talk with Fleur about him accepting the invitation alone. It would be Harry's first serious test without a bi-lingual dictionary sitting on his shoulders.

When the dishes on the supper table looked empty, Harry let the fairies jump over to Ron's shoulders. After a last glance to his friend, grinning at Ron's weird expression, he walked over to Fleur, then followed to her office.

Talking French, he explained the agreement between him and Ron, that Ron was busy learning some French basics, and that he was here to break the news of Ron's acceptance - alone.

"He had some trouble," Harry said, "first because he didn't feel like coming with Padma, then because he was the only one left without French ... But I think we solved these problems."

Fleur seemed amused. "So Ron and Padma, that's just a ball acquaintance?"

Harry shrugged. "Don't ask me what Ron thinks of her ... True, if he doesn't want to share the honour with her, it can't be that much ... Anyway, together with Almyra coming alone, it's again an even number."

"It would have been an even number in any case," replied Fleur smiling, "because I have invited someone else - but now I can round up quite nicely by inviting both of them."

"Both of whom?"

"Raoul and Janine - old friends of mine. Raoul and I were in the same class in Beauxbatons, and Janine is Raoul's younger sister." Fleur grinned at Harry. "For a while, our parents thought it might work between Raoul and me - except it was as likely as something between you and Hermione."

Harry laughed, remembering the time when articles in the *Daily Prophet* had misled a lot of people, among them Molly Weasley. Then he asked, "Is this just for rounding up, or do you have second thoughts?"

Fleur gave him a teacher's glance. "I know what you mean, 'arry, but only because I've been here in 'ogwarts long enough ... Second thoughts - this is a totally non-French concept - in France, people only have first thoughts, but all the time."

"That answers my question."

As Harry noticed, not only was he able to perform this conversation without ever searching for the proper terms - more, French seemed excellently equipped to discuss such topics.

"There's another question," he said, "for which I'd appreciate your help - it's about guest presents."

"That's fairly simple - remember, French is the language which has provided the word *bonbonnière* ... 'arry, everybody in our family has a sweet tooth, and British sweets are highly popular - you simply can't go wrong."

"And cakes?"

Fleur knew he was thinking of his reliable source, the house-elves. "That would be something nice for my mother," she said, "an idea you might pass to Ron or 'ermione ... For you, as Gabrielle's special guest, a collection from 'ogsmeade is definitely the best you can do - and it shouldn't be more."

* * *

Following Fleur's advice, Harry informed Ron and Hermione about the welcome that would await a cake or two from the Hogwarts house-elves, then started to organize his own present.

The first step was to convince Cho that a short touch-down in Hogsmeade during their next patrol, near the entrance of Honeydukes, wouldn't hurt. As it turned out, this was the only difficult part.

When entering the shop and asking for a well-sized sampler, there were only two questions - how much he was ready to spend, and whether any of the common types should be left out. The answer to the second question was no, the answer to the first so that none of the pre-packed boxes was big enough.

He paid in advance and explained he would come to get it the day after tomorrow. Nobody mentioned the fairies on his shoulders, weird customers were the trade in Hogsmeade.

Cho didn't enjoy the idea of another stop in Hogsmeade. However, as this would be the present from both of them, she had no good argument against it. For the same reason, when he came out of the door with a box in his hands, she wanted to know what he'd paid, feeling the obligation to cover half of it.

"Nothing," he said.

"What do you mean, nothing? - They don't give it for free, do they?"

He had to agree, this was true.

"So how come you didn't pay? ... Is it still open?"

"Er, no - I paid already when I ordered it."

Cho looked murderous. "And how much was it?"

"Uhm - strange, but I can't remember."

It made her so angry, she stomped her foot. The response from her Steel Wing was immediate - next moment, Cho was up in the air.

Chuckling, Harry mounted his own broomstick and jumped up, following her back to Hogwarts.

The moment their Steel Wings were stored in the racks, Cho turned to him and said, "I'm still waiting for an answer, Harry."

He managed to suppress a grin. "I can offer you a deal."

She looked suspiciously. "Which is?"

"Well - you know, there's something strange at that place ... I can't remember what I paid two days ago - I can't even remember what happened when I came out, before we returned ... Wouldn't be able to tell anyone."

Cho's expression changed. "Very clever, young Potter ... You wouldn't have used that trick two months ago ... Okay, it's a deal - make sure your two fairies keep to it."

She walked off.

There was no need to advise the fairies, first because Muriel and Céline didn't talk about their clients, and also because this was their last day. Actually, the patrol flight had been the last event shared together; now it was time to say good-bye.

After signing back with Ron, Harry went to his dormitory to deposit the sweets box and to fetch that cute little suitcase.

"Muriel, Céline - merci beaucoup ... je n'oubliais jamais cette semaine - j'ai appris plus de Français qu'on aurait attendu ... Au revoir."

"It was a pleasure, Harry - we had a lot of fun ... Have a good time."

"C'était une semaine magnifique - la meilleure que je peux rappeler ... Merci, Harry, pour les vols de Steel Wing - adieu."

They had reached Fleur's office.

Harry deposited the suitcase, waved a last time - funny, he had been together with them for almost every hour of a week but had seen them only for minutes, was still unable to tell who was Muriel and who Céline when he left the office.

* * *

The day of the Beauxbatons ball bore little resemblance to that of the Christmas ball. The differences seemed everywhere - in the halls of Hogwarts, which lacked the frenzy as well as the decor, in Harry's mood, which registered this event as another *first* - counting new since he and Cho had explained each other, even in the perspective which placed the ball on the eve of something still more important.

It started with a late breakfast, taking on and on, used for idle speculations how Beauxbatons might look, extending until the older students were forced to leave or to keep their seats for the lunch table, which was frequented only by the younger ones.

Then, Harry made the visit in the library that was due for more than a week, receiving the confirmation from Madam Pince that yes, the Ollivander essay was available in the National Library through special reader service.

This done, he spent the afternoon in a leisurely style of nearly doing nothing, hanging around here and there, giving Ron the opportunity to crush him in a chess match, surprising his friend and surprised by himself when the game ended in a draw.

Only when it was time to prepare, he started to feel similarities to the last event. There was this slight tension in the stomach, dissipating when he stood under the hot shower.

Ron returned from the Prefects' bathroom, still carrying the smell of a soap more exquisite than what was offered to normal people. Harry remembered Fleur's suggestion of an aftershave, wondering how the French students would handle this issue. He turned to Ron. "Prêt à danser?"

"Comment? ... Eh - oui."

"Bien ... Allons-y."

Ron grinned, "On y va," then fell back to English. "Harry, it's a great feeling to know how to order a drink in that school ... I owe you one."

"Pas de rien - tu es mon homme d'ancre, est-ce-que tu rappèle?"

"C'mon, give it a break - what's dancre?"

"Ancre - anchor." Harry looked solemn. "I said you're my anchor man, that's why it's okay."

"Whatever. - Let's go."

Harry followed Ron down the stairs, to the entrance of the Ravenclaw tower. They found Charlie already waiting there.

A few minutes later, they heard the girls coming down.

This time, Harry knew what to expect. A beaming smile was spreading his face when he recognized this strongly oriental appearance in the red dress. "It's the first time I can really appreciate how you look," he said. "The last time I was simply overwhelmed."

Cho smiled. "Your compliment feels a little sharp at the edges, but thank you anyway."

"Why's that?"

"Well, it means you knew what I would wear, because it's the same as the last time - which is okay, only nothing a girl likes to be reminded of ... Especially if her best friend has something new."

Now Harry realized - Almyra wore indeed another dress. He couldn't remember what it had been the last time, when she came across her ball partner at such a short notice, but certainly not this pearly white dress which made her look gorgeous, with her bronze teint and the dark, curly hair.

He whispered, "No matter how new or old, it must be this incredible red ... You look so perfectly Chinese, I wouldn't know any better."

"That's what I wanted to hear. - You're improving, Harry."

They walked toward the staircase that led down to the basement where the portkey link to Beauxbatons was waiting for them, Ron and Padma before them.

Harry examined Padma's dress, a light blue, then registered how spectacular these three girls had to appear toward other guests - the same hair colour in three different styles, and the robes ... "You girls will stand out," he said, "especially when staying together. "Blue - white - red - the French colours as well as the British ones ... I bet they'll applaude you at arrival."

Ron looked a bit surprised, then asked, "You're certainly right, but - did you train that with the fairies?"

The others laughed, Padma maybe a bit less genuinely.

Cho bent closer and murmured, "That was nice, but I don't mind if you keep to a more personal level."

They reached the linking room, which ended in two cabins, one for each direction. A short line of students was waiting to pass through, one person at a time.

Madam Hooch was playing the gatekeeper. One after the other, the figures stepped into the right cabin and disappeared. Then it was their turn.

Cho pushed him. "Wait for me."

He stepped forward, grabbed the handle. An instant of disorientation, then the solid wall in front of him was gone, opening to another room not unlike the one he had just passed. The couple he just had seen disappearing was walking up a staircase.

A man, standing at the side, waved him to make room. He quickly stepped out of the cabin.

A moment later, Cho appeared in the cabin, came out to join him.

Reaching the upper landing of the staircase, Harry had his first view of what seemed to be the Great Hall of Beauxbatons - only to learn soon afterwards this was one of two side halls, with the real Great Hall in-between.

There was no denying, in terms of size and space, Beauxbatons outperformed Hogwarts easily. Within the next minutes, Harry could ascertain the same was true for the number of students - what had congregated in the three halls seemed enough to populate a medium-sized town.

The three couples had gathered again.

Harry turned to Ron. "You're the organization wise - er, wizard - tell us how to find our seats."

"Well - hm ..." Ron glanced around, with the same stupefaction as all the other Hogwarts students, who just realized their school was a cosy little hut, compared to this megalomaniac place.

At this moment, a young woman approached them. She was very attractive, a large sticker with the Beauxbatons emblem - crossed wands emitting stars - on her bosom, which was also quite prominent.

All smile and teeth, she asked, "Can I 'elp you?" It was really English, although with a clear accent.

Harry said, "Oui, mademoiselle - nous cherchons la table numéro huit, les places douze jusqu'à dix-sept."

It seemed nearly impossible, yet the smile still widened. "Excellent - suivez-moi, s'il vous plaît."

About to turn, the young woman's gaze fell on Harry's forehead. The smile faltered, for compensation, her eyes turned wide. "Mon dieu - vous êtes 'arry Pottère, n'est-ce pas?"

A sound at his side told Harry what he had suspected for the last seconds - Cho did not respond well to this representative of Beauxbatons' service troops.

Quickly, he replied, "C'est vrai - mais ne disez pas aucun d'homme, s'il vous plaît ... Aujourd'hui je suis incognito - vous comprenez?"

"Naturellement - pardon, monsieur."

She hurried forward, followed by the group, in which Almyra had trouble keeping serious. Ron, in contrast, remained calm - obviously, and to Harry's great relief, because the remark had exceeded his level of understanding.

Table number eight was in the middle hall, not far apart from a wide stage, in short distance to some tables that seemed reserved for teachers and other school personnel. No doubt, Fleur had pulled some strings to provide them with such excellent seats.

The young woman sped off, looking as if her first action out of view would be to tell the next service maid whom she had met.

Harry settled down to examine the surroundings.

The stage spanned the full width of the hall. Currently, it looked empty but for some decorations. The band was located in front of the stage, on a low podium spanning half the width. Actually, band sounded definitely wrong - this should be called a full-grown orchestra. Otherwise, the hall looked very much as expected, with banners hanging as if in mid-air, a ceiling literally out of sight, a dance floor in the middle - everything three sizes bigger than what could be found in Hogwarts. The side halls had their own parquets, large archways connected them with the middle one.

Checking the tables, Harry realized there was no separation in Hogwarts tables and Beauxbatons tables. Rather, the Hogwarts students were spread all over the range. Examining the figures at the teacher tables, he could see Dumbledore and McGonagall, and there was Hagrid - sitting beneath Madame Maxime, looking great, more self-contained than Harry had ever seen him. Was it the working with the Giants, or the influence of Madame Maxime? Maybe both - anyway, there was nothing foolish or out of place in Hagrid's appearance.

Scanning further, along many unknown faces, Harry was surprised to see Lupin. The woman to his right - Harry had never seen her before, probably a Beauxbatons teacher - a slim brunette, talking animatedly with Lupin.

Harry felt pleased, the sight of his older friend was unexpected yet much welcome. He turned to Cho. "So what's your first impression?"

"It's big ... I guess their lost-and-found is about the size of our poor little Hogwarts."

"Have you seen anything close to a bar? - I'd like to fetch some drinks."

At this moment, the seats opposite the table filled with six other figures - three girls and three young men, undoubtedly Beauxbatons students.

They had barely settled when the student across Cho's seat started a conversation. He spoke French. "Good evening ... I am Gérard, and the beautiful young lady at my side is Marie-Christine."

"Nice to meet you ... My name's Harry - "

Cho saved him from a desperate search for a reply of similar elegance. With her most charming smile, she said, "And mine is still shorter - Cho."

"So it's true what Fleur promised us - we will be in the company of the most interesting people from Hogwarts ... An excellent start for this splendid evening."

While mastering the language without any difficulty, Harry became aware - there was still way to go before he would be in calling distance of Gérard's well-honed table manners. Within seconds, this guy had uncoupled Harry from his conversation with Cho, still without excluding the girl at his side. It was done masterfully, Harry had to admit, watching Cho who seemed to enjoy it.

Gérard enlarged his audience for a moment. "I think we need something to drink - Do you agree to champagne?" Without waiting for an answer, he reached for a silvery ball on the table and pressed it on the top.

When a waiter appeared moments later, Harry realized - what he had considered a part of the table decoration was a signaling system to order drinks, probably also food.

Gérard raised his glass. "To this evening - and to the wonderful people here."

It was Harry's first champagne, and it tasted delicious. He sipped some more, feeling simply good, listening to this amiable French student who continued sending fireworks of wit and charme toward Cho.

The girl at his side, Marie-Christine, asked Harry, "Have you been in Beauxbatons before?"

"No, this is the first time ... Fleur suggested it more than once, but somehow ... And there was always the barrier of the language."

"Which barrier?" Marie-Christine looked bewildered. "Your French is excellent - you could pass for a student from Paris any time."

"Maybe so - but that's all pretty new ... A week ago, I wouldn't have known how to talk."

She studied his face. "You're joking, right?"

"No - really ... It was a crash course - I had the help of two fairies ... Their names were Muriel and Céline." Listening to his own words, Harry felt surprise about himself, talking so lightly with this girl he had never seen before. Maybe it had to do with this champagne - excellent stuff, really.

"Then you must be a natural with languages," said Marie-Christine. "How many do you speak, in addition to English and French?"

"None - aside from Parseltongue, that is."

Her expression made him realize what he just had said. However, all he could see was curiosity, none of the disgust he had encountered in Hogwarts. "Sorry," he said, "I didn't mean to be impolite."

Marie-Christine smiled. "Not at all ... So it seems all the stories are true - about you, I mean."

Harry shrugged. "I wouldn't know - but I'd bet they're greatly exaggerated." Marie-Christine's style of conversation reminded him of Almyra, there was definitely something familiar in her directness.

She asked, "Where did you meet Fleur?"

"Last year, in the Wizards Tournament." Harry grinned. "At first, we didn't go along well - naturally so because I was an unplanned intruder ... That changed after the story with her sister Gabrielle."

Marie-Christine nodded. "No, I don't think the stories are exaggerated."

At this moment, a man in a glittery costume entered the stage and started to welcome the guests, in particular those from Hogwarts.

Harry had expected Madame Maxime doing the formal parts, then learned from Marie-Christine that this *conférencier* would be the guide through the evening.

The man promised a lot of music, and fun, and some entertaining presentations, then the orchestra started to play, and the Beauxbatons ball was opened.

Feeling light-headed, Harry turned to Cho. "Ma princesse Chinoise, voulez-vous danser?"

She beamed at him. "Je vous en pris."

With satisfaction, he recognized an appreciating smile across the table while they walked to the parquet.

It took him a few steps, then he was back in the motion, actually better than ever before - a bit of champagne seemed to help here as well. The music fit perfectly, Cho in his arms felt wonderful, smiled at him, he smiling back. This ball would be simply magnificent.

After the first danse, Cho said, "Harry - you're a celebrity here."

"What makes you think so?"

"Can't you see? - People are looking at us."

He laughed. "Nonsense - they're looking at you, no question about that ... This Gérard is the best example."

Cho showed a wicked smile. "Jealous, Harry?"

"No, why? ... He's very charming - he really has style, I don't mind learning a bit."

She sighed. "And I wouldn't mind a bit of jealousy from your side ... Although I have no reason to complain - you're adapting awfully quickly - that girl is the best example."

"Marie-Christine?"

"Who else?"

"She reminds me of Al - her way of talking. - And that," he bent down, kissed her lightly, "reminds me of you."

He had found the right answer. "We should come here more often," said Cho softly, "although you might want to slow down with the champagne, Harry - just keep that level."

They danced again. The orchestra only included instrumentalists, there was no singer. Harry didn't miss it as the music was so well suited, played to dance and nothing else. It was all-present without drowning the conversation on the parquet - Harry had the feeling Beauxbatons employed some Muggles technology for this purpose.

After a third dance, the parquet emptied.

He returned with Cho to their table, wondering about this early break.

Then the conf rencier was back and announced a juggler, instantly making room for the artist.

A man appeared on the stage, dressed in a tight garment of black with some stripes of silver, juggling three balls until he had reached the center of the stage. Then an assistant appeared, a young woman, dressed still tighter and more scarcely, who passed him a fourth ball, then a fifth. After a demonstration of perfect coordination, the artist reduced the number down to zero by passing the balls to her rather than up again.

The second gag was done with bats, this time only three. The artist kept wandering from side to side, turning, moving his legs through the whirling circle of spinning bats.

The third and last gag was a clownery and also a masterpiece of stage magic. Resting against a stand like a bar customer, the artist threw a first ball up. At peak point, the ball slowed down and started to fall as if in slow motion. The artist sipped from a glass, took a drag at a cigarette, and threw the next ball. When the first one reached the bottom point, he pushed it carelessly, sending it up again. Then he inserted a third ball in the game, even a fourth, playing the lazy barfly who was equally busy to drink, to smoke, and to send slow balls up in the air.

Moments later, he emptied the glass, stubbed the cigarette, and disappeared behind a curtain.

The balls, left alone, sped up to normal and fell down.

Next moment, the artist returned and bowed, accepting roaring applause.

Smiling at Cho, Gérard asked, "How did you like Le Jongleur Magique?"

"The lazy balls were very nice ... The other stuff was okay - I'm used to it from Hongkong, there you can see it up and down the street."

Harry watched how Gérard was digesting Cho's specialty - the blow out of nowhere, noticing the visible signs of some readjustment in Gérard's face. If he wasn't seriously mistaken, an opinion had just switched from light-weight to a higher class. The thought made him grin.

Gérard seemed to have a good antenna. He turned to Harry. "How was it for you?"

"I've never saw a juggler before - for me, it was quite impressive."

"Never before?" Gérard looked astonished. "I can't believe entertainment in England is that limited."

The smile didn't leave Harry's face. "Probably not - it's more a personal lack of experience ... My social life has been somewhat limited."

The music started again.

Gérard was up, bowed to Cho, and guided her to the parquet.

Harry looked at Marie-Christine, receiving a smile and a nod before he could say a word. They went to the parquet.

After a moment of dancing, Marie-Christine said, "I hope you don't mind Gérard's talking - sometimes, he's a little arrogant ... Most of the time, to be honest."

Harry laughed. "No, not at all ... I like him - he's genuine, he has style ... It's very informative to watch him."

It made her laugh too. "Your partner - Cho - has cut him quite nicely."

"Yes, that's her trademark ... People tend to underestimate her - but only once."

"I had the feeling." A moment later, Marie-Christine said, "I watched you two dancing ... It told me why you didn't get upset about Gérard courting her."

Slightly surprised, Harry asked, "Is it that obvious?"

"Maybe not for everybody."

He wondered how it was for Marie-Christine, watching her partner focusing his efforts toward another girl, and why she seemed not to care. Following a parallel he had recognized before, he asked, "Are you in research?"

He could feel her surprise. "How did you know?"

"Some similarities ... You should talk with Almyra, the girl next to Cho in the white dress - I'm a case in a study of hers."

"About what?"

"You might ask her for the exact title - something long and complicated - I'm in for my Parseltongue."

Marie-Christine nodded. "Just what I thought ... I'd have no problem to envy her - although it surprises me a bit that you accepted it."

"Well ..." Harry smiled. "Almyra is Cho's friend."

"I see ..." Marie-Christine sighed theatrically. "It's always the same - as a researcher, you need luck as well as the right connections."

They went into the second dance.

When it ended, Marie-Christine asked, "Your remark to Gérard, about your social life - was it a joke to stop him?"

"No - it was the truth. - Why do you ask?"

"Then how come you learned to dance like that - another pair of fairies, maybe the week before?"

Harry laughed. "No - not fairies but Fleur, and not the week before but the months before the Christmas ball."

"Just so - to balance out a lack of experience?" Seeing his expression, she added, "Sorry - it's a bad habit, asking people all kinds of questions."

Harry felt disarmed. "It wasn't just so but for a purpose - otherwise, your description was correct."

The music had started again.

While dancing, Marie-Christine said, "I guess I've met the purpose this evening."

Enjoying this unrestrained style, Harry said, "A propos balancing out - let me ask you a question - just in-between."

Marie-Christine smiled. "One."

"What's the topic of your research?"

"The Dark Forces - Voldemort in particular."

Somehow, Harry managed not to lose step. "Oh ... That explains it."

Sounding apologetically, Marie-Christine said, "I thought you had guessed already - after I was asking you all these questions."

"No, I didn't ... Although it's certainly not by accident that we're sitting across each other, right?"

Marie-Christine blushed a bit. "Do you feel set up?"

"No ... As long as you don't start interviewing me about my encounters with him."

"I promise - although it's hard *not* to do it."

Harry thought a moment. "Talk with Almyra - if she votes for you, which will make sure it doesn't conflict with her study, we'll meet somewhere, and I'll stand a real interview ... And now let's just dance."

Marie-Christine beamed. "Thank you, 'arry - I'll do that."

As expected, the dance floor cleared again after this dance. The conf rencier announced a singer who seemed quite famous, considering the reaction of the audience. However, listening to his song, Harry felt no lack of experience at never having heard him before. He also realized, if this pattern continued, he would finish his dance duties long past midnight before even having a second chance with Cho.

Remembering her warning of the champagne, he asked Marie-Christine which other drink she could recommend.

Before she could answer, G rard said, "You should try pastis, 'arry - that's the proper drink for a long evening."

"Sounds interesting." He looked at Marie-Christine. "So what is your opinion?"

Her glance told him she didn't care but thanked him anyway. Aloud, she said, "Try it - it's not everybody's taste."

Using the silver ball, he called the waiter and ordered a *pastis*, also more champagne for Cho, who seemed not inclined to follow her own advice.

The pastis arrived - a high glass with a bit of a greenish fluid, plus a carafe with water - obviously tap water. When filling the glass with water, the mixture turned milky-yellow.

Harry sipped, surprised of the strong taste from the little amount that wasn't water. It was good, refreshing - just the right stuff in this heat. With so much water, he felt safe.

Then he danced with Almyra. When he told her about Marie-Christine as a potential fellow researcher, Almyra seemed very interested. He asked her when, or where, she had learned her obviously good French.

"It's a neighbourhood issue," he was told. "Jamaica is under English influence, but the next-door neighbour - in Voodoo terms - is Haiti which is under French influence."

After another break, soon to forget because it was the same singer again, Harry danced with Padma, recognizing a giddiness in her movements, as well as a faint slur in her speak that

could be traced back to some glasses of champagne. He felt glad having switched to pastis, more glad when the dance was over.

The conférencier entered the stage again.

Waiting for the next announcement, hoping it wasn't that singer again, Harry was startled to hear the guy talking about "our friends from Hogwarts", some of which he was going to present now. Then he called Dumbledore to the stage and introduced him as the Headmaster of this "ancient school with its long-standing traditions", further as the "central figure in the fight against the Dark Forces".

This was followed by some statements from Dumbledore, spoken in a slightly old-fashioned French with a not so slight accent.

The applause kept to a moderate level, except for some islands of Hogwarts students who added considerably more noise.

Watching the row of faces across the table, Marie-Christine said, "He seems to be very popular, your Dumble d'Or."

Harry nodded, and Ron called, "The greatest wizard ever." His face was heated, thanks to this delicious champagne.

Now the conférencier was talking about more friends, and about two extraordinary people who had found a way to gather them. Still unsure what exactly that meant, Harry heard him calling for Madame Maxime and Hagrid.

Of course - the Giants.

Smiling broadly, he watched Hagrid standing there, answering questions that originated from the conférencier but were translated by Fleur who also translated his answers.

"What a charming couple," said Gérard grinning. "It's not exactly the beauty and the beast, but only because the beauty is somehow questionable."

Harry's head snapped around, the smile had left his face completely. "Hagrid's my oldest friend, Gérard - so please, watch your words."

Gérard laughed. "Pardon, Harry - I didn't know ... True, it's not his fault there is an ugly Giant somewhere in the family."

Cho's voice was a cold hissing. "One of those *ugly* Giants has mended my arm after an accident. His name's Lleyrin the Fist, and he's not only their chief but also a friend of us. - So, Gérard, because this champagne is just too good to throw it into your face, I think you'll take that back."

Without hesitation, Gérard held his arms up, smiled. "My dear Cho, I deeply regret to have insulted you or your friends - I seem to hit every grease pot within reach, and beyond ... Sorry, it's a specialty of mine."

Harry felt Cho at his side relax.

Some other faces also looked easier than a second before - knowing that Cho's promises were all but hollow, even the unspoken ones.

The conférencier had dismissed the two huge figures and now told his audience there were still more protectors of Hogwarts, very unusual ones, difficult to handle because they were dragons, and one of these admirable dragon guards would now come to him, and his name would be "Charlie Weasley!!"

Accompanied by laughter and applause, Charlie walked to the stage, was greeted by the conférencier, and had to answer questions, translated and re-translated by Fleur.

The conférencier asked how Charlie managed not to be burned.

"Well," said Charlie, "it's just a matter of politeness - you step aside if they snort."

He had hit the right string with his audience, which responded with laughter and applause through the interview. At the last question, how a wizard came to work with dragons, Charlie replied, "It's like in that old joke - it was pure luck."

Watching, Harry saw some people - including almost all teachers - rolling in laughter while others, like him, didn't know that joke. Obviously, the conférencier had understood but made no intention to tell. It was maddening.

Before he had an opportunity to ask for the punch line, his attention was caught again.

The conférencier talked about true heroes, about someone who only recently had escaped from the claws of Voldemort, someone who had developed a mastership in the fight against Dementors and - still better - someone who was here this evening ...

"Lupin!" called Harry, a split second before the conférencier did the same.

With shining eyes, Harry watched Lupin entering the stage, listened to his answers which came in good French, not surprisingly so with this name. A moment later, he froze.

"... true that I have mastered the most successful form of cursing Dementors, I'm not the only one, more - I'm not the first one. The true master of the Golden Patronus is a student who fought with me in the Hogwarts Express accident - his name is Harry Potter!"

Lupin was staring in his direction, smiling, waving.

Now the conférencier was waving, while voices in the hall were shouting his name. Cho was pushing him, saying, "Go, Harry."

He stood up, cursing inwardly, the dizziness in his head deepening, his gaze fixed at two smiling figures on the stage, Lupin and Fleur.

When he reached them, Lupin said grinning, "Hello, Harry - your turn," and marched off the stage, back to his seat.

The conférencier moved a magiphone in front of him. "Harry Potter - the famous boy who defeated Voldemort!"

"Er - yes, that's me ... Good evening." The light was blinding in his face, he couldn't recognize faces, only heard applause.

"Harry - is it true you are the hero of the Golden Patronus?"

"I can do it, yes - otherwise it's nonsense ... Professor Lupin is my teacher, I learned everything from him." Angrily, Harry added, "He said it just to get off from here."

Laughter, the applause roaring.

"Harry - I've been told you're also an expert on a broomstick - the youngest Quidditch seeker in hundred years, and the current champion of Hogwarts."

"For Quidditch, that makes me one in a team of seven. - But right now, I'm just a member in our Flying Squad - one of twenty-eight, plus our squad leader Viktor Krum - and Ron Weasley who's doing the office work ... If that's the reason why I'm standing here, I think the others should come up too."

Whatever he said, the people in the hall were applauding like crazy.

The confériencier turned. "That's a wonderful idea - I ask all people of the Hogwarts Flying Squad to join us!"

A moment later, the first figures appeared through the curtain of light, grinning at him, looking self-conscious, easing up when the stage filled with the others.

Viktor was caught by the confériencier, now the duty was on him to answer questions. Then the squad had to arrange in team formations, of course with Harry, Cho, Katie, and Alicia in the middle. Flashes were hitting their faces, Cho, smiling to the audience, hissed, "Clever trick, Harry."

Then it was over, they could walk back to their seats.

While Gérard kept busy explaining to Cho how extravagant it was to waste such an exquisite body at broomsticks in general and Quidditch in particular, Harry felt Marie-Christine's glance at him. No doubt, she was dying to ask him a million questions about Golden Patronuses, only he wasn't in the mood to answer them, grateful for the bubbles of charme which pearly toward Cho, not leaving much of a trace.

The music didn't start again. Instead, the waiters appeared with dishes.

Something to eat - a wonderful idea, although it wasn't much, measured with respect to more dances to follow. Harry emptied his pastis, let a glass with only water follow, and ordered another one.

While eating tiny pieces, they had the opportunity to learn more about Beauxbatons.

This school was organized in *régiments*, ten actually, which tended to ally in pairs, resulting in five alliances and in rivalries and competitions very much like the four houses of Hogwarts. There were of course Quidditch teams, except nothing could be farther apart from Gérard's interest.

"Really," he said, "I'm not built for hard work - isn't that obvious?"

Marie-Christine explained, "He's one of those people who excel effortlessly, without ever stressing themselves." Seeing the question in the opposite faces, she added, "Don't be misled by Gérard's behaviour - normally you'll find him at the top of the ranks in every class."

"Except Quidditch," corrected Gérard.

"He has a specialty," continued Marie-Christine, "a variation of the Imperius charm ... First he'd drive people really mad with his bad manners, then he uses this trick - and they forgive him instantly."

"Very handy," said Cho, "although you might be careful using that toward Harry."

Gérard smiled. "I'm always careful with 'arry - but why here in particular?"

"He's immune from the Imperius - now imagine your trick won't work?"

Harry saw Marie-Christine's eyes widen.

Gérard said, "Immune from my charme - pardon, 'arry, but I don't need you for that."

Following his glance toward Marie-Christine, who had slightly blushed, seeing Gérard's eyes, Harry suddenly understood. Poor guy - hopelessly in love with a girl who, at her best, tolerated him.

He said, "Competing against science and hard work - that's really a terrible fate, Gérard."

Marie-Christine was blushing deeper.

Gérard caroled, "Here's the one who understands my misery - no wonder with such a beautiful girl at his side ... 'arry, we have to drink to that."

Harry couldn't help, he had to empty another glass of champagne - even more delicious after the food. Then Cho had to follow, Harry wondered how Gérard could handle these quantities without showing more effect than a sweaty face.

The music started again.

Harry went to dance with Hermione, regretting the wine he had accepted. At least, it didn't hurt his motions, more to the contrary, and Hermione seemed not to notice, or maybe she was suffering similar symptoms.

The next piece of entertainment took place at the parquet rather than on stage - the Beauxbatons Dance Formation, four couples whose movements seemed to fill the entire rectangle.

Harry wondered why Fleur wasn't one of them. Marie-Christine told him this formation was limited to students only - Fleur had been part of it until the end of the previous year.

He danced with Cho again - Fleur, the last on his duty list, had been caught by someone else. Spinning in a waltz, he saw his vision blur to a continuous ribbon of colour spots which didn't go all too well with his condition. But Cho didn't fare better. "Slow down, Harry - before we have an accident."

Luckily, the next music was very slow, and the lights darkened, and it was completely sufficient to hold her close while moving slowly in place, and a very good feeling.

Cho whispered, "Poor Gérard," and Harry murmured, "Lucky me," and she answered, "Lucky us," and the light was so nicely dimmed.

Back at the seats, Gérard tried to share another glass with him, only Harry insisted on staying with pastis, so he had to respond with that.

Then the conférencier announced "Ladies Choice," and Harry watched Cho getting off, almost tripping.

Before he could see who was her target, one of the other two girls across the table was standing before him. He followed her to the parquet.

"Thanks to Gérard, we had little opportunity to talk," she said. "I'm Janine."

In spite of the dizziness in his head, Harry's memory seemed still intact. "Do you have an older brother?"

"I've some, but one is older, yes."

"And his name is Raoul?"

Janine smiled. "That's true."

"Then we'll have an opportunity to talk tomorrow ... Except it's already today." Harry suppressed a giggle, wondering why he found this remark so funny.

"Maybe so," replied Janine, "although I wouldn't be surprised if Gabrielle turns out more persistent than Gérard."

This was certainly worth a laugh. Then Harry asked, "Could you talk with Ron, then?"

"A bit ... We had some trouble with the language, and then I had to be careful - imagine Padma realizing there's an invitation, and she's not in."

This was definitely worth more laughing.

They had both trouble holding their step, steadied again after a moment.

Janine seemed to be a very joyful person, an open face with a lot of freckles, light brown hair with a shimmer of red - Harry found Fleur's choice an excellent match, if only for a day in a French castle.

Back at his seat, he had an urgent desire for some fresh air.

Taking Cho's hand, he fought his way to an exit that opened to a park with trees, paths, benches. Breathing deeply, he tried to clear his head, to sharpen his vision. Unfortunately, it didn't work, seemed worse than before.

"Less siddown," he said.

"Harry," murmured Cho, "you're in a bad shape ... Trouble is, I'm not better off much."

"Thiss glass with Gérard - I guess that wassa misstake."

"Yes," came her voice, "and the one before and the one after."

"Can't be ... 'twas only pastis - mossly water."

He heard her giggle. "Wait here." Cho walked off.

Waiting? What else - as if he would be able to wander around. Wasn't it difficult enough to sit straight? But then, who said he had to sit straight? Still, might be better ... Resting his arms on the back of the bench, he stabilized. This air was wonderful, if only it would clear a bit ...

Some figures came along the path. The small red one - had to be Cho.

"Get up, Harry."

"Cer'nly."

He followed inside ... Walking wasn't difficult at all, if someone kept telling him where. There was a staircase - down it went, down ... oops, almost he'd been down quicker than planned, better grabbing the handle ... along a corridor, there was a cabin, like the portkey link, only it wasn't, at least not the one to Hogwarts.

Somebody pushed him inside.

He grabbed the knob, felt no surprise when the wall disappeared, stepped forward into another room.

There was Fleur.

He said, "Fleur - pity I missed to dance with yer."

"Never mind, 'arry."

She guided him out, upstairs, more upstairs, there were certainly more stairs than in Hogwarts, which was something, wasn't it? And he still could walk them, remarkable, after all ...

28 - La Vie en France

There were voices outside, muffled first, clearer after a moment of disorientation - definitely French.

French??

And if they were outside, what actually was inside, please?

A young voice said something like "... wake him." Next moment, Harry heard a door, light steps, sniffing, breathing, then something wet washed over his face.

"arry!!"

He opened his eyes.

To find himself lying in a bed, at the side of which three dogs were standing, wagging their tails in excitement, the one closest to him busy washing his face with a wet tongue.

Behind them, in the middle of the room, a young girl, about ten - Gabrielle, a younger version of Fleur, only the silvery hair almost as long, beaming at him, as excited as the dogs.

Behind her, in the door frame, stood Fleur, smiling at the picture.

"What ..." At this moment, Harry's memory came back, welcomed only for a short moment.

"Oh no," he moaned, realizing what had happened. He had been drunk, had done it at the Beauxbatons ball. Suppressing panic, he looked at himself, relieved to see a night dress, although not his own.

"Good morning, 'arry." Fleur's voice was thick with amusement. "Gabrielle decided it's time to wake you ... You should know, her word isn't exactly law in this house but close enough - especially in this case."

Harry looked at the dogs, at Gabrielle, couldn't help grinning, was rewarded with another wave of tail-wagging and wet muzzles.

"Good morning, Gabrielle ... Fleur, I'm sorry ..."

She interrupted him. "Calm down, 'arry - it's no affair, and you behaved quite decently - surprisingly so, considering your state." Fleur grinned. "To ease you up - Cho wasn't that much better."

"Where is she? ... Where are we?"

"At home," replied Gabrielle beaming, "you're here much earlier than planned - so we have much more time!"

Fleur turned to her sister. "That's true, but now let him get dressed - c'mon, young lady."

Dressing?

Harry looked at Fleur. "Who - er, brought me in? - And what about my - er, clothes?" His real question was who had undressed him, only he couldn't ask that.

But Fleur had sensed his meaning. "You were walking all by yourself, 'arry," she grinned again, "and you did the critical parts of the undressing - all very orderly, only tight like a lord ... You'll find the bathroom next door."

Fleur took her sister and stepped out. The dogs followed, then the door closed.

Harry swung his legs and tried to figure out how he felt.

Weak, a slight headache, not too bad altogether, only a dry mouth and a sore stomach. He staggered into the bathroom and gulped two cups of water.

A lot better - only that a moment later his head started to swim. This was impossible, wasn't it? It had been tap water, no way it could have been something else.

He started to shower. After some minutes under the hot water, he felt some steadiness return. Having finished with cold water, he felt ready to live further.

His clothes formed a neat stack in the bedroom, cleaned, without the sweat stains he had expected. Well, if you got drunk, there was no better way than to wake up in a castle with a lot of servants.

Climbing down the stairs, he found two dogs waiting for him, wagging happily, a small white one and a retriever.

Harry knelt down, patted them, receiving caresses in return. After a moment, the third dog appeared, large and black, eager to get its share of the patting.

Next moment, Gabrielle was there.

Harry asked, "Are they all yours?"

"The small one is mine, she's as old as I am, and she's the boss. Her name is Boulicot because she was such a small bundle when she came to us, but we call her just Bouly. This one," Gabrielle pointed to the retriever, "is Danny, for Danièle, and this is Max. He's the youngest ... Do you have dogs, 'arry?"

He grinned. "One - sometimes."

Gabrielle tilted her head. "Sometimes? What does that mean, sometimes? Either you have a dog or you don't."

"He's not really a dog - his name's Sirius, a wizard who can change into a dog, a large black one, like Max here ... Sirius is my godfather."

Gabrielle seemed impressed. "Can you change into an animal, 'arry?"

"No I cannot ... But one of the girls that will come today can - her name's Almyra, and she can change into an owl - or a falcon, what you like best."

A slight disappointment could be found in Gabrielle's face. "Why can't you change into an animal, 'arry?"

"I didn't learn it yet ... All I can do is to change my arm into a snake, and then I can talk with her."

Gabrielle clapped her hands. "Yes, please, 'arry - do it!"

A man appeared in the door. "He'll do it later, my sweetie - let him eat something first." The man turned to him. "Good morning, 'arry - I thought, if I wouldn't come for help, you'd never make it for the breakfast."

Harry rose, realizing that up and down movements weren't the best idea yet. "Good morning, Monsieur Delacour - please excuse my untidy arrival in your house."

The man shook his hand, smiled. "It's not really your fault, 'arry - you're a victim of cultural differences between England and France - let's find a seat, then I'll explain to you what should be part of the education program at Hogwarts."

They entered a large dining room, where Harry found the table laid for two people - probably himself and Cho.

He hadn't reached his seat yet when a woman came through an archway - Fleur's mother, the resemblance remarkable, her face beautiful, a clear indication that Fleur still had time to reach her peak.

She smiled at him.

Monsieur Delacour said. "My dear - may I introduce you to our young friend 'arry Potter ... 'arry, this is my wife Elienne, who has caught me twenty years ago, never to let go again." His face left no doubt this was the best he could imagine.

Harry stepped forward. "Madame Delacour - thank you for your hospitality under these embarrassing conditions ..."

She interrupted him. "My dear 'arry, let me tell you - in this house, you're welcome at any time - you certainly know why."

He blushed, remembering the scene at the lake which at that time had looked so foolish.

Monsieur Delacour held a bottle. "I was going to let 'arry come back to the living - what about you, my dear? A small drop, to celebrate this event?"

Harry's eyes widened - champagne! "Oh no, please, Monsieur Delacour ..."

The man smiled. "I know what I'm doing, 'arry - trust me. Lesson number one - after a night with too many drinks, you need one glass of the same medicine, no more, no less."

Frightened, Harry looked at the glass. "The water alone was enough to make me dizzy again - I'm afraid this glass will make it worse."

A laughter. "Which tells me you were drinking pastis, right?"

Harry nodded.

"That's the nasty after-effect - water is not the best idea, while this glass will truly sober you up."

Reluctantly, Harry accepted the glass.

Fleur's father raised his own. "To our first meeting with Gabrielle's friend and hero."

It was remarkable how delicious the champagne tasted, even at this morning.

Fleur's mother left the room. Harry sat down, started to eat carefully, at the same time listening to Monsieur Delacour's instructions how to handle alcoholic drinks.

"As unplanned as this was, Harry - it has shown you don't lose your manners when getting drunk - which is the sign of a self-assured person, and therefore not too surprising in your case ... It might not be a reason to be proud, but once you know it, there's no reason to drown in shame either."

Harry nodded, chewing slowly. After the glass had worked exactly as promised, he felt ready to believe Fleur's father every word about drinking.

"Mainly, as I said, you're a victim of differences in the education between Hogwarts and Beauxbatons. In France, knowledge of alcoholic drinks and their effects is expected from students at the age of fifteen ..."

"Seriously?"

Monsieur Delacour nodded. "It doesn't mean they should drink regularly, but they have to know ... Because of that, Beauxbatons students always forget that this is not true for other students, in particular for those from Hogwarts." He smiled. "I know that your Headmaster is more open-minded in this issue, but he certainly has to face a strong opposition among the parents."

"There's a town near Hogwarts where you can get a drink," said Harry, "except this year it wasn't allowed for security reasons."

"That adds to it ... There are two things you have to know, Harry. Every drink, no matter what, contains the same amount of alcohol - assuming it's served in the proper glass. That's why liquor glasses are so small, while beer glasses are so big."

Harry's eyes widened. "Does it mean - each pastis was as much as a glass of champagne?"

"Yes."

"Oh my God - and I thought, with that much water ..."

"Pastis is a strong liquor," explained Monsieur Delacour. "The water stretches it to what's called a longdrink, and makes it quite digestible for the stomach ... But in quantities of alcohol, there's no difference."

"And nobody ... yes, I see."

"The other rule is, don't mix drinks. If you started with champagne, keep to it. If you're on pastis, keep to that ... I can tell you, champagne and pastis is a particularly bad mixture."

The expression in Monsieur Delacour's face left little doubt that this judgement was based on personal experience. Harry shuddered inwardly, thinking about his innocent foolishness with the drink habits of Beauxbatons.

There were footsteps outside, then Cho appeared in the door.

Monsieur Delacour was quicker than Harry. "Mademoiselle Chang - I'm delighted to meet you." He took her hand, brought it near his lips, bowing.

"Monsieur Delacour - please forgive my appearance, and please call me Cho."

She accepted the offered glass without hesitation, evidently her knowledge of drinking habits was better than Harry's. Then she started to eat, with obvious appetite, giving a good example how much better it was keeping to champagne only.

Harry was about to finish his small breakfast when a whirlwind came through the door, in the shape of Gabrielle, trailed by the three dogs. "Cho!!"

The cheering shout was followed by a hugging, responded equally.

Gabrielle beamed. "I'm so happy you're here too. Fleur has told me how you and Harry are flying together, and how you helped him in the exam, and how your arm was broken, and how the Giant has cured it ..."

Interrupting herself, Gabrielle examined Cho's arms. "Which one was it?"

Cho tipped her right arm. "This one - but it wasn't broken, otherwise we couldn't have finished the patrol."

Satisfied to see her unhurt, Gabrielle turned to Harry. "Are you done? Then we can go. I have to show you everything."

Smiling, Monsieur Delacour said, "It's the best you can do, Harry - which gives me the rare opportunity to do what I like best - talking with an attractive young woman."

Harry followed Gabrielle, for a tour that would not end before the other guests arrived at lunch time. It started with a succession of rooms, first the kitchen where they met Madame Delacour in the company of some house-elves, smiling warmly at the sight of her younger daughter, through family rooms, a library, up the stairs to Gabrielle's own room, surprising Harry with a picture of himself and Cho, obviously taken during the Christmas ball, and another one of him alone, sitting on his Steel Wing.

He was shown the places where the dogs used to sleep, about two and a half for each of them, then his young guide found the building done and dragged him outside. All the while, Harry praised each galleon he'd spent on his crash course - Gabrielle kept talking almost non-stop.

Outside, the first station was the garden, actually more a park, where they had to throw rubber balls for the dogs.

The first one to get tired of that was Bouly, lying down in the grass with her own ball, snarling whenever one of the other two dogs would come too close.

The next was Gabrielle, who found it time to show Harry the stables and the horses. Inside, she asked, "Can you ride, 'arry?"

"I don't know - I never had an opportunity to ride a horse."

"Never??" Gabrielle looked disbelieving.

"No. Once I rode a hippogriff, although that's more flying than riding ..." Next moment, remembering, Harry corrected himself. "Wait - yes, I did ride, twice actually. But it wasn't a horse, it was a Centaur."

"Really?" Gabrielle seemed relieved to see her hero's reputation restored, and also fascinated at the idea of a horse one could talk with. "Tell me, please."

"It was twice the same - his name's Firenze. The first time, he saved me from a bad enemy, and the second time was in the exam patrol - there he saved Cho and myself from losing because Cho was hurt."

"Tell me how he saved Cho and you."

And so Harry had to tell the story how Cho crashed into a tree, and how he guided her to the ground where Firenze found them, and how the Centaur had carried Cho. This was interrupted by many questions, however, Harry couldn't imagine a better way to recover from an overdose of pastis.

When Gabrielle heard Fleur's shawl had played a role, she smiled archly, suddenly no longer a ten-year-old while Veela more than ever. "What did Cho say when she had the shawl around?"

"Hmm - maybe you should ask herself about that."

"She became tender - am I right?"

Harry smiled. "Yes. She wanted me to kiss her."

Gabrielle nodded, this was quite obvious to her, not asking him what he had done, certainly assuming he had obeyed. Next moment, she looked up. "I can do it too - without a shawl."

"I know - you're a Veela."

"A quarter Veela," she corrected him, "but that's still enough. - Shall I?"

Harry had no doubt this girl would be successful. Luckily, he found the proper answer. "Ask Cho first - if she agrees, it's okay."

"Yes, you're right." Gabrielle nodded again, showing Harry that Drilencu's lessons had provided only the dry facts of Veela standards and morale.

The dogs, lying placidly around them, raised their heads almost simultaneously. A moment later, they could hear voices from the building.

"I think the others just arrived," said Harry.

Gabrielle looked pleadingly. "Can you ask the girl for me - the one who can be an owl?" Suddenly, she was her true age again.

"Almyra," completed Harry. "Yes, I can do that ... On the other side, she's Cho's friend - so if you ask Cho to ask her, the chances might be even better."

Gabrielle didn't fully agree. "You must ask her first, 'arry."

No question - as much as she liked Cho, her undivided hero had to fight the first battle. To confirm this, Gabrielle grabbed his hand while walking over to the main building.

Inside, Harry saw six figures - not his friends, as expected, all but one face unknown, and this one belonged to Janine.

Gabrielle made the first part of the introduction quickly, shouting, "Here - this is 'arry Potter!"

It was the Baillard family, as Harry learned from Monsieur Delacour's more formal introduction, although not quite complete. A son somewhere in the middle had been left home, the other four children were Raoul and Janine, both of them grinning conspiratorially, then Thierry, a boy slightly older than Gabrielle, and Vivienne, a girl of about eight. As Gabrielle informed Harry immediately, Vivienne was usually called Vif, which was funny because she was very shy, seemed quite impressed by Harry's presence, and held close to her brother.

The introductions hadn't finished yet when another group appeared, guided by Fleur, a Fleur who seemed a bit self-conscious.

A second later, Harry saw why. Together with Viktor and Hermione, Ron and Almyra, a fifth figure was climbing the stairs - Bill Weasley. Harry smiled inwardly, wondering if Fleur's invitation had just been a nice wrapping for what seemed Bill's first visit with her parents.

Ron had found the presence of mind to bring the box with the sweets collection.

Harry whispered, "Thanks a lot," and decided to let Cho do the passing-over, considering his conversations with Gabrielle all the morning, this present suddenly felt like overkill.

Gabrielle was indeed very pleased about the box, however, when Cho introduced her to Almyra, she seemed more awe-struck.

Neither Cho nor Almyra had an explanation for this unusual moment of silence from the girl who was known for silver outside and quicksilver inside. At their questioning looks, Harry whispered, "I told her you can do an owl, Al - I'm ordered to ask you in her name to show it."

Almyra's answer was a low, "Damn you, Harry," although she seemed more excited than annoyed.

While everybody was settling down in the dining room, Monsieur Delacour bent to Harry and murmured, "I forgot to mention the last rule about alcohol, 'arry - place it only on top of some food ... I recommend to skip the apéritif while you don't need to worry about some wine with the meal."

Harry nodded, grateful again for being guided through the complexities of French dinner habits.

Gabrielle, seated between Harry and her father, looked pleased when registering that Harry's apéritif and her own were the same - mineral water. Then she turned to her father and said, "Papa, can we have a Centaur for riding?"

"No, my little one. Centaurs are no animals, so you cannot own them, and they don't like the company of humans - it's impossible to ride them."

Gabrielle shot a reproachful glance. "But 'arry has said he rode a Centaur - twice."

The scene had the attention of the entire table.

"That's highly unusual," replied Monsieur Delacour, "but as 'arry doesn't lie, I'm sure he can explain it."

Feeling Gabrielle's stern glance, Harry said, "It was one specific Centaur, his name is Firenze. - And it's true, the other Centaurs were very angry with him helping me, but he said something like they should read the stars more carefully, then they would know ... By the way, I rode only once, the other time, it was Cho."

To resolve Gabrielle's conflict between his own statements and those of her father, he added, "Firenze didn't like it at all, but Cho talked him into it."

The other people were staring at him, then at a blushing Cho.

Gabrielle asked, "What did you say to him, Cho?"

Harry's reaction came in an instant, as always when at the risk of severe injuries, whether now or later. "It was some poetry," he said to Gabrielle, "and it was only for Firenze's ears."

Lucky him - Gabrielle was satisfied with this answer.

Madame Delacour raised her sherry and said, "To the magic of poetry."

The round followed, and Harry saw that Cho had restricted herself to water as well. Then he felt her hand touching his, an acknowledgment of his quick reaction after this hazardous remark.

Fleur's parents asked Bill about his work with the Goblins, deepening Harry's suspicion this invitation served as a multi-layer event.

Bill explained that recently his job was more outbound, after periods of working as a mere office clerk. His French was quite fluent, giving Harry the impression Veela trances might also speed up the mastering of foreign languages. Listening, he reminded himself not to reveal more than genuine interest.

Monsieur Baillard asked, "How is it for a human to work with Goblins, Monsieur Weasley?"

"Definitely better than the other way around," replied Bill. "Many people consider Goblins as a bunch of greedy dwarfs, only interested in money ... The truth is totally different, although it's quite obvious they support this public prejudice, because they prefer to keep a low profile ... They are very proud - it takes time to gain their confidence, while it takes only an instant to lose it."

Harry nodded. "Goblins are warriors," he said.

Next moment, he twisted. Why had he said that? Could only be a late effect from that damned pastis.

Bill smiled at him. "Harry is right - that expresses her nature in the shortest form."

Monsieur Delacour asked, "Have you been able to gain their confidence?"

"Yes, Monsieur Delacour." There was pride in Bill's voice. "Not too long ago, I had to handle some - er, transactions which involved Goblins and humans ... I didn't make a mistake, and it got me a reward."

Harry's head jerked up. Unable to stop himself, he asked, "Which level?"

"Classified."

Bill's face had blushed a bit, Fleur, at his side, was beaming at him.

Harry could suppress another remark but not a happy grin toward Bill and Fleur. So Bill was now in a position to propose for a girl with rich parents, which wiped off Harry's last doubt about Fleur's plotting.

Monsieur Delacour's face didn't reveal how much he knew about Goblin requests, or about the tactics of Veela daughters. At least, he looked quite satisfied when he said, "Well done, Bill - no need to ask for details, because Harry's face tells me all I have to know."

Over the soup, Janine said, "This guy yesterday, this Monsieur Lupin - I had the feeling there was an interesting story cut very short." She was looking at Ron.

"That's true," answered Ron, "but I think Harry should tell it - his French is much better than mine." His cheeks were slightly pink.

Faces turned toward Harry.

"He was at Hogwarts with my father, and also the reason why my father and some others learned to be an Animagus - you have to know, Lupin is a werewolf."

Some gasping, widening eyes across the table.

Had he done another faux-pas? Quickly, Harry added, "It's fully under control - you may ask Hermione, she's the one who's brewing his medicine."

So Hermione had to explain about the potion, and how this advanced recipe had brought peace to an age-old horror, and why it was her job to do it.

Madame Delacour said, "We didn't know - I'm glad to hear these people can have a normal life, after all that time."

Janine wasn't satisfied yet. "Is it true he was held prisoner by Voldemort? According to what I've heard, he escaped with the help of Dumble d'Or, or 'arry, or both."

"He was caught while fighting Dementors," confirmed Harry. "We found out by - er, some accident ... But the rescuing was done by other people than me - Ron's the one who made it possible - he found information about Voldemort in the Hogwarts archive."

This move took him off the hook, put Ron in the focus of attention, especially Janine's, while Ron - with growing fluency - described his administration job and how he remembered a forgotten letter which finally revealed the location of Lupin's imprisonment.

After finishing his story, Ron tried to pass the ball back to Harry. But Harry was prepared to bounce it off immediately. "After they found the house," he said, "it was guarded for days by Animagus wizards. Almyra here was one of them - she can tell."

Even Gabrielle, whose interest had diminished rapidly before, hung at the lips of Almyra describing the guard shifts that involved a dog, a cat, and alternately an owl or a falcon.

When Almyra mentioned the dog, Gabrielle turned to Harry and asked, "Is this your dog, 'arry?"

He had to laugh. "Yes, although I don't own him. The man is Sirius Black, my godfather."

Monsieur Baillard looked astonished. "What a strange coincidence of names - I remember, wasn't this also the name of this prisoner from Azkaban? ... The newspapers then said he was after you, 'arry."

Harry decided to make it short and quick. "It's one and the same - he wasn't after me, he came to save me ... Thanks to Lupin, we could resolve the misunderstanding."

Monsieur Baillard didn't let it rest. "So he was innocent, then?"

"Yes - innocent in Azkaban, for twelve years ... It was someone else."

Monsieur Baillard would have liked to ask more, but something in Harry's face made him stop.

Instead, his older daughter said, "But I still don't know who enabled Lupin to flee from that house."

Harry said, "That was Dumbledore - in my shape ... Capturing Lupin was just a trap to catch me, and Dumbledore turned the trick against Voldemort."

Monsieur Delacour said, "Which definitely was a masterpiece of magic skill ... An admirable man, your Headmaster ... Actually, this is the most fascinating dinner table I can remember."

Other people agreed, then his younger daughter shouted, "And I'm the one who has made it happen."

"Yes, my pretty one." Monsieur Delacour was stroking Gabrielle's hair, then looked at his other daughter. "With some help from your sister."

During the main course, the conversation turned to family matters, giving Madame Delacour the opportunity to ask Bill about the Weasley family. While he explained, there was a very attentive listener in the Baillard family - Janine who smiled at hearing the Weasleys could offer two children more than her own family.

At some point, Madame Delacour turned to Harry. "Is it difficult for you, 'arry, when the conversation is about families?"

"No - quite the contrary," he replied. "It's fascinating, and I can just sit and listen."

Madame Delacour smiled warmly. "Yes, I can understand that ... What about your relatives?"

Harry's smile faded. "There's no use talking about them - not at all."

Gabrielle's patience held until the dessert was served and gulped quickly, at least by herself. Then she was up. "Thierry, Vif - let's go ... Are you coming with us, 'arry?"

Not only was it impossible to deny her plea, Harry welcomed the opportunity to leave the table. French dinners turned out awfully long. He followed the children into another room, accompanied by the dogs. There, he had to give a detailed explanation of all the sweets in the box.

Pointing at Bernie Bott's Every-Flavour Beans, he said, "Be careful with them - it's really any flavour you can think of, and some of them are terrible."

"That's simple," replied Gabrielle. "For each colour shade, first I let Bouly try. If she doesn't spit out, you can eat it."

Harry had his doubts, only what did he know about the synchronization between this girl and the dog that had watched her grow? With the beans tested, he wasn't surprised when the Canary Creams turned out Gabrielle's favourites - provided there was a mirror so she could watch herself as a large canary for a minute or so.

Thierry preferred Chocolate Frogs because of the pictures, while Vivienne got excited about the Fizzing Whizzbees which made her levitate inches above the floor.

After the box had been emptied to half, Gabrielle turned to Harry. "You said you can make a snake of your arm and talk with her - please do it, 'arry."

He looked at the two other children. "What about you? - Ain't you frightened by a snake?"

Thierry said, "No," not sounding entirely convincing.

Vivienne, who had lost some of her shyness, looked at Harry with great seriousness. "If you hold it, I'm not frightened."

Remembering the reactions of his classmates, Harry said, "When I'll talk with her, don't be afraid, okay? - It'll be Parselmouth, not French."

They nodded, indicating it wasn't quite clear to them why he had to point out something as obvious as that.

He took his wand. "*Manuserpeversa!*"

The brilliantly green snake was moving, hissing.

"Oh - how beautiful," said Gabrielle.

At this moment, a growl came from the large black dog.

"Max - shut up." At Gabrielle's command, the dog sat down, although still at alert.

That'd be the day, thought Harry, bitten by a dog because his arm was a snake. He turned to the object of Max' undiminished attention. "Go fetch a white pill from the box."

The snake dived into the box, came up with the sweet in its fang.

"Give it to Gabrielle."

The snake bent toward the girl and dropped the pill at her hands.

Harry repeated the manoeuver for Thierry, who was somewhat reluctant to take the pill, then for Vivienne, who showed him trust enough to take her pill out of the fangs.

After restoring his arm, he bent down to Max. "It's okay, pal - everything's back in order."

The dog sniffed his arm, licked it, satisfied the green monster was gone.

If Harry had expected to be asked for some other magical tricks, he was wrong. Gabrielle took it for granted he could manage, was only interested in performances that couldn't be watched everyday. So after the snake spectacle, and since he couldn't offer anything new, she decided it was time to fly broomsticks.

She guided him, the other two children, and the dogs to a storage room near the stables. Inside, Harry found a collection of broomsticks, among them some twin seaters.

He checked the label. *Omniair 27 DS*; the smallprint told him DS stood for *Double Selle* - twin saddles. He turned to the children. "Who wants to fly?"

They wanted all, no question about that.

"Okay - let's go inside, ask your parents first, and Cho and Viktor then."

They found the other people sitting comfortably with coffee and cognac. Gabrielle informed her father they were about to fly broomsticks, while basically this had to be a question for allowance, Gabrielle's words reminded more of a press announcement.

Monsieur Delacour found it better to check personally, followed the children outside.

Harry turned to the round. "We need two more pilots - Cho, Viktor, have you ever seen an *Omniair 27 DS*?"

It was interesting to notice - not even the name of an unknown broomstick model could drive Ron off the round, not after Janine had told him this was a family two-seater of decent speed.

In sharp contrast, the thought of two foreigners flying his children, one of them not even native English, brought Monsieur Baillard up pretty quickly. They went outside.

Monsieur Delacour suggested to have the children sit in the front seat, and the students behind.

Harry shook his head. "It doesn't work that way - there's no control from behind."

There was no denying that, only the two fathers couldn't come to terms with the idea of their children in the back seats.

"I know what to do," said Viktor. "We need safety belts - between the pilots and the kids."

This, however, was totally different from the picture Gabrielle had in mind. Safety belts like for a baby, no thanks.

Cho looked at her surprised. "What's your problem, Gabrielle? - We all use safety belts on our broomsticks - I, Harry, Viktor - all squad members."

A suspicious look. "Is this true, 'arry?"

Barely able to keep serious, Harry nodded. "The only way you can fly the *Steel Wings*. Its even printed in the manual."

Suddenly, the concept of flying without a safety belt seemed rather unprofessional, nearly ridiculous.

There weren't any belts, but ropes and the knowledge of two experienced wizard fathers. Five minutes later, three *Omniair 27 DS*s were manned, mounted, ready to jump - Harry and Gabrielle, Cho and Vif, Viktor and Thierry.

Harry gave last instructions to his young passenger. "You do the same what I do, Gabrielle - if I bend left or right, you bend with me, if I duck, you duck onto my back - okay?"

"Yes, 'arry."

"Ready? ... Up we go." He jumped.

First thing, Harry checked the handling of this Omniair. It was no Steel Wing, no Firebolt either, while definitely a lot more than some cranky old family vehicle. The acceleration was moderate, a sensible thing with a kid in the back seat, and the steering was a bit sloppy, probably only in his opinion which used a high-speed combat broomstick for measure.

He drove an arc, approaching Cho and Vif. Coming closer, he saw Cho grinning madly. She called, "That's a picture I could get used to, Harry."

He blushed. "Each at its own sweet time."

Gabrielle was pounding his back. "Go on, 'arry, let them see what we can do."

A little show-off - why not? He made a final check. "You're not going to be seasick?"

He felt her head shaking. "No, not me."

"Hold the belt!" He pushed seriously.

The Omniair responded smoothly, gaining speed - no, this wasn't a slow piece, not at all. Half of his mind in a permanent check of the body at his back, the hands at his side, Harry bent to the left and started a wide arc, upward, dropping, downward, diving to the ground, with only feet of air left underneath, pushing up again, this time a right arc.

A piercing scream of delight reached his ears.

Grinning, he bent more, starting a full circle at undiminished speed. He could feel his passenger bend with him, her hands tightly gripping the belt around his waist.

Suddenly, a wave washed through his mind, a dizziness, familiar ... It was her!

He broke the circle, turned upright, slowed down. "Hey, Gabrielle - watch your Veela power!"

"Pardon, 'arry ... I didn't mean it." She sounded quite embarrassed.

In a more conventional style, he turned to fly back. From behind came a voice, "Er - please, 'arry, don't tell the others."

He patted the hand at his side. "Never - it's something like what Cho said to the Centaur."

The response was the closest thing possible to a hug in mid-air.

For the last stretch back, he selected a manoeuver which was less exciting but required considerably more skill than a simple full-speed circle. It was a swinging to both sides along

the main direction, like a pendulum, called the dancing broomstick. The zig-zagging motion required fine response from the device, giving another proof that these Omniairs certainly didn't come cheap.

With the last swing, they stopped right in front of Monsieur Delacour.

The man helped his daughter dismount, then bent to Harry. "To be honest - it was a bit stressful to watch."

Harry dismounted. "I'm sorry, Monsieur Delacour - I didn't ..."

He was interrupted. "Never mind - I know perfectly well you were only following orders."

Gabrielle grabbed Harry's hand to walk inside. They met Fleur, who asked her sister, "How was it to fly with the Hogwarts champion?"

Something in her sister's answer made Fleur look startled. Her glance followed Gabrielle, who was walking into the salon, then she turned to Harry, "Something wrong?"

"Nope - we were running a bit wild, but then slowed down."

After a second, Fleur started to giggle, then stopped herself. "I see - in order not to lose control, right?"

Harry grinned. "Psst - I'm not supposed to talk."

Inside, he found small groups, absorbed in conversations. Madame Delacour, who was sitting with Bill, smiled at him. "Your patience is admirable, 'arry - it's so pleasant ... You're really up to the picture Gabrielle is drawing of you."

Harry smiled back. "It's fun - every minute of it." He bent down to stroke the large black dog. "And I could get used to some dogs around."

Madame Delacour asked, "Do you see your godfather often, 'arry?"

He looked up. "Certainly not as much as we'd like - and when, it's usually because of some trouble ... That's one reason why it's nice to pat a large black dog just for nothing."

Gabrielle arrived with the information that they were about to play a game, and that this was impossible without Harry since it required four people.

As it turned out, the game was a kind of quartet, played with cards - except that the pictures on the cards were of course magical, changing their contents in patterns which required an excellent memory. Harry was chanceless.

Then it was time for coffee and cake, including those brought as presents by Ron and Hermione. Inevitably, the conversation turned to house-elves, and Ron mentioned Dobby, Harry's greatest admirer - short of Gabrielle, of course.

Hearing about this competition, Gabrielle asked Harry to tell the story of Dobby, and how he had managed to free him.

He had no choice - everybody wanted to hear it. When he came to Dobby's role in the second task of the Wizard Tournament, Fleur interrupted him. "So it was cheating, 'arry - isn't that so?"

He looked up, surprised. "Sure - it was cheating all the way ... Bagman was cheating because he had a high bid running ... Mad-Eye Moody - I mean, Crouch was cheating because I was supposed to be first at the cup ... To balance out, I told Cedric about the dragons, and to balance out that, Cedric told me about that ball ... For all I know, you and Viktor were the only ones playing fair."

Viktor shook his head. "I wasn't ... Couldn't - Karkaroff kept telling me all the time."

Monsieur Delacour turned to his elder daughter. "You see, Fleur - by right and order, you should have been the winner - but I'm awfully glad you weren't ... In any case, Dobby's help or not, 'arry deserved his points in that task."

Raoul asked, "Wasn't there a price for the winner, 'arry?" It earned him a sharp look from his mother.

"Yes," replied Harry, "thousand galleons. This - er, I mean Fudge, dropped them to me before he stormed out. Then I tried to pass them to Cedric's father, but he wouldn't accept." Harry grinned. "I found someone else who wasn't involved, and had no objections."

Glancing over to Bill, he could see there was another person in the round who knew the details.

After all this eating, and with the dinner still ahead, people wanted to have some exercise. This was just fine for Gabrielle who wanted to move four other legs rather than her own, not counting those of the dogs. And of course, Harry was supposed to ride at her side.

Monsieur Delacour said, "Don't worry - there's a very gentle horse for you."

He was right. Even better, ten-year-old Gabrielle wasn't allowed more than a decent canter, her father made sure of that the only possible way - by leading the group.

Viktor surprised Harry, and maybe also Hermione, with his riding skill. When asked, he said, "Didn't I tell you - I'm the son of a Bulgarian shepherd ... I was in a saddle at the age of five - what do you think made me the seeker I am?"

Back from the ride, Gabrielle came to Harry and whispered, "Did you ask Almyra?"

Said Almyra stood steps away. Harry walked to her. "Al - ready to sing and dance for your supper?"

She grinned. "So be it."

First, they had to find a leather armament for Cho. Then Almyra and Gabrielle disappeared behind the stables - Gabrielle with shining eyes, savouring the privilege to watch the transformation.

Moments later, she came running. "She's a falcon - she's a falcon!"

The bird appeared, landed on Cho's arm, was thrown into the air. After climbing high, and after sailing a circle, it came diving - the manoeuvre Harry had watched behind Hogsmeade.

Then a bird and a girl disappeared once more behind the stables, returning as two girls, both faces beaming.

Inside again, Gabrielle showed first signs of a long and exciting day. In her case, it meant sitting comfortably, Harry and Cho close by, as well as the Baillou children, and listening to stories.

Careful to avoid tales of violence, Harry told her how he and Ron had come to be friends with Hermione, having Cho as attentive a listener as the children. While talking, he could watch his audience grow by two more people - Viktor and Hermione.

Finishing, Harry said, "Hermione - it's your turn ... I'd think the polyjuice potion is a nice story."

"Oh my God - not that! It was so awful for me - all that hair!"

She shouldn't have said that - not only Gabrielle but also Viktor insisted on hearing the story.

So Hermione first had to tell the story as a lesson how spells could fail, and then had to describe her cat Crookshanks for Gabrielle.

Then, Viktor made his contribution by telling about the life of a shepherd's son. It was heavily censored, what Harry could hear was a story about a young boy with dogs, mules, horses, sheep - first-rate tales for a ten-year-old.

With her strong sense of fairness, Gabrielle decided now it was Cho's turn for a story.

So Cho told her about the exam patrol, how she had been hurt by the bludger and how Lleyrin the Fist had cured her. This was extended by descriptions of Giants in general, how they lived, and how it was to be in a hut tailored for a figure of twenty feet.

At that time, Gabrielle had obviously recovered. When they were called for dinner, Harry saw her holding Cho, whispering in her ear.

A moment later, he had the opportunity to ask Cho, "What did she tell you?"

"That's none of your business, young man."

He grinned. "I guess I know - she asked what you've said to Firenze."

Her expression told him he was right.

"Did you tell her?"

"Is there something with your ears? I said, that's none ..."

He grinned deeper. "This morning, she asked me what you said with that shawl around."

"Did you - oh, very clever, young Potter."

"Then she said she could do it without a shawl, and then she asked whether she should prove it."

"Are you making this up?" Cho's tone was slightly menacing.

He shook his head. "We agreed you should be asked first."

"Very good ... and very wise of you."

Meanwhile, Harry was prepared for the French dinner technique of small quantities, compensated by a never-ending number of courses. He could get used to it - as long as you had nothing else to do the same day.

Ron had adapted very nicely to the environment, using his limited amount of French fluently, compensating for the lack of words with quick paraphrasings. He could do it even when talking with someone other than Janine, for example, when asked by Monsieur Delacour what plans he had for the future.

"Basically administration," replied Ron, "only I have something special in mind, and I don't know yet where it can take place ... It might turn out the Ministry is the wrong place for that."

"Is this specialty something to discuss here?"

Ron grinned. "Why not? It might be a test ... I think it's time to integrate some Muggles technology into the wizarding world - and that's what I want to do."

Surprised looks around the table, with a notable exception sitting next to Ron. Harry felt surprise himself, Ron never had talked about this issue before.

Madame Baillard asked, "Could you give an example what you have in mind?"

"The best example I know are copiers - I could use them ten times a day. Sure, there are wizard copiers, except they're ridiculously complicated and expensive, compared to the Muggles equivalent."

Monsieur Delacour asked, "And what about social or cultural levels?"

"What I'm thinking about is just some technology," was Ron's answer, "and only as a one-way-street from them to us ... It may have cultural effects toward us, but otherwise - no, I'm definitely not the big politician who'll attempt to unite the two worlds."

The faces of the Baillard parents made clear this concept would hardly find their approval - in obvious contrast to their elder children, and to their hosts. Harry was reminded of the Delacours crossing a cultural bridge twenty years ago, with great success.

Monsieur Delacour found the most elegant way to sail around the cliffs in the conversation - he asked the same question to Almyra, who explained she would continue with her project, only full-time and - hopefully - with some financial support by the Health Department of the Ministry.

Being the one who had started the sequence, Monsieur Delacour was expected to continue.

"ermeeonny - " registering Viktor's grin, the host said, "please pardon my crime against your name, but what are your plans?"

"Oh - nothing spectacular ... I could imagine myself as a teacher in Hogwarts - could be Potions ... Even History, I always thought there must be a more attractive way to talk about literature and past events than this flimsy ghost can muster."

Thanks to Fleur, the Delacours knew about whom she was talking, and could share the laughter of their guests from Hogwarts.

Then it was Viktor's turn. "Very simple," he said, "a farmer - a lot of cattle, and a lot of children." With a glance toward Hermione, he added, "For example - Hogsmeade could be a nice town, considering the possibilities."

Hermione blushed a bit, although not for objections, especially when the Baillards confirmed that farming was the true basis of any decent civilization.

Monsieur Delacour turned to Cho. "What about you, already having roots in two different cultures?"

"I might stick to Chinese traditions," replied Cho, "which means I could warm up for Viktor's model - except for the farm and the cattle, that is."

"To be replaced by what?" asked Monsieur Delacour, smiling.

"Oh - a major group of house-elves would do," answered Cho, raising another laughter, even from Hermione. "And some Giants in the neighbourhood - they really can put your perspectives straight."

Gabrielle, who had to fight her eyelids, came subtly more awake at the mentioning of Giants, and said, "If you take Lleyrin, you have someone to cure your arm when it's hurt."

Cho smiled. "You're right, Gabrielle - although I wouldn't *take* a Giant."

"Of course not," said the girl, "you'll take 'arry ... Otherwise, I'd do it."

Into the chuckle around the table, Cho managed to say, "That's generous of you, Gabrielle."

Monsieur Delacour turned to Harry. "In addition to the plans already decided for you, 'arry - are there some of your own?"

Gabrielle was the first to answer. "He will defeat his bad enemy, this nasty Voldemort - isn't it true, 'arry?"

Harry smiled at her, then looked at Monsieur Delacour, his smile fading. "Yes - that's all I know about my future ... Although some other people knew long before me."

The silence around the table was lasting. After a moment, Madame Delacour asked, "So you're a victim of your fate, 'arry?"

"A victim?" He pondered the thought. "My parents were victims of this fate, yes ... Maybe I'm a tool, which has to be honed - sometimes it feels like that ... But no victim," he smiled at her, "because I'll come back."

Monsieur Delacour examined him. "How do you know, 'arry?"

He could answer easily. "Because I promised to do it only when I'm ready for it - when I've found a way to do it *and* to survive." Looking at the sleepy girl at his left side, he added, "It's the only way - remember, I'm supposed to tell Gabrielle."

It broke the silence, although some of the laughters were a bit shaky.

Monsieur Delacour raised his glass - for once not champagne but red wine - and said, "To the day when you'll come to tell Gabrielle."

Gabrielle, now fighting sleep seriously, asked, "When will that be, 'arry?"

"I don't know yet," he said, "but don't hold your breath - it might take a while."

The girl nodded, satisfied with the answer, no longer able to resist suggestions that it was time to go to bed. Harry was hugged, while Cho had the honour to accompany her to the bedroom.

This was also the signal for the guest parties to leave.

With all the shaking hands and saying *au revoir*, Harry missed the scene he would have liked to watch - the goodbye between Ron and Janine. He had the feeling it wasn't by accident.

After promising they wouldn't wait another year before finding their way into this house again, the Hogwarts group was guided back through the two links by Fleur, first to Beauxbatons and from there to their own school basement.

Fleur returned immediately - after all, Bill hadn't been part of the group.

Harry and Cho had a moment alone. Standing close to him, she smiled softly. "It was wonderful to watch you with that girl ... I love you, Harry."

When his mouth was free again to speak, he said, "I have to go - I'll manage just two sentences before falling asleep, and with them, I have to ask Ron something."

Cho grinned. "Remind me to ask you what he said - although I think I know, I saw them at the door when coming from upstairs ... Good night."

In his dormitory, Harry sat his bed for a moment, looked toward to the other bed, and said, "I'll be gone in a moment, so - in the shortest form possible, Ron, what do you say?"

There was nothing of the usual grin when his friend answered, "I wish I'd known her two weeks before - or there'd be another ball next Saturday."

29 - Premonition

Easter had passed, now classes again demanded a proper attention, let alone the O.W.L. exams which inexorably were drawing closer. Nonetheless, the two days in France had left their traces - in Harry too, certainly, however more in Ron, who appeared as a different person.

There was no lack of attentiveness, he responded when addressed by teachers or students, still, he seemed to walk in a haze of happy purpose.

The first days after the unforgettable weekend, Ron stayed in his office longer than ever. Asked what was holding him there all the time, he answered, "Writing - what else?"

Then Harry came to watch how Ron passed a long parchment to Fleur. If there had been any doubt, seeing Fleur's expression was enough to confirm this wasn't something official. No - Ron used Fleur as a *postillon d'amour*.

Harry decided to break the haze - at least for an opening that would allow a decent conversation between friends. Next day, coming back from Astronomy, he said, "To talk about someone closer than a light year - did she answer?"

There was no need to explain whom he meant. "Not yet," replied Ron, his eyes dreamily, "but it's no surprise - my letter was really long."

"There's a link in the basement - and it's open for all students who can talk French ... What about that?"

Ron looked a bit worried. "I know," he murmured, "actually, I could quote the rules for that with eyes closed, but - you know ..."

"No, I don't ... Tell me."

Ron grabbed Harry at the shoulder. "Let's find a quiet place - with nobody around."

This was a request Harry could understand immediately. They agreed the lesson room would be safe enough for such delicate matters.

Sitting down, Harry said, "Come to think of it - in a way, it's even simpler from one school to another ... More than once, I wished I could write a letter to Cho - except it was simply too ridiculous."

Ron understood him perfectly. "But you're past that stage - I wouldn't think you'd prefer Cho was in Beauxbatons, would you?"

"Definitely not."

"Still, you're right," said Ron slowly. "I wrote the first page three times ... Took me longer than the other pages together."

"Well - I won't ask you what's in that letter." Harry smiled sympathetically. "I don't need to ask you another question either."

"Other question? ... Which other question?"

"What happened to you!" Harry laughed. "There's no way to confuse these symptoms, Ron."

His friend looked anxiously. "You mean ..."

Harry nodded, beaming. "My dear Ron, you're definitely, deeply, desperately in love."

"Do - do the others know?" Ron looked horrified.

Harry had no trouble whatsoever to keep serious - too fresh were the memories of his own behaviour. "Which others? ... Hermione, yes. - Fleur, yes. The other Gryffindors - they might have guessed, or they'll do it soon."

Ron twisted. "And ..."

Harry waited, although knowing what Ron was about to ask.

After a moment, his friend was able to formulate more precisely. "Does she know?"

Every ounce the wise old expert, Harry said, "If the same happened to her, she doesn't know - no matter how obvious it is to everybody else, and no matter what you wrote - unless you said so explicitly."

Ron twisted again. "Beware ..." For a moment, he seemed relieved at Harry's confirmation, then a new anxiousness grabbed him. "Harry - what do you think - is she ... Has she ... Does she ..."

"Ron - how long, counting from lunch, have you two been apart?"

"Erm ..." Ron didn't have to stress his memory particularly hard. "Once she went - I mean, not longer than a minute."

Harry nodded. "That's what I saw. Does it answer your question?"

Quite obviously, it didn't.

"Well - in this case, you have to wait for her letter."

Ron sighed. "I think I know, and next minute, I don't know anything - she might take me for some jerk, and it was just politeness."

This wasn't the right time for jokes, and besides, Harry felt little temptation. "Ron," he said imploringly, "politeness holds for an hour - two at the most. So - if it was that, around coffee time she would have been desperate for another conversation partner ... And what happened?"

A smile of hope appeared in Ron's face. "She asked me which cake to put on my dish."

"That's what I mean," said Harry, the young expert in young love.

Ron was biting his lips. "Harry, tell me - what do you think of her?"

This time, Harry couldn't resist. "Seriously?"

Ron seemed to shrink a bit. "Er - is there something wrong with her?"

"Not the least bit," replied Harry quickly to put his friend at ease, then held up his hand. "I'm ready to confirm - Janine Baillard is very nice, good-looking, someone you like to share company with, and the best that could happen to you."

"Seriously?"

Harry nodded. "I'm not joking ... When I danced with her, I thought, what a perfect match."

Ron beamed, however only for a moment, then he was grimacing again. "Harry, how ... How can you ... How do you say ..."

Harry waited a moment, then completed, "... that you love her?"

Ron nodded, looking expectantly.

"I know two alternatives - both of them extremely difficult, almost beyond what one can muster ... The first is, you go to her when nobody's around, then you say to her, 'I love you'."

Ron nodded. "That's what I thought ... And your description's awfully precise." With new hope, he asked, "And the other alternative?"

Harry smiled. "Basically the same, except this time you say, 'Je t'aime'."

"Arrggh ..." Ron hardly noticed being treated with his own medicine, his mind obviously too preoccupied with the matter at hand. "I'm trying to imagine it ... It's ridiculous, usually I don't have trouble saying what I mean ..."

Harry nodded sympathetically. "This isn't usually, that's the problem ... Anyway, believe me, she'll make it as simple as possible - she'll give you a sign."

"And how do I recognize it?"

Harry's voice was affirming. "You will - don't worry about that. Lemme give you an example. Assume you visit her in Beauxbatons, and you two are walking in the park, and talking ... Then maybe you tell her you had trouble in classes, and trouble falling asleep, and were always thinking of last Sunday, and couldn't await this day ..."

Ron looked surprised. "How did you know?"

"Never mind ... So, around that point, you might hear a reply like it's the same for her ... Well, this would be the sign."

Ron had a shaky laugh. "It sounds like in a three-sickles-novel, except it isn't." He glanced at Harry, hesitated, then said, "Would you ... I'd like to know how it was for you - say no, Harry, if you don't want to tell."

"A few days ago, I wouldn't have dreamed of telling you." Harry grinned. "And now ... I know you'll understand me, and that's why I'm glad to share it." He told Ron about his conversation with Cho in the staircase, and its continuation in the storage room.

Again, Ron had this dreamy shine in his eyes. "So it took you quite a while, Harry - which means I could visit Janine next Saturday without telling her, right?"

"Sure - except once you've said it, you'll regret each day you waited."

* * *

One of the traces left in Harry was the memory of Marie-Christine, the girl who had specialized in the topic of Voldemort. He would like to talk with her again, tried to figure out what was tickling him more - her interest in himself, strictly at the base of serious research, of course, or his own interest in what she had gathered. Somehow, he couldn't help thinking she had collected facts still unknown to him. As for the question of his motive, he was at a loss to answer, although it was absolutely clear how he would argue, a-hem.

He asked Almyra whether the two had found an opportunity to talk.

"Yes, we did," replied Almyra's, "and that's why I'm sure about one thing - if I have a saying in that, I'll let her talk with you only after three more interviews ... Researchers are a greedy pack, Harry, I know that - with some more interviews, there's no risk I'll have to fight for your time."

"So there's no conflict of interests?"

"Not at all - only that you can answer only one question at a time ... And this so close to the O.W.L. exams."

"Yeah ..." The reminder gave Harry a twist in the stomach. "Then let's talk with Dumbledore about the next one where he wants to join, and about the offer with Fawkes as a tranquilizer."

"Any time - as far as I'm concerned."

Almyra would have done it right away, but they had to wait until the evening. Then they visited Dumbledore, to hear the day after tomorrow would be fine, since he would have gathered some other information until then.

Harry wondered what that might be, knew better than to ask now - if Dumbledore had been ready to answer, he would have told them already.

There was another kind of interview lingering in Harry's mind, and the next day, he found the time as well as the required person - Lupin.

When they had settled across each other in Lupin's office, mugs in their hands, Lupin said, "You were of course right, Harry - up on that stage ... But you managed so well, I just can't feel guilty."

Harry grinned. "What a pity - it would make it simpler for me to ask you for something."

Lupin grinned back. "Okay, then - I feel deeply ashamed having left you there in the rain - er, in the spotlights, with that nasty conférencier - for a penance, you may ask me now."

"It's about more lessons," said Harry, "or training."

Lupin examined him. "And what in particular?"

"The ..." Harry swallowed. "The Killing Curse."

The expression in Lupin's face didn't change. After a moment, he asked, "Why?"

"Because I have to find a way to ... to kill Voldemort." Now it was said.

Lupin nodded. "I thought so ... But why the Killing Curse?"

Harry was astonished. "Well - how else would I be able to do it? After all, it's the only one without a counter-curse, so ..."

"NONSENSE!"

Harry jumped.

Not looking upset at all, Lupin continued, "I know, that's how it's taught, with the effect that nobody would think longer about it ... Harry - you've countered it twice, even without that bad joke from Draco Malfoy which was so neatly modulated by Sirius. - So please stop repeating that superficial babble as if you'd be a prayer wheel."

Calmly, Lupin waited until Harry's face told him it made sense to continue. Then he said, "There's just one aspect in which the Killing Curse cannot be countered, and this one's obvious - after a successful curse, there's a dead body, and nobody but God can make a dead body alive - even that's an open question, but never mind ... This is the real contrast to, say, a stupefying spell which can be reversed easily ... But as long as nobody is dead yet, there are ways to make that curse fail - not a million, agreed, but some."

"Then ..." Harry felt not too sure about his argument, had to use it though. "Why am I the only one who's survived it?"

"Are you?"

Harry remembered the scene well. "Mad-Eye Moody said so in the ..."

"Wrong! ... It's been Barty Crouch who said it."

Harry blushed. What a stupid mistake!

Calmer, Lupin said, "You simply don't know, Harry - nor do I, for that matter ... If people survive a Killing Curse, everybody'll say, 'Well, the other hadn't mastered the dark magic,' or something like that, and usually it's true - while nobody's ever going to say that about Voldemort, that's why your case is outstanding ... Whatever, I disagree that this curse is mandatory to conquer Voldemort - and I don't think it's a good approach."

"Why not?"

"Mastering this curse needs a lot of dark magic - even though it was Barty Crouch who said so, he was right in that ... You'd be surprised to see the small number of wizards who really can do it successfully - in any case, you have to pay a price for that ... It marks you, Harry - and although I have no proof for my belief, I'm pretty sure this mark would make it impossible for you to reach your goal."

This was a new thought to Harry. "Then how should I ever find a way?"

"Think about Zen, Harry - using your enemy's attack to defeat him, that's what I think should be your strategy ... Look - as a child of one year, you used this technique, with the effect that Voldemort was defeated for a long time ... I'm convinced, with the proper knowledge, the same technique will do him off forever."

Harry felt urged to protest. "But it wasn't me who did it ..."

"Really?" Lupin stared at him in a mix of mock and reproach. "Who else?"

"My mother protected me, that's what Dumbledore ..."

He was interrupted. "Sorry to be so blunt, Harry, but - when Voldemort tried to kill you, both of your parents were already dead ... There was nobody else around ..." Lupin waved off the protest. "I know, I know - Lily sacrificed herself, and this gave you protection, true, but it wasn't something like that shield on your Steel Wing. It was a quality she gave to you, your body, your mind, your soul - don't ask me but, for Heaven's sake, it was you - and still is!"

Harry stared, speechless.

Lupin sighed. "As clear as it's for me that you'll have to go that way, Harry - I don't know any details ... It's not as simple as a Patronus." He smiled, indicating this bad joke was only acceptable here and now, and only between them. "What I expect is, you'll reach a state of being in which you *know* - like in Zen, only deeper."

Harry thought for a moment about Lupin's words. Then he said, "Prof, you said I countered it twice ... But the second time, wasn't it just the wand?"

"The wand did something," confirmed Lupin, "and I think we agree it's not by coincidence that these are sibling wands, so we can safely assume this is required to reach your goal ... Otherwise, how was it? Did you just stand there and watch your wand fighting Voldemort?"

Harry shook his head. "I had to hold it with all my force, and willpower ... Somehow Fawkes helped me, also my parents ..."

"Right," said Lupin. "Does that answer your question?"

Beaten by his own argument - Harry had to grin. Then he remembered the other question he wanted to ask. "The cursing from Draco - Prof, what would have happened if Sirius hadn't stopped him?"

Lupin shrugged. "How would I know? ... My best guess is, you would have been hurt, or unable to act for some time, but definitely not dead."

"If ..." Harry hesitated, then said, "Assume I would meet Voldemort again - I mean now, not better prepared than I am - what do you think would happen?"

"You mean - you would just do nothing to defend yourself?"

"Yes."

"I don't know." Lupin smiled humourlessly. "All I know - it wouldn't be a good idea ... Imagine the protection has waned a bit, and then?"

Harry felt relieved. When thinking about a training for the Killing Curse, his feelings had been quite bad. He told Lupin, receiving at least a hint of the steps to go.

"This feeling, Harry - it should have been enough to tell you this approach doesn't work for you ... Remember the Zen lessons - listen to yourself, whether you're up to it ... I guess we have to work on that, so it'll stick better ... Mind you, it might even solve the puzzle - the last time we worked seriously, you came up with the Golden Patronus ... Imagine the possibilities when working with something as complex and powerful as a human mind!"

* * *

Next day at lunch, Ron seemed less in a hurry than the days before. He still sat there after the meal, his eyes fixed on the table, as if there was a writing on the white cover that had to be deciphered.

Hermione, watching him, said, "Ron - qu'est-ce-que tu pense?"

"Er - j'ai recu une ..."

Only now, Ron realized what had happened, looking a bit self-conscious when Hermione said, "Hear that guy - a week ago, he's been complaining if something other than English was used at this table."

"Well," replied Ron softly, "that was a week ago."

Hermione could stop her teasing, while not her curiosity. "So what does she write?"

For an instant, Ron looked caught, then he smiled. "A lot - and none of it says I have to tell you." Even so, a moment later, he couldn't resist himself. "She has invited me ... Saturday, in Beauxbatons."

Hermione looked at Harry. "Now that's a real surprise - wouldn't you say so, Harry?"

"Definitely - of all I could have dreamed of, this idea would never have ..."

Ron giggled. "Stop it - please."

"Okay," replied Harry. "Shall nobody say I wouldn't respond to the desperate plea of a poor soul."

Hermione nodded. "Right - and he said the magic word, we mustn't forget that."

"There goes my Go partner," sighed Harry, "lost to someone who can offer freckles for stones - quite a lot, actually."

Ron's usual style was only hidden, not lost, as his reply made clear. "For that, you may ask Cho - I mean, if you two haven't anything better to do ..."

Harry found it wise not to answer, especially because Hermione had to suppress a giggle. Instead, he strolled over to the Ravenclaw table to break the news - after all, Ron hadn't mentioned any restriction, and a little gossip would probably be welcome.

He was right. Cho looked pleased, then said to Almyra, "No wonder - that girl has called 'Yes' when her own share of charme was due, and once more at her brother's account."

Almyra protested. "He's not that bad ..."

"Yeah, sure ... that's why you were so excited all day long."

Almyra chuckled. "I just wasn't interested ... thinking about the interview this evening, that's what's really exciting."

"Hrmphf." Cho had swallowed a sharper reply, so much was clear, however leaving it to everybody's guess whether about Almyra's lack of interest in other things or about the interview.

Harry registered mixed feelings inside himself. The best that could be said - from his perspective - was that afterwards it would be done. On the other hand, maybe Dumbledore would reveal a bit more about the kind of information he was trying to gather.

Harry's hope was fulfilled. After supper, when he and Almyra had found their seats in Dumbledore's office, the Headmaster's first words changed the atmosphere at once.

"I am sorry to ask you again, Harry, but I would be very grateful if you could try another visit of Nagini."

Almyra looked perplexed, and somewhat disappointed.

Harry felt his pulse fastening, this had to do with the mysterious issue that kept Dumbledore occupied. He asked, "For which purpose, Professor?"

Dumbledore sighed. "One reason is, you might get some information where they have settled in the meantime ... But that's not my true interest - all I can say is, something's going on, and we don't know what ... Aside from some details, Harry, now you know as much as I do."

"Details? - Such as?" If Harry was to cross that nowhere space again, he was entitled for a bit more, wasn't he?

The Headmaster seemed to come to the same conclusion. "All right," he said, "here's what we know ... The Dark Forces are planning something - they are gathering, they stopped any harassment whatsoever ... An unusual number of visitors from other countries has been around lately." Dumbledore looked at Harry. "Maybe that's useful when talking with the snake - provided you'll find her."

Harry nodded. "Okay - I'm ready, Professor."

"Thank you, Harry." Dumbledore smiled. "Then we should have Cho here, to make sure you'll find your way back ... And I will take the blame which is due as soon as she'll hear about it." He turned. "Almyra, would you please be so kind?"

"Of course." Almyra's disappointment had vanished before, replaced by concern. She went out, returned shortly afterwards with Cho in her trail.

Harry listened calmly while Dumbledore was talking with Cho, Fawkes at his side had the expected effect.

Cho didn't look happy at all but nodded her agreement.

Harry leaned back. "Ready."

Almyra did it. "*Mesmerisio!*"

The room was gone. The void almost felt like a train station to Harry. As casually as if looking for the Hogwarts Express, he sensed around.

Nothing.

This was a new experience here. He tried again, concentrating more, not feeling any irregularity in the velvety void. This was really unexpected.

Missing any orientation, he decided to try the same technique used to end the visits. Not here ...

It worked, he felt the change immediately - now there was a pulsing beat, this had to be Dumbledore's office. Something else? He felt nothing, at least nothing as clear as that ... It was like trying to hear a whisper in a noisy room.

He synchronized with the beat, sharpening his concentration for the moment between the pulses, forcing the memory of Nagini ... There! A tiny dent, lost at the next beat ... He had it again, used it to approach like a climber on a rope, hand over hand, except there was no hand.

When it felt as if he couldn't come any closer, he reached for it.

Another room, somehow not much different, as far as his view reached. Fire place, rug, obviously Nagini's natural choice where available, the snake itself.

"Why did you come, Harry Potter? You are not welcome here."

"That might be the reason why it was so difficult to find you ... Where are we?"

"It doesn't matter. Go."

"Not so quickly, Nagini. The last time, you had more to say."

The snake seemed very angry, showing an intensity of emotion Harry hadn't recognized before. "The last time," she said, "I saw the possibility of a change - only I was wrong. When I made an offer, you didn't accept. When you were called, you didn't come. Now you come when nobody has called you, and nobody wants you here ... You are not different from my master - only promises, no fulfillments."

"What did I promise you?"

"You pretended to be interested, and trustworthy. But it was all pretense, like that man who came in your shape ... I had to suffer, and I blame you for that."

"Oh - did your master punish you?"

It seemed to make Nagini furious beyond any measure. "I have no more to say to you, Harry Potter, only so much - you don't need to come again, because we will come to you - then you may find the answer to your question!"

Before Harry could ask more, the room disappeared. The snake had pushed him off!

Still feeling surprise, because he hadn't expected this possible, he sensed the pulsing beat without difficulty, closed in, and reached into it.

Reality filled his senses again, after a second, he had his orientation in place. "Okay - I'm back."

Relief in the other faces, Cho's hand holding his own.

Dumbledore smiled, "Very good - we almost called you back, Harry, because it took so long, only the next second you started talking Parseltongue."

"How long did it take until I said something?"

"About fifteen minutes."

"Really? - In that void, you have no feeling for time ... Well, it seems they tried to hide - I wasn't welcome at all, and it was Nagini who ended the conversation."

Dumbledore nodded. "That's more or less what I expected - only that you've managed nevertheless ... What did you find out, Harry?"

Only at this moment, Harry became aware of what Nagini had said. His eyes widened. "They're coming to us."

Dumbledore's lips tightened. "Please repeat as precisely as possible, Harry."

The few remarks still fresh in his mind, Harry could do it to the last word. By the time he finished, Cho and Almyra had grasped the meaning, both of them looking pale.

Harry turned to Dumbledore. "Professor, I could swear that snake has lost its temper and has told me something she wasn't supposed to say."

After a moment's thinking, the Headmaster said, "You're the best snake expert I know - me included, so what can I say? ... Only so much - I take it she didn't lie."

Harry shook his head. "Most unlikely."

"In particular because it fits so well - so that's the explanation." Dumbledore's look passed from one face to the other. "The Dark Forces are going to attack Hogwarts - next week, tomorrow, or an hour from now."

Harry's hand met Cho's again. At the border of his vision, he saw her other hand connect with Almyra's. Maybe this was also a bridge for Fawkes' calming effect, at any rate, there was nothing similar to panic.

He asked, "And now, Professor?"

Dumbledore breathed deeply. "In a way, we have expected this moment all year long, so it doesn't find us unprepared ... Now we will spend three more minutes to restore our presence of mind - then, a lot of things will happen almost simultaneously ... My feeling is, we have at least a few hours, maybe more - and when they come, we will fight."

Almyra swallowed, then said, "Professor, if you need a night guard - I'm ready."

"Thank you, Almyra - I'll take you by your word, but the first and more important task is to alert people ... I need Viktor first because he has to do another express flight."

"Shall I catch him?" asked Harry.

Dumbledore stood up. "No - I'll do it by myself. There are other errands for you ... Harry, Cho, please mount your Steel Wings, fly to Lleyrin, and tell him the news ... Wait a second, hear me to the end ... Almyra, please fly to the dragon's nests and alert their guard - for both groups, my message is this - they should hold their position unless told otherwise, or unless they hear or see that it has started ... An hour from now, I will hold a speech to all students in the Great Hall - please make sure you're back until then."

The Headmaster looked around. "Ready? ... Let's go."

* * *

Together, they left the office and walked down the staircase. If Harry had expected Almyra would follow outside, he was wrong - she went to the Owlery, maybe gaining height was simpler with feet on stairs than with owl wings through the air.

Inside the storage room, Cho grabbed him at the shoulder. "Wait a second, Harry."

He turned, looked at her face, saw a pained expression.

With a voice not entirely steady, she asked, "They're really coming, right?"

"Yes ... And this time, it's not about taking hostages."

She pressed herself toward him. "Harry ... I'm so frightened."

"Of course you are." He held her tightly. "That's the right time for it ... later, we'll be too busy for that."

A dry sob was shaking her body, then another. He changed his grip to hold her head close to him, heard her murmur, "It's unfair - so unfair ..."

After a while, he felt her grip loosen. She looked up to him. "Kiss me, Harry, then I'll be ready."

He did, murmured, "I love you," did it again, said it again, hearing her echo. Eventually, he asked, "Ready?"

"Just a second. If ... If I don't ..." She swallowed. "Harry - if something happens to me, please take care of Al ... Will you do that?"

He nodded, not even trying to say this wouldn't happen, although he felt it impossible to think of such an outcome.

Cho didn't look at him. "She admires you ... Sometimes I think she loves you ... Normally, I never would have told you, but ..."

"Hey - even so, that's no reason for you to get killed."

A slight trace of a grin in her face. "No - quite the opposite ... But she'd never tell you, especially not after ... Anyway, I'm done with panicking - let's go."

They mounted, jumped, raced across the lake. This was no patrol, this was real. Even in the scarce light from the stars, they could find the course easily, would have found it with eyes closed.

Cho dived down to the hut with the lighted window, shouted, "Lleyrin," and touched down.

Steps inside, the door came open, Lleyrin in the frame. "Cho Chang - and Harry Potter! - Come inside."

Cho stepped forward, held her arms up, routinely like a child toward its father.

Lleyrin grabbed her, moved her up to the table. Next moment, Harry had followed. Lleyrin looked at them. "You didn't come to exchange stories."

"No," confirmed Harry. "We have a message from the Headmaster. The Dark Forces - they are coming ... Pretty soon, except we don't know exactly when." He gave a summary of his visit and what he had heard.

Lleyrin nodded. "Does Albus Dumbledore want me to do something?"

"He said you should stay where you are, until further notice, or until you'll hear - er, something unusual."

The Giant pondered this message. "Albus Dumbledore may not have found the time yet to think it through ... Please tell him what I'll do - I'll send a patrol of three men right now, they'll guard your entrance ... If I haven't got any other information by noon tomorrow, I'll move all of my men to a place from which we can reach Hogwarts within three minutes - maybe toward the Forbidden Forest. This camp is too far away."

"Yes, Lleyrin - we'll tell him what you said."

The Giant examined them again, then said, "Cho Chang, you are scared."

She nodded. "Yes, Lleyrin - less than I was some minutes ago, but you are right."

"That's good, Cho Chang - people who are scared tend to live longer."

Cho stiffened, unsure what he meant.

Watching her, the Giant smiled. "You're not scared of yourself, Cho Chang ... The demons you fear do not rest in your mind - they are outside, and they are real. Your perspective is realistic, the virtue of women."

Cho asked, "Are ... Are you scared, Lleyrin?"

"I'm concerned," answered the Giant, "because I know about fighting and because I'm the Chief ... But like all men, I'm a dreamer who cannot imagine he'll be the one whose time has come."

He walked to the cabinet, reached into a drawer, was busy with a bottle and two tiny flasks. Then he came back. "Here - my present for you, Cho Chang, and for you, Harry Potter - you know it already, it's the same stuff I gave you in your exam patrol ... When the moment has come to muster all you can offer, use it."

Harry took his flask, seeing a white powder inside. "Thank you, Lleyrin - that's a wonderful present ... The last time, it worked a miracle."

They were put down to the ground, said goodbye to the Giant who was eager to send his patrol.

Checking the time, Harry saw they just could say hello to Hagrid before returning. Reaching the other hut, he knocked.

The door opened. Seeing them, Hagrid grinned broadly. "Harry! - And Cho! That's nice yer come to see me ... How yer doin'?"

"Hello, Hagrid ... It's not nice at all - we just informed Lleyrin, the Dark Forces are going to attack Hogwarts ... We have five minutes, then we must go."

Hagrid's eyes narrowed. "How d'yeh know?"

"From Nagini - Voldemort's snake ... Only we don't know when."

In a face otherwise tense, Hagrid's eyes were shining. "That's my Harry - runnin' 'round with that Parselmouth, other people spittin' at him - an' then yeh come'n say, the snake's told me." Then he sobered up. "So it's real, huh?"

"Yes - it's awfully real."

"Okay." Hagrid looked grim. "We'll wait fer them, an' then we'll fight them ... Harry, watch yer back - an' that of yer li'l bird."

Harry grinned, still more so when he saw even Cho was smiling. "Will do, Hagrid - watch your own ... Bye."

* * *

The Great Hall looked as full as on the first day of each school year. This, however, was the only resemblance. No banners, no Sorting Hat, all but joy in the faces of teachers and students alike.

Dumbledore stood up, pointed his wand toward his own mouth for the *Sonus* charm, and looked around. "Some months ago, when we met here, I told you all about the new purpose of our school, which since then has developed to the *Fortress of Hogwarts* ... Today, my dear students, my dear colleagues - today we are asked to prove it ... The Dark Forces, our enemy, is preparing to attack us."

Murmurs, disbelief in many faces. After a moment, the hall fell quiet again, everybody wanted to hear details.

"As with the attack at the Hogwarts Express, we were able to gather information." Dumbledore's voice grew louder, harder. "And as it happened then, we will fight back - and make sure they are not going to do it again! ... We do not know when they will be here - maybe tomorrow, maybe tonight, maybe even before we are finished here ..."

It raised a lot of twisting around, glances to the entrance, as if dark figures might enter any second.

Dumbledore showed a smile. "The entrance is guarded by some Giants - you may calm down and listen to what I have to tell ... We do not expect them within the next hours, however we cannot exclude it - that's why we have to act quickly, to organize ourselves ... The school of Hogwarts, called *fortress*, has to change into a real fortress to protect the school and all people in it."

Then he informed his audience that Mr. Krum had been sent out to start a chain reaction among all wizards who could, and would, reinforce the school's own resources. Every wizard would pass the message further and then come to Hogwarts as fast as possible. This way, even an early arrival of the enemy could not prevent an inforcement by at least several of them.

He also announced a request that had been sent out for support from the Law Enforcement Squad, but warned his audience not to expect too much, particularly so because the Ministry, never the quickest to react, might not be in a state to provide help in time.

"Now to our own organization," continued Dumbledore. "From first-years to fourth-years, all students will be evacuated to Beauxbatons. This will be done the moment we see them coming - until then, you will prepare for it, for example by exercising how to pass a large number of students quickly through the link ports."

Harry saw many relieved faces, while others were showing disappointment. Shouts of protest went through the hall.

Dumbledore waited a moment, then said, "I heard your offers. I thank you for them, and I appreciate the spirit - but it's out of discussion. Your skill is too limited - remember, this is not a game, it's deadly serious."

Apparently, many students only now realized what it meant - the Dark Forces attacking Hogwarts. There was quite some uneasiness and fright in the faces, and these emotions weren't restricted to the younger classes.

"For the classes five, six, and seven," called Dumbledore, "listen carefully to what I'm saying! Fighting - whether actively or in supporting others who do it - is not everybody's cup of tea. And those who know this about themselves will do the greatest service to our common cause by acknowledging it - and by escorting and accompanying the others to Beauxbatons."

Of course, nobody dared, or was ready, to mark himself as one of this kind.

Dumbledore looked through the rows. "Admitting this takes another kind of courage - keep that in mind, everybody! ... Keep also in mind that every person around here - once the fighting has started - takes the risk to get killed ... By law and duty, I'd be supposed to evacuate *all* students, only we cannot afford that, so - with a little luck, we'll have time till tomorrow to find out what is our best contribution."

Dumbledore looked at his colleagues. "This is true for teachers as much as for students. More - to make it clear this is a reasonable action, and to have a Hogwarts representative in Beauxbatons, we need at least one teacher who'll guide the evacuation, and who'll be evacuated then ... Who is the first?"

Watching, Harry saw heads shaking. Snape showed a humourless grin, as if saying, 'Don't wait for me.' Only after a pause, a hand came up - that of the Arithmancy witch.

"Thank you, my dear Zoe." Dumbledore turned to the audience. "Professor Vector is our evacuation officer - contact her when your place is in Beauxbatons."

Then the Headmaster announced quite a number of tasks, for which he asked volunteers to contact Ron or Professor McGonagall, both of them located as of now in Ron's office, except for short naps in-between. These tasks included guards on all towers, runners that would carry out errands within the school, with a minimum of six as stand-by at Ron's office, and other duties to ensure quick communication between all forces. Some fourth-years tried a last attempt to vote for them, however Dumbledore cut them off quickly.

A moment later, the Headmaster came to the tasks Harry had been waiting for - those of the Flying Squad. "We need one team to stay with the Giants," he said, "another one that stays with the dragons - until they have moved over here, which will take place tomorrow, assuming we still have that time ... One team will do a continuous patrol, circling around Hogwarts, and two teams are required as stand-by at the office."

Suddenly, the squad seemed very small - five teams on duty, this meant two shifts, two per day if they would establish six-hour shifts.

Ron stood up, raised his arm. "Professor Dumbledore!"

"Yes, Mr. Weasley?"

"I'd suggest to place the office in the Entrance Hall - it's too narrow up there with all those stand-by people around."

Dumbledore smiled. "An excellent idea, Mr. Weasley - we'll do it as soon as we are finished here."

Ron sat down, looking satisfied.

Harry bent closer. "Moving figures - there's no shortage now, is it?"

Ron nodded, his thoughts already at the job. "Harry - what's better, six-hour shifts or eight-hour shifts for the squad?"

Hermione was quicker to answer. "Sailors do four-hour shifts - they had centuries to figure out what works best."

Ron had listened attentively. "Makes sense," he said. "If something else had worked better, they would have changed it ... What do you think, Harry?"

Harry nodded. "Imagine - six hours round and round Hogwarts ... Then you know why they do it this way."

Ron grimaced. "Somehow, suddenly it looks as if we'd like them to come as soon as possible."

"Not quite," replied Harry. "Once Sirius is here, and the dragons are here, and some of those re-inforcement wizards have arrived - yes, then maybe ... From then on, it means waiting ..."

He remembered the days spent waiting for a full moon, then realized how different it was today - not knowing when the enemy might appear, but more importantly, not being alone ... He would be able to talk, to exchange opinions, and hopes ... Or fears.

Dumbledore gathered his audience a last time. "For the hours, maybe days, to come, we are on a permanent alert, which means there won't be classes ... And because there's nothing like food and drinks to hold body and soul together, you'll find a permanent supply here in this hall!" He pointed his wand.

Suddenly, the tables filled with plates and dishes, cans and cups.

At the Headmaster's last words, a memory resurfaced in Harry's mind. *CONSTANT VIGILANCE!* - this had been the shout of the false Mad-Eye Moody, and now it came true.

He pondered the thought of a late meal, then realized he had all night for that, while right now it seemed more important to enlist in the squad duty roster. Ron was already off.

About to walk over to the Ravenclaw table, he stopped, looked at Hermione. "Have you already decided what to do?"

Hermione smiled, although a bit miserably. "Yes - I'll be as close to Viktor as possible, which probably means office runner." She sighed. "Harry - on the Hippogriff, we could do it together ... Now it's Steel Wings, and I'll be on the ground."

Harry grinned. "If something goes awry, get that timeturner and put it straight."

Hermione's eyes widened. "Hey - maybe it's really just a joke, but I'll check it with McGonagall."

Harry went over to Cho and Almyra. He asked, "Anything new from the dragons?"

Almyra shook her head. "They hope we'll have time till tomorrow - moving the dragons in the night is almost impossible. Charlie says, after dawn, they defend their places very aggressively."

Harry turned to Cho. "Any preference for our shift? ... Or for the schedule?"

"I'd like to synchronize with AI, which means Hogwarts patrol would be the best choice ... Otherwise, the Giants' team's my choice."

Harry looked at Almyra. "I can't believe you can fly every other four-hour shift."

"No, that's impossible ... Four out of twelve, that's the best I can do."

Harry was calculating aloud. "Then - er, that means we can synchronize only once a day ... If we drop this shift and take the next for the round patrol, we'll be together - assuming this slot isn't booked already ... And I'd have a chance to meet Sirius - he should arrive within the next two hours."

Cho said, "Fine with me - if it's gone, pull some strings with Ron."

Harry marched to the Entrance Hall, only to realize the office hadn't moved yet. Climbing the stairs, he found his way blocked by a large desk floating in the air, moved by the Headmistress who was walking behind, her wand toward the piece.

It was interesting to see, moving furniture wizard-style was certainly easier while not really faster than what he'd seen near Privet Drive. He had to recede, went back into the Entrance Hall to wait for Ron, saw his friend arrive a minute later with a pile of parchments. "Hey, Ron - can we have the Hogwarts patrol for the second shift?"

"Stop it, Harry ... Gimme a minute, okay?"

Harry watched as Ron settled his parchments, divided them in three piles, then sat down on the chair which meanwhile had arrived with McGonagall's second turn.

Ron reached for a list, then looked up. "Here we are ... The first shift will be a broken one, from now to midnight. - So you want the after-midnight shift? ... Good for you, saves you from the pre-dawn ... Okay, Hogwarts round-trip - zero to four - Harry and Cho." He was writing.

"And Al."

"Huh? - She hasn't a ..." Only then, Ron became aware Al wouldn't need a broomstick. "Damn, Harry," he muttered, "that's just what I need to get lost in these parchments."

"Don't you record her schedule?"

Ron looked astonished. "Not yet - it's kind of irregular, to say the least ..." Then his sense of organization took over. "But you're right - this is the place where it should be known who's where ... Just a second."

He grabbed an empty parchment, wrote a title, a line, then said, "Done."

About to go, Harry saw Fred and George arrive.

While Fred was booking the twins for their first shift - dragons' nests, to join their brother, George turned to him. "Harry, want some dust bombs?"

Harry nodded. "If you have enough, that is."

"Right now, we can offer three - by keeping our own quota which is eight for Fred and myself ... Should be enough - I don't think we'll fight for hours." George grinned. "You've got the first offer for our surplus, that was clear - but if we could get more dust, we could build more ... Pity there wasn't an official task to build them, all squad members should have some."

"What about Dobby?"

George waved dismissively. "Sold out - we took everything he could deliver."

"Hmm ..." Harry thought about fairies who used the dust for language lessons. He said, "I'll check it, but not before tomorrow morning."

George seized in his deep pockets, came up with three of these thick firecrackers with the dust wrapping. "If you can find quantities, tell us - any time ... We might need a fill-in for our own shift, but that'll be Ron's problem ... You just don't know when they'll come, right?"

Walking back into the Great Hall, Harry found Cho eating. He grinned. "Has been a long time since supper, hasn't it?"

Between two bites, Cho just said, "That's your chance, Harry - your first meal at the Ravenclaw table."

She was right, except that different people reacted differently in critical situations. At least, he could have a drink, so he sat down and informed the girls about his settlement with Ron. Then he showed the firecrackers. "Look what I have - one for each of us?"

Almyra shook her head. "I wouldn't know what to do, or how to carry it in my claws ... Thanks anyway."

"You take it," said Cho.

Harry had a better idea. "Let's play Go ... The winner takes it."

Cho grinned. "Wizard or Muggles?"

"Muggles - I'm not in the mood for the finer details of stone-jumping."

"Okay - when I'm done here, let's go to the Ravenclaw tower ... This hall is too noisy."

Watching around, Harry saw groups of younger students, headed by prefects, probably walking to or from an exercise with the link ports. Then he saw Fleur. He jumped up, "... back in a second," hurried over.

"Fairy dust? ... Is this important, 'arry? - Right now ..."

"I'm not joking, Fleur."

"The first chance's tomorrow ... Okay, I'll see what I can do - but what are you doing with fairy dust?"

He showed her the firecracker. "A dust bomb - thrown from a broomstick ... Puts a wizard asleep, or more if they're close enough."

Fleur examined the small piece. "The 'ogwarts Air Force - mon Dieu ... See you later." She went off.

Once more, Harry marched to Ron's public office, told his friend he would be in the Ravenclaw tower, and would appreciate a message runner when Sirius arrived - or Sirius himself.

Ron barely looked up. "Ravenclaw - Sirius - message ... Got it."

Cho was still eating, slowly so, but nonetheless. Mockingly, Harry looked at her right side, at her left side. "Incredible - where do you stuff it?"

"Where it belongs," was the calm answer.

He sat down. "I can't eat ... I've almost trouble watching you."

Cho didn't take offense. "As a refugee," she explained, "you learn to eat when there's food, and there's time ... That's how you survive - afterwards, the habit sticks."

Some minutes later, she had finished. They reached the Ravenclaw tower, found a corner with empty seats. Cho went out to fetch the game.

Harry looked at Almyra, remembering Cho's words in the storage room. He asked, "How do you feel?"

Almyra grimaced. "And you?"

"A bit worried ... I'll be quieter when Sirius has arrived here - I know, he's taking risks, so I'll be glad when he's done with his turn in that chain Dumbledore spoke about."

Almyra stared at him. "And for yourself?"

"Well ..." He shrugged. "I'm together with all people I trust - except Sirius, and he should be here until midnight ... That's a good feeling - not to be alone."

Almyra sighed. "I admire you, Harry."

He twisted. What had Cho said? And now Almyra ...

Her eyes were shining. "After our first interviews, I was pitying the child you've been, Harry, and I thought ... I had a kind of wishful thinking, except for the past, not for the future. Then, after the days waiting for Lupin, and after our meditation, it became even stronger ..." She had blushed a bit.

Carefully, Harry asked, "In the past?"

Almyra looked embarrassed. "Yes ... In this picture, you were my brother - except I couldn't figure out if you had to be a younger brother or an older one ... Maybe a twin - that comes closest ..."

He exhaled deeply. "Did you tell Cho?"

No, she hadn't.

"You should tell her ... She has sensed something, although she didn't get it ... er, she thought it was ..." Now it was his turn to have difficulties with his words, and to blush.

Almyra looked at him. After a moment, her eyes widened, then she smiled. "I guess I know ... It's true, except it's something else - there's no conflict with Cho, not at all ... Just that foolish picture."

Not looking up, he said, "It's not foolish ... And if it wasn't true in the past ..."

Cho was crossing the room.

She deposited the board and the stones at the table, looked from one to the other. "Did I miss something important?" No question, she was thinking exactly that.

Harry said, "We were talking about - er, imaginary brothers and sisters - and how it would have been ..."

Again, Cho looked from one to the other, then it dawned on her. "So that's why ..." She turned to Almyra. "Well, I could live with that - better than with some other idea." Grinning, she added, "Except this would imply a detail of which I'm not sure it would be an improvement."

Neither Almyra nor Harry had understood, were looking expectantly at Cho who suddenly seemed to regret her remark. "Forget it," she said.

"No," protested Almyra. "Tell me - what do you mean?"

"Erm - in this imagination, you and Harry were sister and brother, right?"

Almyra nodded.

"And I'm not mistaken it's your imagination - which means your parents are still in the game - in contrast to Harry's own, which are no longer available to agree or disagree ... See what I mean?"

Almyra had understood, laughed. "You wouldn't be frightened of a Voodoo priest, would you?"

Glancing at Harry's pinkish cheeks, Cho said, "Let's drop the issue - it's a bit delicate this way or the other."

But it was Harry himself who didn't let it rest, only shifted into another direction. "I just had to think of the dinner with Fleur's parents, and the look in the Baillard's faces when Ron spoke about his plans ... And now, with him and Janine - they won't be happy about that."

Cho glanced at him. "True, although that might not be your most urgent problem, Harry."

He glanced back, trying to decipher her expression. "In contrast to what?"

"Some Dark Forces, for example."

If Cho had meant something else, she wouldn't admit, that much was clear, so he said, "Now - do we play or not?"

They did.

Harry's concentration wasn't the best, however, either Cho had the same difficulties or she was determined to pass the third dust bomb to him.

After having won by two points, he examined the board. "You didn't play seriously."

"What do you mean?" Cho looked innocent. "I didn't tell jokes."

It confirmed his suspicion. "Okay," he said laughing, "what about another one? - This time, you won't be restricted by ..."

He stopped in mid-sentence because the girls' faces were looking toward the entrance. Turning around, he saw - there would be no other game, the dust bomb had found its owner, and this was a minor issue anyway.

30 - Gathering

The two figures which had caught Harry's attention were crossing the room. One was a Ravenclaw girl, same class as Cho if Harry's memory was right, obviously one of the office runners at this moment, escorting the other person, which was Sirius.

Registering how Harry's beaming face turned toward his godfather, the Ravenclaw girl found her task done, headed back.

Sirius reached the group of Harry, Cho, and Almyra. "Myladies ..." He turned to his godchild. "Harry, old Parselmouth, that's the right spirit ... First raising hell and then hiding at this cosy place with a decent number of girls around."

Grinning, he sat down, glanced across the room. Some students who had watched the scene quickly looked away. Sirius turned back to Harry. "You and Dumbledore - that's two of a kind, huh?"

"What??"

"Yeah - he tickled Voldemort at the wrong spot, with that article in the Daily Prophet - so much so that the Dark Lord is mad enough to attack ... And then you go and upset that snake until she's spitting at you."

"I didn't go, actually."

"No, probably not." Sirius' smile faded. "You have won us a few hours, or maybe days - precious time, Harry, and that'll make the difference ... I couldn't have stood the thought of being somewhere else while the music's playing here."

Almyra said, "Listening to you, it sounds as if this would be a piece of cake - as if you would be happy about it."

"No, Al, it's not a piece of cake - it will be a bloody fight, and there will be casualties - no sense in pretending anything else ..."

Sirius shot a quick glance to Cho, looked at Almyra again. "But sooner or later, it was due, and this is not the best time for the others, they were forced to it - or it was because Voldemort really got mad about the story with Lupin and Dumbledore ... That's the good part - Harry has given us some time, that's even better - what I'm really happy about is that I'm here to do my part ... I owe Dumbledore, I owe Harry - I owe you too, Al, because you helped rescuing my old friend Remus ... Of all constellations I could imagine, this is one of the best."

"You don't owe me," protested Almyra. "You've been in the train, so we are quids."

Sirius showed a sad smile. "Maybe so ... Maybe Dumbledore would say the same, and Harry too - it doesn't matter. There's an open issue that calls me when Voldemort is involved - or his creature, Wormtail."

Cho stared at him. "Do you think you'll be able to close that issue, Mr. Black?" Her voice sounded not too friendly.

"Before I answer your question - do you think you could call me Sirius, Miss Chang - or Cho, in this case?"

"Yes, I could."

Sirius waited an instant, as though expecting to hear *but I won't*. It didn't come.

"No," he said, "that's very unlikely. The set-up is not ours, it's theirs - we didn't call them, it's their own decision." He looked at Cho as if he thought she would blame him for that. "I have my doubts Voldemort will be seen in the center of the action. I have more doubts he'll take personal risks, and I have the most doubts Wormtail will do it ... This is just defending against an attack, nothing else ... I'm fully aware that a good part of the defenders are students, not warriors - Cho."

Obviously noticing the message between the lines, Cho showed an apologetic smile. "Okay - Sirius ... I guess I was a bit confused with my question."

Sirius nodded. "I know - it's a terrifying experience to realize there's someone who really wants to kill you ... and you never get used to it." After a moment, he added, "But you learn how to handle it."

Harry asked, "Which people will come to help us, Sirius?"

"The same wizards that were fighting Voldemort fifteen years ago - as far as they're still alive, and free to join us ... The one I notified before coming here is Mundungus Fletcher - I was lucky to meet him at home ... He may have less luck when trying the next one to pass the message further, and he may need more time to come here ... So I don't know how many there will be."

Some minutes later, it was time for the patrol. Downstairs, Sirius said good night and headed for the guest suite they knew so well.

Then they had to wait for the returning patrol, did so in the Entrance Hall which now served as office. The triple team - from Hufflepuff - arrived shortly afterwards, reporting nothing unusual, looking tired.

They went outside, greeted the three huge figures who were sitting on the ground, silent, motionless except for the arms that returned the greeting.

Almyra disappeared around the corner. Harry and Cho took their Steel Wings and jumped up.

This patrol felt different from any other before - colder, darker, longer, but most of all, it was incredibly real. Using the lights from the school as their beacon, Harry and Cho crossed around and around, wide circles alternating with straight moves to the other side, at low speed, except for a high-speed round at the regular course once per hour.

Every sound counted as a possible attacker, each darker shadow a place to be inspected, first with drumming pulses, after a while with some kind of routine, although not casualness.

Twice, a large owl crossed their path, the wings a black shade against the dark sky, passing them, dipping the wings, disappearing in the night. It was surprising how much these short

encounters were improving the spirit - not to be alone in the dark, someone else flying another pattern of patrol.

Harry wondered if Almyra would feel the same - probably so, even more as she was alone in her patrol. He and Cho kept close, separating only when one of them had to examine darker spots more closely.

Twice per hour, they passed the entrance to the building low over ground, signaling the Giants that everything was okay. They were careful in doing so, knowing the Giants would raise alarm if they were late by more than five minutes.

Passing the entrance was also the moment when they changed positions. It had taken little time to find out - the one staying behind, up in the air while the other was examining the ground, suffered significantly more - until the other figure was coming up again.

Four hours - growing longer and longer, the time slowing down. In the second half, Harry regretted bitterly not having eaten something, together with Cho. Only the thought of the hall, offering food around the clock, was holding his mind at ease while his stomach protested vigorously at this draining of energy at such an unlawful time.

After a small eternity, their shift was over, really over.

They stumbled inside, finding another team which had been waiting sleepily for their arrival.

Ron wasn't there, only McGonagall sitting at the desk, her stand-by students slumped down in the corners, mostly asleep. The Headmistress asked, "Are you already enlisted for your next turn?"

Next turn - four hours from now. Only four hours? It seemed impossible, a cruel joke, except McGonagall wasn't joking.

Cho asked, "Is there a stand-by left?"

"No - dragons and giants."

There were only two rules - the previous round patrol was entitled for something else, and the new round patrol had to come from a previous stand-by team. Either one of those three would volunteer, or Ron - alternatively McGonagall - would select one.

"Giants, then," said Cho, looking questioningly at Harry who nodded, not caring about anything other than to go inside for some food.

A short meal, for him and Cho who seemed too tired for remarks like, 'I told you so.' With little more than three hours left for sleep, Harry went into his dormitory.

* * *

He woke from a cold touch in his face, and from a ghostly voice that was shouting, "UP TO THE ARMS, ALL MEN, THE ENEMY IS CLOSE!!"

Opening his eyes, he saw Nearly Headless Nick floating in the air. Next moment, the ghost's arm washed through his face, through his head, again stirring this cold sensation.

He jumped out of the bed, donned some garments, raced downstairs, through the Great Hall. Passing into the Entrance Hall, an arm stopped him - a living one - Viktor's.

"Stop, Harry - it's a test alarm. Sit down here, out of sight."

For a split second, Harry was pondering the thought of his fist in Viktor's face. Then he slumped down at the next free seat, feeling sick from too much adrenaline, in combination with a lack of sleep. Of course, Viktor was right - it had to be done, but damned if he would appreciate it.

Cho came through the entrance, found a seat across, not caring to share anyone's company, looking very much like Harry felt.

Other squad members arrived, then the free shift was complete.

"Okay," said Viktor, "six minutes thirty - way too long, not to mention your appearance. Some of you would freeze to death when trying to fly a Steel Wing in those flimsy garments."

There was more than one pyjama visible under a cloak or coat, however nobody felt like grinning.

"Before you fall asleep, your clothes must be ready to jump in. One minute to wake up, one to dress, one to come down - next time I want to see you here in four minutes total ... And remember - next time it's *not* a test ... That's it - school's out."

Which time was it? Half past seven - so Viktor had actually been quite merciful with his choice of time. Harry would be able to shower, provided he could muster the energy for undressing and dressing again. Then he realized, if he thought about it a moment longer, all showers would be busy.

He raced upstairs.

Fifteen minutes later, he was sitting at the Gryffindor table, still feeling wasted, though at least human again, and properly dressed. He filled his dish, not hungry but remembering the night shift's lesson well enough not to skip the opportunity again.

Cho fell onto the opposite seat, grunted something, and started to refill her own batteries. A shared silence, the best Harry could think of here and now - short of some more sleep, that was.

When the other team arrived, they were ready. The flight to the Giants' camp was short, done at almost full speed.

Lleyrin's hut looked empty. A moment later, however, the Giant chief came into sight from somewhere behind, reached them with a few steps. "Good morning, Cho Chang and Harry Potter ... Are you hungry?"

Harry shook his head.

Cho showed better manners, or was more awake. "No, Lleyrin - we just had breakfast."

"In this case, the best you could do is to find yourself a place in my barn, and to sleep." Seeing their expressions of disbelief, Lleyrin explained, "We are all busy preparing to move - a very bad time to walk around here for small people." He smiled. "So if you - or one of you - wants to stay awake, make sure to keep above ground - and make sure I know where to find you ... On the other side, the barn really would be the best place. You cannot do anything other than to be available, and I'll wake you if something happens or if you're still asleep at the end of your shift - whatever comes first."

Lleyrin was serious. They looked at each other, feeling a reluctance that was somehow out of place.

Then Cho nodded. "You'll find us in the barn, Lleyrin - unless we tell you otherwise."

Without another word, the Giant turned and headed off.

They found the barn open - luckily so, it would have been a complicated manoeuvre on the Steel Wing to open a door whose handle was mounted high above reach. Inside, they found a large pile of straw, another one of hay.

Harry looked at Cho. "Do you really think we can sleep?"

"What else?" Her face seemed pointedly expressionless.

Not looking at her, he said hesitantly, "It feels like cheating ... This is our shift ..."

Only the hay looked so warm, and inviting.

"The stand-by teams in the hall are sound asleep," said Cho. "They'll be wakened by Ron, or McGonagall, if something's up ... And we'll be wakened by Lleyrin, and it's a barn, not a hall." She looked into his face, a light sparkling in her eyes. "These will be the only differences - sound asleep here, or up in the air outside ... So what's your choice?"

Trying to sound casual, Harry said, "Here - I don't feel short of fresh air."

He had made a few steps toward the hay when Cho said, "Straw's better - after two hours, the hay under your body's as hard as a rock."

Cho with farming skill? Astonished, he asked, "How do you know?"

"You'll find out there is just one answer to that question." Cho's voice sounded slightly high-pitched. "Then you'll ask, 'When did you sleep in barns?' and I'll answer, 'While travelling from China to England'."

She flattened some straw, sat down, and fell back.

Suddenly remembering the other occasion at which Cho had rattled that much, even more, Harry searched for a good reply, simultaneously registering how his own embarrassment was fading. "You're very articulate - " he said with as much admiration as he could fake, "that

early in the morning." Then he found a place for himself, at her side, careful not to blow straw over her face.

Cho shifted up a bit, resting on one elbow, looked at him. "You know very well - I'm talking that way when I'm nervous ... Really, I didn't expect us sleeping together, side by side in a barn." Her cheeks were a bit pinkish. "Give me a good-morning kiss, Harry, and try not to snore."

He kissed her. "I didn't have in mind anything else."

A moment later, he could hear her regular breathing - just for a moment, before falling asleep himself.

* * *

Something was tickling his nose. Had to be a fly - small wonder in a barn. He waved it off with his hand. A moment later, it was back. Opening his eyes, he saw a blade of straw dangling over his face. At the other end of the blade was Cho, lying at her side, looking very smitten.

The blade came down again, made him sneeze, which was enough to come fully awake. "Don't," he said.

She murmured, "I had to keep you at blade's length ... Better that way."

"What?"

"To wake you up ... It felt a bit risky touching you." Next second, Cho was up and walking outside.

Strangling with her own rules ... Harry stretched, yawned, feeling restored, ready to face a day. After disappearing behind the barn, he went outside, found a trough full of water, slapped some in his face, drank some. The rural life - nice for a change, while otherwise, no thanks.

He checked the time - half past eleven. Good for two slow rounds through the camp, then back to Hogwarts.

Cho came into view, twenty feet above ground on her Steel Wing. She shouted, "Get moving!"

Gliding slowly across the camp, they saw Giants at work with garments, bags, honing Quarterstaves, some of them at a fire, hardening the sharp ends of these efficient weapons.

Under a tree, they found Lleyrin - sitting cross-legged on the ground, a larger pile of round items at his right, a smaller pile at his left. He was working with a muddy piece of linen, took an item from the bigger pile, polished it, and stored it at the smaller pile.

Coming closer, Harry saw it wasn't polishing. Lleyrin was oiling the surface of these things - small balls, about two inches diameter, like miniature cannonballs, except Giants had no cannons. It was a strange view, the Giants chief doing such work.

Not finding any other clue, he asked, "Lleyrin, what is this?"

"Our ammunition, Harry," came the answer. "Don't you recognize it?"

"No, Lleyrin."

"Then wait and see." The Giant seemed to take pleasure from his work.

"Where did you get them, Lleyrin?"

"We had a deal with mountain dwarfs, Harry - food and some services for them, iron balls for us."

"Services?"

It wasn't very polite to ask, however, Lleyrin didn't care. "They had trouble with a troll or two, and we could convince the trolls that life would be simpler without bothering them ... Maybe longer too." Lleyrin was placidly oiling one ball after the other.

"And why do you have to oil them, Lleyrin?"

"To make sure they move smoothly, Harry - exactly for the same reason why you would oil other things, right?"

The message couldn't have been clearer - if Harry had no idea of his own what these balls were good for, Lleyrin wasn't going to tell him. Yes, and in the meantime, might he please stop asking stupid questions.

"When will you move, Lleyrin?"

The Giant's face changed from amusement to seriousness. "I agreed with Dumbledore to stay off until the alarm is raised, Harry ... He wants to have some troops at some distance - not all beans in the same pot, as he said ... He has a point, although it's a bit too far. I guess we'll place ourselves in the middle between the school and this camp here, probably this afternoon."

A Giant crossed the distance from the camp to Hogwarts in about thirty minutes, or fifteen when marching as fast as possible. Halving the distance would mean, the Giants could come to help within ten minutes, still having enough breath left to fight - a reassuring thought.

Not seeing a chance to solve the oiling riddle, Harry said, "Okay, Lleyrin - see you then." He jumped up, followed by Cho.

It was a wonderful day to fly a Steel Wing through the air, however, the thought of the food waiting in the hall had a speeding effect.

In the Entrance Hall, Ron greeted them. "If you can wait still ten minutes, we could have lunch together."

Harry glanced around. "Where's Viktor? ... And where's Hermione?"

"The one is found close to the other." Ron's grin made room for a more business-like expression. "They are preparing a command post on a tower platform, near the Owlery ... Viktor said, as soon as the dance will start, this here'll be the worst place to be."

The tables in the Great Hall still had the same names as before, only the squad members had broken the former barriers. Caught in a grip of four-hour shifts, the teams had no intention to separate only because they were mixed together from different houses.

Checking around, they found Almyra sitting at her own place. Naturally enough, Cho and Harry sat down there, followed by Ron.

"Charlie and his teammate are moving the dragons," said Ron. "It's a spectacle - you shouldn't miss it, Al, when flying around."

"When do you expect them?" asked Harry.

"Late in the afternoon - that's what Charlie said ... They are pretty slow, these dragons."

"Slow?" Harry's memory of the Triwizard Tournament said something else.

Ron grinned. "They can be fast - if they want ... But Charlie prefers the convincing method, and since basically dragons are lazybags, it takes time - especially because he has to convince them individually, after all, dragons are very individual lazybags."

Almyra said, "I think he's making that up a bit ... Anyway, I'll have a look. - See you." She walked out.

After chewing his last bite, Ron stood up and headed for his desk.

Harry, refreshed from a stand-by shift spent mostly in a barn, found himself wide awake and nothing to do. Schoolwork was out of the question - mostly due to lack of concentration toward such mundane matters. In addition, the thought of his friend's remarks in years to come, about him doing schoolwork on a day at which the Headmaster had cancelled classes, felt slightly beyond his level of courage. He pondered the thought of increasing the number of stand-by teams outside, but Cho declined.

Left on his own, he climbed all the way to the command post on the tower, inspected the place, found it a good choice. Viktor showed him a shortcut that saved another thirty seconds when travelling between the post and the hall.

Then he tried to find Fleur, without success. This struck him almost as good as an answer - if she had found fairy dust, she would have delivered earlier.

This done, he decided to hang around in the Entrance Hall, hoping to meet Sirius, waiting to watch the dragons' spectacle, ready for the unexpected.

Sirius let him wait, the dragons too.

The first unexpected figure was Hagrid, entering the hall with a grumpy expression in his face.

Harry followed his oldest friend to a table, watched him filling his dish. "What are you doing here - now that the Giants are preparing to fight?"

"Ter sent me off ... said I'd better join people here ..." Anger was bursting out of Hagrid. "I'm teh small fer Giant fights ... either the Quarterstaff's teh long fer me, or it fits - an' then's teh short for ser'ous work."

Harry tried not to grin. "Too small - nobody won't say that here ... You could join Charlie - he might need help with the dragons."

It wiped off Hagrid's disappointment. Harry explained what was going on, and where Hagrid would find the dragons on tour.

The half-giant who was too small looked happier. "Yeh' right, Harry - 's sumpfin' I'd handle ... Remember Norbert?"

Back in the Entrance Hall, Harry spent some time doing nothing. Just when he felt forced to admit that sitting here had been a mistake, a group in the entrance made his eyes widen. The figure in the lead was Bill, followed by - he counted quickly - a full dozen Goblins, dressed for battle, carrying weapons Harry could identify, bows for example, and others unknown to him.

They looked around, examining the desk in the middle, the students in the corners - and now they examined him, their faces unreadable.

Recognizing his brother, Ron had started to grin. Registering the Goblins a moment later, the grin gave room to open-mouthed astonishment.

Harry jumped up, feeling his welcome would be more polite, in particular because McGonagall wasn't there. After all, these were the people to which he was bound by a Request. He quickly walked over.

"Bill - great to see you here." Looking at the Goblins, Harry bowed. "We are honoured with your presence, and your intention to fight with us."

The Goblin in front of the group, for Harry's untrained eyes not looking any different from the others, made a gesture with his right arm that seemed to be a military salute. "Our joined forces will defeat the enemy."

Bill had followed the exchange with an appreciation in his face. Now he said, "Dumbledore's probably waiting for us - see you later," and guided the group forward through the hall.

Harry suppressed the impulse to follow them. Feeling excited, he looked at Ron. "Goblin warriors ... Did you see their weapons?"

Ron's gaze had followed the group. He turned. "They really took me by surprise ... Thanks for your quick reaction, Harry."

They discussed this new aspect, speculating about the unknown weapons as well as about the magical power of Goblins. For the first time, and quite unexpectedly so, they felt regret not having listened with more attention to Binns' droning about the Goblin wars. Anyway, Bill

would know more ... Yes, sure, Hermione too, only Hermione wasn't around, and Bill would just answer their questions.

They had to stop because other students demanded Ron's attention. Harry went back to his corner, to wait again.

Cho appeared in the hall, to tell him Almyra had returned through the Owlery, At this moment, excited shouts from outside announced the arrival of the first dragon.

They hurried through the entrance to watch, joined by other students.

It was a spectacular view - the tiny figure of Charlie moving in front of the Hungarian Horntail, turning every few steps, talking with the beast, beckoning it forward, baiting it with some herbs. The dragon followed at its own sweet pace, stopped at the sight of the appearing students, smoke curling up its nostrils.

Charlie waved, gesturing them they should go inside again - obviously, any sudden movement made this task more complicated, maybe even more dangerous. It was like steering a cat along a path, only Charlie had no leash, and the cat was fifty feet high.

Hanging at the windows, they watched Charlie guiding the dragon to a place under a tree, toward the lake and in safe distance from the entrance. Then the next dragon appeared - the Swedish Short-Snout, following a Hagrid who looked delighted. It was amazing to watch the obvious affinity between the two creatures - Hagrid seemed to have less trouble than Charlie, who had spent months with these gigantic animals.

It took almost two hours until the four dragons were placed in a semi-circle around the building, apart from each other as much as from the entrance.

Harry had told Cho about the Goblins. Now they were sitting quietly, waiting for their shift to pass. Outside, dusk was falling.

There was a noise outside, like from a squad member touching down. Then a figure came running through the entrance, shouted, "Something's comin' - looks like a dark cloud!"

Harry was up, sprinted outside.

Far behind the lake, up in the air, a black wall was filling the sky, coming closer, extinguishing what was left of the daylight.

* * *

The black thing could have been a cloud. Its border showed an irregular shape, seemed to pulse, except - a cloud would have ended somewhere. This black wall did not end, kept growing and growing.

Harry pushed his way past the other stand-by students who were standing there, staring up to the blackening sky. He felt satisfied seeing Ron still at his desk, anxious to hear Harry's description.

"It's black, and it fills the sky ... Raise alarm - we're going up to the tower."

"ALARM!! - STAND-BY - ATTENTION!"

The students rushed in, were immediately sent to Dumbledore, the four houses, the teachers. A moment later, the entrance was free.

Harry stormed out, found Cho waiting before the storage room, her Steel Wing already mounted. Like him, she had realized the quickest path up to the tower would be through the air.

He grabbed his broomstick. Mounting - jumping - seconds later, they reached the tower platform.

The spot looked pretty crowded. Viktor stood there, Hermione at his side, other squad teams were watching the sky while the limited space rapidly filled with more teams coming through the door.

Viktor shouted, "Stay in the air!"

It wasn't the most convenient method. After a moment, they found an improvement - with one hand holding to the flagstaff that was protruding from the platform, it was much easier to hold position.

Watching the black wall, Harry saw two dots, quickly growing to the shapes of two broomstick flyers - the rest of the roundtrip team, approaching the tower post at full speed.

They braked, came to a stop in mid-air. "BATS!"

A black wall of bats? Then it had to be millions - or so it looked. With the front line coming closer, they could see movement, then individual shapes. A single bat was a harmless animal, a swarm of them an interesting spectacle. But a million ... The uneasiness in the faces was growing, condensing to fright.

Another movement on the platform. Students stepped back, making room for a huge, slim figure - Dumbledore.

The Headmaster examined the approaching wall of bats, he himself watched by the teams. Now he turned. "These bats ... they have no other purpose than a cloud of black smoke would have - to blind us, to fill our view - most likely to cover something else ... We have to clear our view as quickly as possible."

Clear the view? How to get rid of a million ...

"These bats are conjured up," shouted Dumbledore. "You can make them disappear with a simple spell ... What you have to call is *Vespertilabi!*" ... In a moment, I'll show you."

At these words, relief could be seen in many faces.

They didn't have to wait long until the front line appeared close enough, hundreds, thousands of dark wings, flapping, carrying the tiny bodies toward them.

Dumbledore's wand was up. He aimed toward the first wave. "*VESPERTILABI!*"

A hole appeared in the front. By Harry's guess, this spell had wiped off more than hundred bats.

Viktor shouted, "Squad - up with you ... Stay on top and clean from above!"

Harry's look met Cho's. She nodded.

A push brought him forward. Almost touching the front line of the bats, he swerved upward, looked down, feeling better at the sight - a thick layer of bats kept rushing through the air. So at least they didn't fill the entire sky.

Gliding yards above the black waves, they held their wands, pointing, shouting, *Vespertilabi!* ... *Vespertilabi!* ... *Vespertilabi!*"

Each spell dug a large hole, seconds later, the target spot was filled again.

In these moments, they had a view at the buildings under them. Every tower, every window was filled with figures, wands pointing up, all of them shouting "*Vespertilabi,*" as though incantating an archaic ritual.

The work was really monotonous. Point - shout - gone the bats ... point - shout - another hole.

To both sides of Harry, the squad members were lying flatly on their Steel Wings, their wands toward the black waves under their feet, intoning one spell after the other. They looked like a group of swimmers or divers, resting on the surface of a lake, catching fish - except their goal was just the opposite.

Shouting his spells, Harry had time to think about the purpose of this endless bat wave. Covering ... What were these bats supposed to hide? All he could think of were ...

A scream to his left, fading in a choking sound.

His head jerked up. Glancing along the line of squad members, it took a second to recognize the source of the pained cry. Then he saw it - a squad member, hanging at his belt, one hand still at the broomstick, something on his back, protruding, like a very thick arrow ...

"ATTENTION!! ... AIR ATTACKS!"

A hissing sound made him turn. At the periphery of his vision, a blur was racing through the air, aimed straight toward his body, would hit him the next ...

In a reflex, he fell sideways, rolling around his Steel Wing, for an instant seeing the broomstick above him, something long and thin buzzing through his view. Using his momentum, he rotated up again, scanning the air for movements much quicker than those of the bats.

"HARPIES!!"

Viktor had shouted. It didn't tell Harry anything - only that Viktor seemed to know these creatures.

Two more squad members were hit. Harry saw the other teammates busy escorting them to the platform, carefully watching the sky, equally careful to avoid direct contact with the other Steel Wings.

Suddenly, the squad was on full alert.

Somehow, it was like in a Quidditch match, checking for the next Bludger on attack. Only, these were no Bludgers but bird-like creatures - like little rockets when attacking, seconds later, slowly climbing upward through the air, gaining height and distance, probably preparing for another attack.

Hissing in the air signaled another wave. Quidditch experience and squad training paid off - this time, nobody was hit.

As good as it looked - Harry became aware, if they didn't find a defense against these harpies, the squad was paralyzed ... Guarding the sky and watching for their own security took their full attention, left no room for any other action.

Viktor stood at the tower balustrade. His wand aimed toward one harpy which had lost its speed, was trying to fly up and out of reach. Viktor shouted something.

The harpy exploded like a firecracker.

Around Harry, the squad members aimed fists, grinning, shouting hoorays.

Watching the remnants tumble toward the ground, he saw these rocket-like birds wore no feathers at all, only skin and bones - and this long, sharp beak used like an arrow when attacking. Probably these were no birds at all, not more than the bats.

The squad members closest to the tower platform were approaching Viktor, no doubt eager to learn this spell. Harry was about to follow when he heard the hissing of another wave. He turned.

The harpies came in pairs!

He scanned the air. None of these pairs were aiming toward his body - but Cho was one of their targets. He opened the mouth to shout, closed it again at seeing her eyes fixed on them.

The harpies raced through the sky, coming slightly from above, side by side, only feet apart.

At the very last moment, Cho's Steel Wing jumped upward, gaining several yards in an instant. The harpies tried to follow - too fast for such an abrupt manoeuver, missing Cho barely - except for her left shoe. In a wide arc, it flew through the air, disappeared below the thinning layer of bats.

Harry approached her. "Are you hurt?"

"No."

"You need a new shoe."

"Tell me something new! ... Did you see where it fell?"

"No - anyway, it's too risky ... C'mon, back to the platform."

"Okay." She glared at him. "Don't move until I'm back!"

"All right - except one of these rockets's coming."

They reached the platform. Cho had trouble finding enough space to touch down, shouted something.

Several students jumped aside, telling Harry she had threatened them to touch down on their bodies - with a branded Steel Wing. An instant later, she disappeared through the door.

He positioned himself at the flagstaff again, scanning the air, checking the scene under his feet. Viktor was trying to teach a group of squad members how to shoot a harpy, seemed to have difficulties - maybe because this spell was considerably more complicated than the bat clean-up, maybe for the lack of targets within reach. At any rate, the scene didn't strike Harry as something to watch closer.

Drilencu appeared on the platform - as another shooter, or teacher, or both.

The twins came through the door - clubs in their hands. They jumped up, followed by Lee Jordan.

Another wave of harpies came buzzing. Harry saw the twins take position, their clubs ready. Next second, they pushed forward, into the course of a pair that wasn't even aimed toward them.

The combined speed of harpies and Steel Wings seemed almost too much for the eye to follow. The clubs swung upward, downward, forward, both of them meeting their targets at the exact moment.

Fred's harpy exploded like the previous one. The blast ripped Fred off his seat. For seconds, he hung free, held only by his safety belt, before he could grab his Steel Wing again and, with a swing, get upright - his clothes smeared with the remnants of the blown harpy.

George's hit had been less precise by the fraction of a second. His harpy spiraled and rotated through the air, then its wings came out, and the creature tried to escape.

Seeing his brother unhurt, George pushed his Steel Wing, club ready. Passing the harpy from behind, he swung the club in an arc that went up and came down on the creature's body - exactly at the root of the left wing.

The harpy lost course. With the left wing hanging limp, motionless, it trundled slowly toward the ground. Alive or not - this one wasn't going to ride another attack.

Viktor had shot another harpy, also Drilencu. Some squad members had tried their luck with what they had learned moments before - without success. Harry saw the Slytherin Beaters touch down and go inside, probably to fetch their own clubs. Even if they wouldn't follow the daring manoeuver of the twins - while trying to find a way back, harpies were easy targets.

A runner came through the door, grabbed Viktor by his shoulders, said something. Harry couldn't understand clearly - for a moment, it had sounded like *Hogwarts Express*.

The runner disappeared. Viktor said something to Hermione.

Harry saw her nod, tension in the face.

Viktor looked around, opened his mouth. "ATTENTION!"

The squad members signaled their listening with arms up and other gestures. Viktor had only their ears, the eyes left the sky no longer than for a short glance in his direction.

"The ..." Viktor stopped, sonored his voice, started again. "The Hogwarts Express has arrived. Probably full with Dark Forces, although nobody has come out so far ... The people downstairs ask whether we can run a check ... I'll do it by myself - don't shoot me by accident!"

He was interrupted by the sounds of the next harpy wave.

This time, the scoring was on both sides. Three explosions in rapid succession gave proof of spells that had been aimed and called properly - Viktor, Drilencu, and - of course, Hermione! The twins, without trying the dangerous counter-attack again, had outjumped a pair, to follow and to beat them crippled. Five harpies gone!

But one of the Hufflepuff Chasers was hit.

He came back to the platform, escorted by his teammates. Harry saw a deep wound at the right shoulder, bleeding heavily, a pale face, grimacing at the movements when touching down.

Just before the Chaser reached the door, Cho came out.

Viktor jumped. His body fell sideways, forwards, then he was diving through the cloud of bats. Next moment, he was gone.

Cho was at Harry's side. "Ready again ... What now?"

"Viktor's checking the Hogwarts Express ... Let's dive down, so we can see whether he's doing okay."

Cho had heard the news inside. With two shouts of "Vespertilabi", they blasted a larger hole in the cloud and went through the layer.

Harry scanned the air. Here, below the bats, it was considerably darker than above, however there was enough light from the other side of the lake. Obviously, the bat armada concentrated mainly at the Hogwarts buildings.

Then he saw the movement.

Viktor was flying a wide arc. What he had in mind was obvious - to pass along the train at full speed, coming from behind, too fast to be hit by a successful cursing - hopefully.

The small dot far away disappeared. A few seconds later, it came into view again, moving very fast, still accelerating. When it reached the point where Harry assumed the end of the train, the Steel Wing was definitely at full speed.

That close to the ground Viktor was flying, he was almost invisible from Harry's position. In contrast, what could be seen easily was a chain of spells erupting from the train, racing from back to front, almost as fast as the Steel Wing, however missing the figure without exception.

Viktor bolted upward, not changing course, elongating the line of the railroad track, keeping himself out of reach for all the Dark Forces in the train.

But not for someone else. From the point where Harry assumed the head of the train, a red line flashed through the sky, hitting Viktor.

The figure on the Steel Wing fell forward. For several seconds, it seemed to lie flatly on the broomstick, then it rolled to the side, fell down.

31 - The Battle of Hogwarts

As Harry could watch, Viktor's Steel Wing held its speed, carrying a body dangling from its safety belt. Another flash shot up, missing this target - giving proof how simple speed could work as protection. Seconds later, the Steel Wing and its stunned rider were out of reach.

"C'mon!"

Not waiting for Cho's reaction, Harry pushed, pushed, pushed, speeding up as fast as possible without losing control, aiming ahead of Viktor's Steel Wing, which kept racing across the sky.

He had aimed too short - the other broomstick with the dangling figure, still some distance away, was passing the calculated meeting point.

Bending to the left, Harry drove the hardest curve possible at his speed.

A hard force pressed him into the saddle, toward the broomstick. His vision dizzied, a lightness in his head, his eyes losing focus ... After a moment, his view sharpened again, the weird sensation in his mind faded. He was on course behind Viktor - more or less.

Viktor's Steel Wing was slowing.

Harry closed in, adapted to the speed of the other broomstick, had to brake more - no doubt, the built-in escape from the battle scene had run out.

Cho appeared at the other side of Viktor.

Harry pointed his wand, saw Cho do the same. In a moment, they would know whether Viktor was only stunned, or ...

"ENERVATE!"

A nerve-racking second passed, another, a third ... Viktor's body twisted!

Relief washed through Harry. "Viktor! ... You okay?"

A hand waved, then a shout, "... guess so."

With his senses fully awake, Viktor lost no time. His hands grabbed the Steel Wing, his legs came up - a swing, and he was back in the saddle. The Steel Wing bolted a bit, then Viktor had it under control.

They stopped in mid-air.

"Harry, Cho - thank you! ... What happened?"

"There must have been someone already out of the train - at the head ... I guess he saw you coming, had time enough to aim."

Viktor breathed deeply. "Wow ... without this Steel Wing ..."

Cho asked, "What could you see?"

"In the train? ... Lots of people - standing at the windows and watching the spectacle."

"That's strange," said Harry. "Why don't they come out?"

Viktor hesitated, seemed to reconsider what he had seen passing the train. He looked up. "I'd say, they're waiting for something."

"What?"

Viktor shrugged. "More wizards - Giants - Dementors ... So far, we've been attacked only by bats and harpies."

Giants, Dementors ... The Dark Forces had timed the bats, and the harpies, and the Hogwarts Express - then why couldn't Giants and Dementors arrive in time?

And what if they *had been* in time?

In this case ... An icy hand was crawling Harry's back. "They're already there! - And since they're not at Hogwarts, there's only one place left ..."

Viktor's eyes widened. "Our Giants?"

Harry nodded. "Must be - they've coordinated everything else ... They're waiting until our Giants are fought down."

Slowly, Viktor nodded. "Sounds plausible ... Yes, you might be right."

With every second passing, Harry felt more certain - this was the explanation. He looked at Cho. "Ready to check?"

A swallowing, then a nod. "Ready."

"Viktor - we're going to check what's going on there ... If it's nothing, or Giants against Giants, we'll be back as quickly as possible. If it's Dementors ..."

"... you'll need longer," completed Viktor. "Be careful - don't start something you cannot finish."

Harry shook his head. "We're not going to fight Giants, or wizards, for that matter ... Are you okay, flying back alone?"

"I'm all right ... come back soon." Viktor pushed, speeding off.

Harry looked at Cho. "Patrol formation ... I'm head."

She nodded.

Pushing his own Steel Wing, he accelerated.

Bob ...

... saw Harry and Cho diving through the black cloud in which they had blasted a hole. Scanning the sky for harpies, he wondered if it wasn't a better idea to clean the bats from below. As far as he could judge, the harpy attacks were completely above the layer - if this was true, a squad team below would be able to clean the sky unattacked.

Unless the harpies followed.

Unless some other risks were lurking on the ground.

Hissing in the distance announced another harpy wave. Their number was diminishing rapidly, now that teachers and students were shooting or beating them with good success, still - when such a pair was closing in on you, a quick jump at the right split second was the only way to avoid a nasty hole in the body.

This one squad member with the harpy in his back hadn't looked well. So what, Madam Pomfrey could do small to medium wonders - provided the patient was still alive when arriving.

Bob checked the courses of the approaching harpies, glanced to his left where Angelina was busy cleaning bats, saw her attention wasn't fixed on the harpies.

"Ange - watch!"

Her hand signaled okay - so she had checked them an instant before, had realized none of the few remaining pairs was aiming at her.

Angelina - this name was just too long to be called when counting fractions of a second. He had tried Angie, only to learn no sir, that wasn't her name. They had agreed on Ange, restricted to cases of emergency.

Sometimes, in cases of another emergency, he called her Angel, which never failed to rise the proper reaction. And occasionally, he called her Devil, watching with great delight how she was beaming when called that way.

Two loud pops told him, Drilencu and that Gryffindor girl had scored again. His glance followed the Slytherin Beaters who were chasing a harpy, reaching it, knocking its wings from both sides. The creature fell like a stone.

The two Beaters were pumping the air with their fists. Ahead of Bob, his teammate Chris gave them the thumbs-up.

So far, their team had come through unhurt - the alphabet team, as they liked to call themselves, after the initials of the three team members Angelina, Bob, and Chris. Of course, Chris had to remind him every now and then Bob's contribution was a cheat - after all, his real name was Robert. However, this teasing belonged to their team etiquette.

Chris had been the right choice, thought Bob. With himself and Angelina so close to each other, the third teammate couldn't help but feel a bit excluded sometimes, though Chris had found the right attitude. By habit reclusive enough, he acted like the common satellite of a

double star. Bob suspected him to bear deeper feelings toward Angelina than he used to show, admiration at the least, maybe more ... If so, Chris was hiding them well enough - and besides, sooner or later, another girl would change his mind.

It would be even better - provided this girl had no Steel Wing to put their team structure in jeopardy. But there were just two girls not yet 'in good hands' - Angelina's fellow Chasers, Katie and Alicia. With such a constellation, probably the role of the second twin team would pass over to him and Angelina - a nice thought because then, at occasions, they would team up with Harry and Cho.

The two Beaters were coming back, which meant they hadn't found another prey for their clubs. Their heads were turning from side to side, scanning the sky which had darkened enough to make it difficult detecting small, dark objects.

A red lightning flashed through the sky, another one.

The two Beaters crumpled on their Steel Wings, started to fall.

Bob's glance flicked to the direction where the flashes had come from. He saw dark spots. For a split second, they could have been a last echo in his eyes from the gleaming red, only they were growing - like broomstick riders, approaching at maximum speed.

"ATTACK!!!"

Here they came - six, eight, more figures, ducking low on sparkling broomsticks, had to be Firebolts, judging from the speed and the glitter. Riding in a wide line, they raced through the space filled with squad members, shooting spells at short distance.

Bob's Steel Wing had pointed in the right direction, and this saved him from being hit. Not finding time to grab his wand, he ducked down on his broomstick an instant before the attacker closest to him shot his spell. The red flash splashed into the shield, bounced off.

The attackers had passed, not slowing down, Probably, they would stop at a safe distance, turn, and come back. It gave Bob time enough to react. First check - his team.

Angelina was hanging from her belt, dangling a bit, otherwise motionless. A short jump brought him at her side.

"Enervate!"

She came awake, first her eyes, recognizing him, then her arms, waving, grabbing the Steel Wing. Next moment, she was up.

He turned, pushed, reached Chris.

His teammate was still in the saddle, though not really upright. Dark traces in a face looking pale, as far as Bob could see in the dim light. Then Bob realized, the traces were blood. Chris' nose was bleeding heavily.

"Chris?"

Slow reaction, probably some shock.

This hadn't been a stunning spell, rather something nastier. The nose-bleeding didn't look good at all.

Bob grabbed Chris' shoulder, careful not to touch the other Steel Wing. "Get in - find Madam Pomfrey ... You need treatment."

A nod, then Chris was pushing his broomstick, enough to reach the platform in time before the next attack was due, according to Bob's guess. Chris' movements were unsteady, however, he seemed sufficiently awake to control himself.

Glancing around, Bob saw other squad members recover. They all had their wands ready.

If not for the Steel Wings and their safety belts, the attack would have killed most of the squad. It would have killed Angelina - his Angelina. At this thought, something inside Bob condensed into a sphere of white-hot fury.

"ATTENTION - FROM NORTH!"

The shout had come from the platform, and it meant a second wave was closing in from the same direction. Thank Godness, these Firebolts were sparkling even in the last light of the day.

Bob waved. "Ange!!" Then he pushed.

Fighting fire with fire ... Attack the attacker - with a Steel Wing and its front shield, coming straight across was the most efficient technique, and the safest too.

A sparkling ahead, seemingly not aimed toward him, not changing course, not reacting - they didn't see him!! Not on a Steel Wing with a light-eating surface.

But he himself saw, his wand ready, and ... "*STUPEFY!*"

He saw the spell hit, the rider fall to his side, then the wave was past him.

Braking, he slowed enough for the quickest looping, jerked upward, backward, turning, turning, and around, pushing again.

Some sparkling far away. Angelina in the saddle, flying an arc, probably about to follow in his path. Other squad members around, nobody hit - no, one figure dangling. He was past them.

Ahead of him, he could see another sparkling, coming closer at incredible speed. Had to be one of the first wave. So they had planned a pattern of crossing waves until the last defender was sent to the ground, stupefied or otherwise paralyzed. Clever - had almost worked, had failed only thanks to the features of a widely unknown type of combat broomstick.

Features ... There was another feature, and now Bob was going to find out whether his plan worked.

Aiming at the glittery spot, he raced forward, flat behind the shield, wand stored away, both hands at the handles. In a moment, he would need both hands.

Just before passing each other, his opponent seemed to have detected him. All Bob could see in the short fragment of time was a twisting and an attempt to come around with a wand.

The two broomsticks touched for a fleeting instant. Bob felt a blow at his leg, a hard jolt in his Steel Wing. For seconds, he had to fight for control before his course stabilized again.

He braked, just enough for his next looping.

Angelina came into view. Her gesticulating told him what he had failed to watch himself - touching a foreign Steel Wing had kicked the other broomstick rider off his seat, had sent him spiraling through the air, disappearing in the cloud of bats.

Excellent - just what Bob had intended. As difficult as the manoeuvre was, it didn't draw a flash through the sky, visible from far away. Bob wasn't really invisible - only difficult to detect, very difficult. This was all he needed.

Going through the next looping, he slowed down at peak height, scanned the sky below. The second wave was coming back.

Well - the second wave minus one, at least.

Gaining speed again, he realized, when attacking them from behind with the superior speed of his Steel Wing, he would risk a stun from his own squad. Could he finish the manoeuvre before reaching the tower?

A bit too tight.

He decided to follow behind and above - to dive down after they had passed the closer battle range.

On a Steel Wing, the full speed of a Firebolt felt almost leisurely. Below and ahead, he saw two flashes bounce off from some head shields. An instant later, two illuminations blew up - firecrackers!

The Weasley artists had struck with their dust bombs.

In the fading light of the two sparkling rainbows, Bob saw two figures fall forward, sideways, and off their Firebolts, like in slow motion. So they were granted a last dream before hitting the ground.

He pushed.

Diving, closing in, he saw a flash from the tower platform. One of the attackers had come too close - close enough for this Bulgarian clown who could use his wand with the accuracy of a sniper rifle. The stunning spell hit, the rider rolled to his side, hung there for a second, then started to fall.

Bob aimed toward one of the few sparkles left, closed in, was only yards behind. In a moment, his Steel Wing would touch the body ahead.

The rider seemed to have sensed something. Maybe a sound, or some sixth sense - would be too late, anyway.

The rider turned on his broomstick.

Even in the dim light, Bob recognized him immediately. Whatever he felt seeing that face, his own expression barely changed. "Hello, Draco ... farewell."

Almost gently, his Steel Wing touched Draco Malfoy's body.

Harry ...

... was lying flat on his Steel Wing, racing at full speed toward the Giants' camp, followed by Cho at patrol distance. To their left, the lights of Hogsmeade flew past. There was nothing unusual in sight, the townspeople seemed not aware of what was taking place at Hogwarts.

The Giants' camp appeared in the distance ahead.

No lights, no movements, no sounds - although at this speed, almost every sound would drown in the thundering of the air around the Steel Wing.

Harry took out some speed, gaining height at the same time - a healthy precaution for a first look at a place where fighting Giants might be found. True, Lleyrin had said he would move his men closer toward Hogwarts, only this had been hours ago, before the events had started.

From above, the camp looked abandoned, exactly what could be expected after the Giants had departed - no movement, windows dark, some disorder between the huts.

Then he saw the first figure on the ground.

Until Cho had reached him, he could see half a dozen.

He pointed toward the ground. "See these bodies ... I'm going down for a close check."

Cho's lips tightened. Then she nodded.

Slowly, carefully, Harry swerved down, scanning the ground, approaching some motionless figures in a safe distance from the next hut. If this was a trap ... His reaction would be fast enough.

He reached the bodies. Inching forward, only feet above ground, he checked them.

Giants, yes. Dead - no doubt, fatal wounds from Quarterstaffs nothing you'd fail to notice.

But these figures looked totally unfamiliar - their clothes were different from what Harry could remember, none of these still faces rung a bell in his memory. Dead enemies.

He went up.

"They're dead - but none of them belonged to Lleyrin's group ... Let's check toward Hogwarts."

Keeping their height, they flew in the direction where their own Giants could be expected, not too fast, carefully scanning the ground. Between them and Hogwarts was the lake, and on this side of the lake was the Hogwarts Express. They would have to stop the scan before coming too close.

In the first seconds, they could see some more motionless figures, then the ground was clear.

Harry's eyes scanned from left to right, flicked back, scanned the next stripe below. He saw nothing unusual, heard nothing - somehow strange, the banging of Quarterstaffs should carry some distance.

A cold breeze washed over his body.

Breeze? Then why ...

This was no breeze - Dementors somewhere ahead!

His hand reached into his coat, took his wand, came out. Slowing more, he lurched forward, wand ready. The cold feeling was growing.

Passing some trees, he saw the first figures, then the first movement. A moment later, he saw the full scene.

A large group of Giants, standing almost motionless, watching what was happening in some distance. There, another group of Giants - Lleyrin and his men, surrounded by the largest number of Dementors Harry had ever seen.

Using their Quarterstaffs, the Giants in the middle were fighting desperately to keep the Dementors at distance, using also their legs for kicks when a hooded figure came to close. The only effect they achieved was a pushing off, when hit, a Dementor retreated but didn't fall to the ground. In the few seconds, Harry saw only Quarterstaffs with the thick ends toward the attacking Dementors, used as clubs.

One Dementor had caught hold of a kicking leg. Next moment, it was beaten off by other Giants, fell back, was up again.

Already pushing forward, Harry looked for the best spot. Diving down, his mind recalled the memory of the arc from the sibling wands.

Not too close ... He needed a few seconds of full concentration.

His legs touched ground. The first Dementors were twenty yards away. He closed his eyes, forgetting the scene around him, calling up the image ... The arc was there, he heard the phoenix song ... his parents ...

"EXPECTO PATRONUM!!!"

The instant he opened his eyes, a golden light erupted from his wand, growing, growing, filling the air in front of him. The light condensed to a shape, formed a Centaur - body, legs, head.

Some figures ahead had turned, made steps toward him, not showing faces, sending waves of coldness through his bones.

The Centaur arched forward.

With two jumps, it reached the Dementors closest to Harry, passed the first, turned sharply, passed the second, turned again on its hind legs, pranced forward, gaining speed.

Where it had passed, cloaked figures crumpled, collapsed, sending out short shrieks, muffled quickly, ending in a choked sound before they had reached the ground, not to move again.

It was like scything corn, or grass.

The Centaur had crushed every Dementor within short distance. Now it thundered at full pace into the ring surrounding the Giants, its body bending to the side, like a race horse passing the last curve. The man-horse shape disappeared around the corner.

Harry felt a light touch, heard Cho's voice, "It's me ... Guarding your back."

He nodded, his mind with his Patronus, sending all his power, his determination.

In front of him, the Giants were no longer obscured by Dementors - at least none standing upright. He saw some of Lleyrin's men waving, using the moment for recovery from the frantic action of the last minutes.

The Centaur appeared at the other side. In full gallop, body still tilted inside, it started the next circle.

The ring was broken. The Dementors, as far as they were still alive, retreated, turned, walked away, ran away - fleeing this place which, a minute before, had looked like a dinner plate, richly filled with victims whose souls could be sucked out.

Returning from its second circle, the Centaur slowed down, checked around.

As much as this magic creature was moving on its own - Harry knew, the Centaur responded to his own thoughts. For a moment, he had considered a pursuing of the Dementors, diminishing their number as much as he could, had dropped the idea at once. His first priority were the Giants, once the acute danger for Lleyrin and his men was banned, Harry and Cho were expected urgently in the school. This left no time for chasing Dementors - and if they were going to make another try at Hogwarts, Lupin would be ready.

With a last prancing up, a wave of the arm, the Golden Centaur faded, was gone.

Lleyrin's men had started regrouping - a battle line toward the other Giants, who had watched the Dementors' defeat in a state of paralyzed agony. Only now, Harry saw them prepare for the next minutes, slow movements, obviously still under shock.

A Giant stepped toward Harry, came down, kneeling on his heels - Lleyrin.

"Harry Potter - and Cho Chang, your sense of appearing in the right moment is flawless. My life is in your hand - from now till death us part."

A chill was running through Harry's back. Lleyrin had spoken the ritual words - he had entitled Harry to send him into death, for any reason, at any time, and he had promised to follow any such order without hesitation.

Another bond.

Harry's mind worked again, finally able to provide him with the proper answer. "I will save it in my heart, Lleyrin - from now till death us part."

Any other answer had been a decline - the ultimate insult, not even leaving the chance for a response.

Looking up, Harry saw Lleyrin's eyes shining. The Giant made no attempt to rise.

Startled, Harry said, "Excuse me, Lleyrin - I hope you're not waiting for something I have to say before you can fight with your men."

The Giant smiled. "No, Harry Potter - you already said what had to be said ... I'll stay close to you as long as you're around - as your personal guard ... I couldn't stand the thought of you trampled to the ground by some foolish accident."

Only halfways relieved, not in the mood to share Lleyrin's joke, Harry said, "Then Cho and I should jump up - at fifty feet, we're secure and still at hand if some Dementors come back."

"Don't worry, Harry Potter - we have a minute or two ... And besides, my men would be very upset hearing I didn't pay the proper attention to our rescuers. ... Now watch - in a moment, the riddle of the oiled balls will be solved." With these words, Lleyrin turned on his knees to watch by himself.

One glance toward the battle line was enough to solve the mystery for Harry. Every second Giant in the line held a long leather strap, started to wheel it around.

Slings! Built after Viktor's - or Hermione's - present.

No question, the other side knew exactly what to expect in a moment. Still outnumbering Lleyrin's men considerably, were these *Dark Giants* already beaten before the first ball was thrown. They stepped backward, pushing those behind, trying to be out of the way when the deadly projectiles were flying.

Lleyrin's men stood guard, every second Quarterstaff ready, every second right arm wheeling a sling in slow motion.

"Lleyrin - what are they waiting for?" asked Harry.

"The decision of the other side," replied Lleyrin. "Harry Potter, this is a battle, not a slaughtering ... The others now have the chance to turn and walk away - except they have to do it within the next twenty seconds, otherwise ..."

As if to remind them, one sling-shooter wheeled faster for a moment, then fired. With a hollow clank, the ball drove into a tree within the other group.

The shooter had reloaded immediately, his sling was already wheeling again. However, there was no need any longer - the message seemed understood and accepted. The other Giants stepped back, or to the side, signaling the Giants' version of surrender. Watched by Lleyrin's men, they started to build a march formation, leaving the battleground as quickly as possible.

Cho asked, "Lleyrin, what happened at your camp?"

"A misunderstanding, Cho," answered Lleyrin grinning, "a big, big, misunderstanding, one of those which damage your faith in good luck - if you're at the wrong side of it ... And these poor fellows you see walking away were at the wrong side. They had been told they'd find us in the camp, so they made a nice surrounding to catch us all together ... Alas, we weren't at home - but arrived just in time to start a roll-up, feeling somewhat upset to find them in our camp without the proper invitation."

Lleyrin's grinning faded. "Well - then came the Dementors ... For a Giant, a Dementor is like a rat for a human - a big rat. With a single one, you can play kickball from here into the next week ... I never saw that many Dementors ..."

The grinning came back. "Thanks to your Centaur, Harry Potter, I'll never see that many again - it will take them a long, long time to balance out their losses."

Lleyrin seemed to know a lot about Dementors, for example where they came from and how their population was growing. Still, Harry didn't feel like asking for details, other things were more important now.

He told Lleyrin about the train full of dark wizards, then asked, "What are you going to do now, Lleyrin?"

"We will position ourselves as close to Hogwarts as possible - without interfering with these wizards ... This way, we can block the other Giants in case they found some fighting spirit on their way home ... If the Dementors come back, we will escape toward Hogwarts - so that we can be seen from there ..."

"So that I'll know - and come again," interrupted Harry.

"That's what I had in mind," confirmed Lleyrin, smiling in spite of Harry's impolite cutting in. "Conversely, if it looks as if your people can't settle with these wizards, we will come for help."

"That means - we can fly off and return to Hogwarts?"

"Yes, Harry Potter and Cho Chang - you have completed your task for us."

Harry suppressed a remark such as, 'Be careful' - even in the heat of the fight, certain things simply weren't said to a Giants chief, particularly not if this Giant's life was stored in your heart.

He looked at Cho. At her nod, he jumped up.

Cho followed. A last wave to Lleyrin, who stood watching them till they were gone, then he pushed.

The direct path was blocked by the wizards in the train. Passing them high up in the air might have been a possibility, only Harry wanted to do a last check - to make sure the Dementors didn't run a visit of Hogsmeade, just to cool down their frustration.

There was no need to worry. Passing Hogsmeade, they found the town quiet and calm - strangely so in their own eyes. They pushed forward.

Ron ...

... saw Viktor arriving - from the other side, thank God, otherwise the squad leader might have met the attackers unprepared.

Viktor touched down, reached him. "Ron - what's the state?"

"Attack by broomstick riders, almost twenty - initially. So far, half of them have been sent to the ground, the others have lost their coordination ... The squad's chasing them - Steel Wings with safety belts against Firebolts without, and our own broomsticks don't sparkle."

"What about the harpies?"

"A few might be left - I haven't seen any in the last minutes."

Viktor checked around. "How's the squad?"

"Four injuries from the harpies - one severe case, the others are doing okay, might even return within the next hour ... Two more hit by the broomstick riders, with something other than a stunning. - And Harry and Cho are still off, they followed you ..."

"I know - they found me stunned ... They went to check the Giants, because we think there are other forces, Giants or Dementors, or both ... The train is full of wizards - we need Dumbledore here, I don't want to go inside."

Hermione, who looked better than the minutes before, was already moving. "I'll fetch him."

A yelling cry, somewhere in the air.

It had come from the direction opposite the lake, where the first wave of attackers had appeared. Ron scanned the sky, cursing the darkness.

A fiery ball raced from the platform up into the sky, sent by Drilencu's wand. Reaching its peak, it slowly fell down, illuminating a breathtaking scene.

A broomstick rider - Firebolt, by the gleaming reflexes - was twisting, gesticulating - no, beating something on his back. Then Ron saw it clearly - a huge bird, wings outstretched, now hitting forward, its beak hacking into the head of the rider, its claws obviously deep in his neck.

Incredible - Almyra was hunting as an eagle, had caught someone.

Two squad members - the Ravenclaw Beaters, if Ron's guess was right, had already pushed forward. They reached the bundle of man and bird. A red flash hit through the air.

The man's arms fell down. For a moment, he sat motionless, held upright by the gigantic wings. The bird separated from the man, climbing upward, out of the illuminated zone. Left at its own, the man's body fell to the side, disappeared in the dark below.

Ron made another mark on his parchment.

Dumbledore appeared in the door, followed by Hermione. The Headmaster walked to Viktor. "Mr. Krum - I heard about your courageous flight ... What did you see?"

"The train is full of wizards. They tried to hit me, so it's clear to which side they belong ... But the question is, why don't they come out? - When I discussed this with Harry and Cho, my guess was they're waiting for something, or someone ... Then Harry thought they're waiting for Giants or Dementors, or both, after they've finished off our Giants, so he and Cho went for a check."

Dumbledore digested the information.

"My guess is the same as yours," he said eventually. "If we are right, either we see Giants or Dementors appear within the next minutes, or Lleyrin and his men could fight them down ... Either way, we need the report from Harry and Cho."

Ron said, "These wizards might get tired of waiting ... We should have light there, or another patrol, or an outpost to watch."

"I can check again," said Viktor, "provided another team is checking me - to catch me when I'll be stunned again."

Dumbledore shook his head. "I know something better." He looked at Ron. "Outpost - you had the right idea, and we have the right men for that - the Goblins ... Let me send them out - I'll be back in a few minutes." He went inside.

Viktor turned to Ron. "I'm going to do a close check around - to see how the squad's hunting."

"Join the other twin team - Katie and Alicia," insisted Ron. "A single broomstick rider might be confused with an attacker."

"Good idea." Viktor jumped up.

Ron watched him flying slowly forward, checking to all sides. Then Viktor pushed. A moment later, he was out of sight - too far away to be discernible in the nightly sky.

A squad team appeared in the darkness, flying the formation with head and two wings. No, couldn't be - the two wings were Katie and Alicia, their wands pointing toward the broomstick flyer in front of them.

The troika came to a stop before the balustrade.

Katie shouted, "Oy, Ron - we have a prisoner."

Ron stared at the figure - a young man, obviously disarmed by the two girls. He seemed quite happy with his fate, naturally so when the alternative was a high dive without wings - and without a Firebolt either.

Well, he could have flown, thought Ron, but maybe he preferred an imprisonment in Hogwarts over freedom with his fellows ... That meant, he would be ready to sing for his supper ...

"Touch down - slowly, then stay."

Holding his own wand ready, Ron watched the young man come down, dismount, standing motionless.

"Hermione - do you know a tying spell?"

"Of course."

Of course.

Hermione walked behind the young man, snapped, "Hands at your back," pointed with her wand, and murmured something. The man grimaced for a second, then relaxed again.

Ron asked, "Hermione, can you cruciate him? ... Just enough so he still can answer our questions?"

"No - please! ... I'll tell you all I know!" The man looked pleadingly at Ron.

Without answering, Ron looked at Hermione. "Now?"

"I'll tell you, I'll tell you! Right here! ... My name's Damian Loew, I came with the others to - to ... I'm sorry, I didn't want - really, the others threatened me ..."

With some effort, Ron suppressed his triumphant grin. "How many?"

"Sixteen altogether." Relief was spreading the man's face. Answering questions was simpler than presenting a confession, and it meant no cru ...

"You know their names?"

The relief was wiped off. "I know ten names - the others are foreigners, I saw them the first time a few days ago ... Those I know are ..."

"Hold it." Toward Hermione, Ron said, "Put him downstairs - into a room where you can interrogate him ... Let *him* do the writing - if you think he needs a bit of encouragement, you know what to do."

Behind the man, Hermione said, "Believe me - he'll write as fast as he can." Then her wand touched the man's neck. "Forward!"

With a twist, the man started to walk toward the door, followed by a Hermione who looked as if hoping for a little resistance.

Ron turned to Katie and Alicia. "I thought you were with Viktor."

"We've been," said Alicia. "Then we found that guy - he was so grateful to be captured ... Here - catch!"

A wand sailed through the air. Thrown by a Chaser - Ron caught it without difficulty.

Viktor appeared behind the girls. He slowed down, shouted, "Ron - have you got some information from that prisoner?"

"Yes - the number of attackers. They were sixteen - so if my counting's right, there are still five somewhere out there."

"I don't think so," replied Viktor. "I haven't seen any spell, any fighting - I guess they decided to disappear before meeting another Steel Wing, whether in singles or together."

Another team appeared in the darkness - the twins, trailed by Lee Jordan. Fred called, "Viktor - air's clean, as far as we can judge - except for those bats."

"Okay ... come down, and keep ready."

The squad lacked a signal for gathering, as Ron realized. They could only wait until the teams returned from their hunt. But maybe if ...

He walked to Drilencu. "Prof - could you shoot something like a red signal?"

"Certainly, Mr. Weasley."

Drilencu's wand pointed into the sky. A glowing ball raced up, exploded, forming a crown of red stars.

Some seconds later, the sky was dark again.

"Another one, Mr. Weasley?"

"Yes, please."

Drilencu aimed, shot a second ball.

"Thanks, Prof."

Staring into the darkness, Ron hoped the squad members had seen the signal, and had understood. Aside from that, he wondered what might take Dumbledore so long. And another corner of his mind was worrying about Harry, and Cho.

A team appeared, closely followed by another one. So the signal had worked.

Viktor directed the incoming teams down to the platform, ordered them to stand alert, otherwise to recover, and *not* to bother with the remaining bats.

He was right, thought Ron - the sky was dark anyway, further, they seemed to disappear on their own. More and more, the ground became visible again.

Dumbledore came through the door, reached Ron and Viktor. "The Goblins are back - they didn't come far ... The wizards have left the train. They are coming to the school, but very slowly."

"Shall we attack?" asked Viktor.

"No - first because they'll find a roadblock of dragons, second because I have another order for the squad - a very special one."

About to ask, Ron stopped, stared.

A Goblin came through the door, then another, then a third ...

"The Goblins ask for a lift," said Dumbledore, his eyes sparkling. "They want to be put down beyond the end of the Hogwarts Express - in the back of the enemy."

Viktor nodded, not showing much of a surprise. "Sure - on the shoulders, they must not touch the Steel Wings."

He turned to the teams. "Attention ... I need the twelve strongest squad members first - and the others for escort."

What a pity, thought Ron, that Harry was missing the spectacle. True, he definitely couldn't be counted among the twelve strongest squad members - physically, that was, but probably he felt closer to the Goblins than anyone else. What kept him so long?

Dumbledore called, "Lights out! ... What's happening now must not be seen from below."

Harry ...

... was wondering why Hogwarts looked so dark - only a few windows lighted, and where the tower platform had to be, only darkness. He didn't like this prospect.

Near the lakeside, flames roared through the air.

The dragons!

The flames faded. Thin red lines shot from the other side, answered by another strike of orange-red ribbons, lapping up, and disappearing.

Followed by Cho, Harry raced toward the buildings, gaining height. It seemed better to approach the platform from above, high above the ground, on which the fiery spectacle was continuing.

Close to the building, he slowed down, scanning his way to the platform. There were some figures - one of them the unmistakable shape of Dumbledore.

He touched down, recognized Dumbledore and Ron.

Both of them wheeled around, then smiled with relief. "Harry - and Cho," said Dumbledore, "I take it you did more than a check."

"Yes - we were engaged in a fight." Harry told them what they had seen, and done, and what Lleyrin had planned to do next.

"Excellent," said Dumbledore beaming, "so these wizards down there are locked between dragons and Giants."

Harry looked around. "Where's the squad?"

Ron answered. "They carry Goblins behind the lines ... Viktor's with them, and Hermione's downstairs to interrogate a prisoner."

"A prisoner??"

Ron's face showed a hard grin. "You missed the show here ... We were attacked by broomstick riders - sixteen. About ten have been sent to the ground, one was captured by Katie and Alicia - the one Hermione's squeezing now ... The others decided to leave."

He glanced at Cho. "Almyra was hunting as an eagle - she caught one."

Cho's face expressed concern. "Where's she now?"

"Chasing bats - this time as an owl ... Some of them were real ones, didn't disappear from the spells, but were quite in a hurry when that owl appeared."

"Of course," replied Cho, "bats are owl food."

Roon looked baffled. "That's why - I didn't know."

Harry turned to Dumbledore. "Professor - what are you planning against these wizards?"

Dumbledore kept looking down at the scene on which yellow-red torches alternated with red flashes. "Nothing yet ... Watch it - they're not attacking seriously ... Of course, the dragons are quite impressive, but it can't be the only reason. - In any case, Voldemort is not with them."

"You think there's more to come?"

Now Dumbledore looked up. "I would like to know where Voldemort is, Harry ... As long as he's not seen, I'm not going to expose us more than necessary."

Figures on Steel Wings emanated from the darkness, came down, filling the platform rapidly. Viktor was one of the last.

He touched down, came over. "Task completed - the Goblins are on their way."

"Very good," said Dumbledore. "Mr. Krum - I'm going downstairs to my colleagues and our supporters ... You and your squad will guard the air - unless told otherwise."

Viktor nodded.

When Dumbledore was gone, Viktor pointed, "You three - slow patrol toward the forest ... you three - same toward the other side ... The others, stay alert."

Harry tried to guess the number of dark wizards on the ground. Assuming the train really had been full, there were quite a lot, squeezed on the narrow path from the train platform so that only the front line was exposed to - or was fighting against - the dragons.

Then he tried to guess the number of wizards on their own side. The Hogwarts teachers, plus those which had followed the chain call, plus volunteers from Beauxbatons - plus the students of the older classes. It seemed still a minority - counting their number only.

But then, numbers meant only so much. Chief Lleyrin and his men had given an example how much. And a dozen Goblins should reach the remote lines of the evil crowd within the next five or ten minutes.

There was something on the lake.

A deep-violet glow was growing, intensifying, not too far from the lakeside closest to the dragon line. It seemed to come from deep below.

The surface above the glow was rising. It formed a ring, a bubble. The bubble split open, exposing a large shape - a ship, smaller than that from Durmstrang, otherwise similar.

The cascades of water didn't fall back. They rushed forward, gaining momentum, gaining height, collecting more water from the surface they passed. It looked like a gigantic sphere of water, rolling toward the lakeside, toward the ...

The sphere left the lake behind, Not losing shape, it raced across the few yards of grass, reached the first dragon, hitting the animal, drowning it, throwing it to the ground, separating in two halves from the impact.

The two halves drove forward, hitting the next dragon, and the next, splashing the fourth before the remnants floated down the dragon flanks.

Where a moment before long flames had erupted, steam was hanging in the air. The sphere had extinguished the dragon fire, at least for a short while.

A fireball raced from the school building toward the lake, missed the newcomer, hit the Durmstrang ship close by.

For a moment, Harry thought the fireball had been a bad miss. But an instant later, a second ball was going the same way. Watching the effect, he knew - both had been hits.

Flames were spreading over the Durmstrang ship, illuminating the other ship, which still was dripping wet, glistening in the flames.

On deck, Harry saw three figures, recognized two of them. The one to the left was Lucius Malfoy. The face of the man at the right was in the shadow of the tall, thin figure in the middle.

Voldemort.

In unison, the three figures pointed their wands toward the dragons. Balls of dark and yellow, smoking, whirling, erupted from their tips, raced toward the dragons.

Another flash from below shot through the air, hit one of the balls. The only effect was a bouncing, changing the course only marginally.

The balls landed on the dragons, between the dragons, exploding, spreading acid yellow smoke.

Harry heard a horrible sound coming from these animals - a choking, a pained breathing. The four mighty creatures twisted, trembled. A last jerking of the long necks, then they collapsed on the ground.

A figure had escaped the collapsing bodies. Head bent forward, hands clutching the throat, was it stumbling, trying to cross the short distance to the building.

From the ship, a green flash hissed through the air, hit the figure, crushed it down, immediately motionless.

In the short moment, Harry had recognized the figure, the face. Hagrid ... Hagrid was dead, killed by Voldemort.

He froze, unable to think.

A black shadow sprinted from the building to the heaps on the ground, stopped behind their cover. Harry had just time to recognize a huge black dog when the shape changed to a man, immediately shooting one flash after the other toward the enemy.

He saw a cat follow, change into McGonagall. Her first spell shot a cloud of steam into the air. It dissolved within seconds, however in this time, many more figures - humans - had passed the distance to the covering wall.

A firework of spells was flashing through the air - toward the dark wizards in front of barricade, toward the ship.

The three figures on the ship held their wands, blocking spell with counter-spell, sending their own flashes between the counters.

Hagrid was dead ... Then Charlie was dead too, and the third wizard ... And Voldemort was standing there, ready to shoot the next Killing Curse as soon as he wasn't busy countering other spells.

Somebody had to stop him.

He had to stop him.

He wheeled around. "I'm going to stop Voldemort ... Who can take the other two?"

Faces staring at him - Viktor, Ron, Cho's face white.

The twins stepped forward, eyes burning, masks of fury. "He's killed Charlie - make him pay, Harry."

Cho made a step. "You two fly second line - *behind* me."

"And behind me," said Viktor.

Harry nodded. "Now."

He was up, flanked by Cho at his right, Viktor at his left, the twins to both sides behind. They were diving down, flying an arc, to come flat from behind, close above ground.

Harry's mind was focused on the most difficult manoeuvre he would ever perform - a touch-down point blank at Voldemort, to be at him, to have his wand ready, his sibling wand that was supposed to block the other one.

The five Steel Wings were down, racing toward the ship, Viktor and Cho slightly ahead, Fred and George behind.

The ship was growing, the three figures too ... Harry's eyes checked off the distance, his mind calculating, the point of braking was ... now!

Four Steel Wings, two at both sides, rushed past. The three figures on deck - was it a sixth sense that made them turn? ... A split second, enough to see the Steel Wings, too short for pointing their wands ...

Harry's mind registered three pictures.

Viktor passed the wizard at the left, close enough to touch his shoulders. Viktor didn't touch him though - he shot his spell right into the face, an instant before he was past this face, before he bolted up, racing toward the sky, out of the light, away from the stunned figure which was still on its way toward the deck.

Cho aimed at the other wizard - Lucius Malfoy. Not finding the time to wonder, or to worry, Harry saw that she didn't have her wand ready, was holding the Steel Wing with both hands on the handles, drove it straight toward the figure, hitting the throat, driving the Steel Wing through the throat, pushing the figure off the deck like a puppet, steered free again, steadied the jolting broomstick, still close over ground, keeping low, flat on the Steel Wing, passed the

crowd of dark wizards, their remote lines, too fast for them to recognize her, to send a spell before she was gone.

Harry's own Steel Wing came to a halt inches before Voldemort's body. His feet were on the deck, his wand ready to act, or to respond.

"Voldemort - it's me."

The snake-like face distorted. "Harry Potter!" Voldemort's wand came around, came up ...

Harry never found the explanation why he did it. Rather than shooting spell against spell, his wand crossed Voldemort's, pressed it upward.

A vibrant sensation raced through his arm. It felt as though his wand welcomed this contact, was urging for more.

"Foolish boy - what do you think this is? ... A sword fight?"

There was no mistaking watching Voldemort's face - he too had felt something, although for him the sensation seemed all but welcome.

"No, Voldemort - this is a wand fight, and you'll lose it ... The last time it was a draw - now that you've killed my friends, I won't let it rest ... I'm not fleeing you again - I'm going to stop you here, and I'm going to stop you anywhere."

Hate was burning in the wizard's eyes. Harry's scar felt like a hot iron. He couldn't care less. "And eventually," he snarled, "I'm going to finish you, ridiculous Lord."

Voldemort's face seemed to fall apart. The pressing toward Harry's wand, held easily against this second-birth body which never was made for physical power, faded.

Voldemort made a quick step backward. His wand came down, pointing at Harry.

Was it Harry's eye, or did his wand move at its own? The instant Voldemort was opening his bloodless lips, the two wands touched again - tip against tip.

A brilliant light sprang from the touch of the wands, immediately sending arcs of gold and violet to all sides, forming a sphere of light that was encircling the two figures.

Voldemort made another step backward, trying to break the connection.

Harry felt a blow in his hand, then a pulling. The two wands didn't separate - they formed a single wand of double length, the brilliant spot in the middle.

Voldemort was pushing, pulling, moving his end from side to side. But whatever he did, the double wand refused to separate, even to bend. And nothing would break Harry's grip at his own end - not now, not here, not in this sphere which filled with the most beautiful sound on earth - phoenix song.

Another pulling, only a fraction of an inch, but incredibly strong.

The double wand was shrinking in the middle! ... As if the blinding spot was burning it and grabbing for more at the same time - two wands eating each other.

Harry watched them shortening, effortlessly holding against Voldemort's last attempts to stop what was going on, unaware of the surroundings, unable to see details outside the sphere of light.

Inch by inch, he and Voldemort were drawn toward each other, following their wands being sucked into the light.

The remnants of both wands together were down to the size of a single wand. The brilliant light vanished - from fullsize to small, to a sparkling, to nothing.

Harry heard the phoenix song fade. The sphere dissipated - suddenly, they were just two figures, struggling for a wand at the deck of a ship.

He looked at Voldemort, saw his eyes twist to the side, then come back. Was there ...

A hand touched his shoulder, rested there. "It's me," said Cho's voice.

Holding his end of the wand, Harry shot a quick glance to his side. Cho stood there, calmly examining Voldemort. "What an ugly face," she said. "Harry - what's this beanpole doing with your wand?"

"This is what's left from our both wands," hissed Voldemort, "and now I'll use it as my own."

"Stupid lord," said Cho, "look where the tip is pointing ... This wand has taken its decision - can't you see it, you imbecile?"

Her words seemed to infuriate Voldemort beyond measure. Harry felt hate like a wave from an open furnace, although no longer in his scar. Whatever Voldemort was trying, no matter how much evil power he was sending, it broke - stopped by the wand that was pointing toward him.

"You've lost, ridiculous Lord ... Your wand has joined with mine - see ..." Harry felt like laughing. "Another present - each time you attack me, I gain more of your powers ... Soon I'll know how to use this one - and then, I'll come to you!"

Voldemort's hand left the tip of the wand. He made a jump to the side, incredibly fast, seized the wand of the wizard stunned by Viktor, came up, pointing at Harry.

As quick as it was done, for Harry it seemed to take place in slow motion. He knew what was happening, anticipated it, had all the time of the world to react. His only movement was a shifting to the side, covering Cho. His wand, the united twin, flat across his chest rather than pointing. Almost casually, he said, "Doesn't work, Voldemort."

"It will! - In a moment, you'll be dead."

"Really? ... Then what are you waiting for?"

The wand was pointing at him, trembling in Voldemort's rage ... or fear?

"You know why, don't you? ... You know it would backfire, worse than the last time ... But do it - this is how I'll make an end to you."

"You think you're still protected by the love of your mother?" The sneering in Voldemort's voice seemed close to desperation. "No longer, you fool ... Remember - your blood is in my veins."

"Yes, it's love - the power you cannot master, never could, never will ... But it's the love of Cho for me, and mine for her - the united power that will crush you, false Lord."

Voldemort's eyes confirmed - he knew this was the truth, and it was almost eating him alive.

Almost pleadingly, Harry pointed his wand. "Expelliarmus."

The wand broke from Voldemort's grip, with a force that made him stumble, almost fall down, and buzzed through the air into Harry's hand.

Voldemort's face no longer looked human, not even snake-like. For an instant, he stood here, hands outstretched in claws. Then he was gone - with a popping, the air imploded into the space where, a second before, a body had been.

Voldemort fleeing - the thought might be savoured later, more important now, what would he try? ... Of course - the ship!

Harry turned to the ship's bridge, pointed his wand. "*DIFFINDO!*"

The explosion surprised him considerably. This united twin wand had to be used with care - the spell, intended to break a door open, had blasted away most of the bridge structure.

"Wow," said Cho, "now that's a hell of a wand, Harry."

He hurried inside, checked around, relaxed. This ship would not move, not now, not for a while, if ever again.

If Voldemort had apparated inside, he had apparated again to another place. There was no sense in searching further, in particular since there was no need to worry about a spell from behind - Voldemort had avoided a better chance, and for good reason.

Stepping out, Harry found the first opportunity to check the scene on the battleground ahead. What he saw was a picture to be held in memory forever.

Along the path, dark wizards were lying on the ground, in singles, in heaps, in bulks of bodies clinging together. At several places, he saw glittering - traces of the Weasley twins' work with dust bombs. At the far end toward the train platform was some movement - Goblins, no wizards.

In the middle, a few figures stood still upright - more or less, hiding behind other bodies, glancing toward the front of wizards ahead, the deadlier line of Goblins behind.

It was only a question of minutes until the last of them would surrender - or die from a Goblin arrow. However, it gave Harry a chance to test his reinforced wand.

He pointed into the middle. "*EXPELLIARMUS!*"

The effect was as if a firing command had been given to a sagittarius squad. Like arrows, four - five wands raced through the air, across the water, to him. He almost beat himself catching them.

Cho giggled. "Stop blustering, Harry - they're done."

"You're right." He stored his wand away. With his arms free, he made a half-step to her, then she was in his arms.

They stood there, holding each other, tightly, wordlessly - words would come later, about themselves, about dead friends, about the days and weeks ahead ...

A sound - inside the ship.

Harry wheeled around, his hand already holding his wand, darted forward, stopped.

Through the debris came a long shape, shimmering magnificently in the wavering light from the burning Durmstrang ship. It stopped, a triangular head in the air, yellow eyes staring at Harry.

"Nagini!"

"We came, Harry Potter, my master and I, to give you the answer - only you answered by yourself."

"Yes, indeed - and what's your comment?"

"You have defeated Voldemort. He has left me behind. So I am at your command - you are my new master."

"Really? ... And what if I don't want to act as your master?"

"Then I will die soon."

"Oh." Harry stared at the snake, not knowing what to think of it. "Can't you just live like an ordinary snake?"

"No. I have lost too much of my own power while keeping my former master alive."

"That's not exactly a recommendation for you, Nagini."

"I'm not begging, Harry Potter. You are my master, be it merciful or pitiless."

This damned snake - he might as well argue with a wall. She saw no choice, had no choice, gave no choice. He looked at Cho. "I don't know what to do."

"Sorry - I wasn't following ... I'm limited to English, Mandarin, Kantonese, and French - if you know what I mean."

Seeing Cho's face, he had to giggle. Had his question been English? He would find out later. He turned back to Nagini. "What kind of food do you need?"

"Any kind of meat - of any size, up to a limit."

"No human bodies!"

"My master commands my food."

Harry sighed. The last thing he needed was a snake of these dimensions, especially now ... Although, Almyra might have another opinion. Either way, he couldn't leave her on the ship, still less he could kill her.

He looked at his Steel Wing, at her body, tried to guess her weight, was unable to come up with a number, but certainly she was too heavy for his shoulders ...

"Can you swim?"

* * *

Harry watched Nagini swimming toward the lakeside. He mounted his Steel Wing, jumped, and touched down immediately, feeling like a frog hopping through the grass.

Nagini arrived, glid onto the ground.

"Wait here - I'll fetch you as soon as I know what to do with you ... You may guard my Steel Wing."

"Yes, master." Nagini moved forward to cover the broomstick ...

"Watch it!! - Don't touch ..."

It was too late - Nagini's front section made contact with the Steel Wing. Even so, nothing happened. The Steel Wing didn't jerk, Nagini was lying quietly.

"What's this? ..." Harry stared. "Nobody except me can touch this broomstick when it's activated - why doesn't it react to your body?"

"I don't know. But you are my master, so I cannot act against your will. It seems this device senses me as an extension of your will, and treats me as an extension of your body."

Harry shook his head in astonishment. "New wonders every minute ... Don't move, I'll come back - although it might take a while."

Followed by Cho, who had watched this conversation without any comment, he walked to the bulwark of dead dragons, living wizards - and dead wizards.

The first figure they met was that of Snape, kneeling beside a motionless body, small in lifetime, even smaller in death - Flitwick.

Snape looked up. "I never saw anyone shoot spells that fast ... He was incredible - took me by surprise. I think the curse that hit him was meant for me ..."

"I saw him do it - in the exam patrol."

Snape seemed under shock. "Flitwick - fainting from a troll, and then this ..."

Harry shook Snape's shoulder. "Professor - we owe him all the same, and you might have been next ... But you're alive, and the others need you."

Glancing around, Snape could see his colleagues busy with the dark wizards, checking them, disarming them, carefully moving forward. "Yes," he said, his mind obviously returning to the present. "Yes - of course."

He stood up, looked at Harry. "You ..."

"Later, Professor."

Snape nodded, started to walk. After a few steps, his gait became more energetically. Wand ready, he headed toward the other teachers.

A figure appeared between the huge bulks of the dead dragons - Sirius.

"Harry - and Cho, thank God ... Are you okay?"

"Yes ... And you? I saw you coming out."

"I'm fine ... Got a blow, but only stunning. I guess it was your Headmistress who woke me up ... We'll talk later - after these bastards are taken care of." Sirius climbed through a gap, following Snape.

Walking around the next dragon body, they found a group of five, one of them dead - Ron, Hermione, the twins around Charlie's corpse.

Ron looked up, his face wet.

Harry took him, held him, hugged him, feeling his friend's body shake under the sobs. "Ron ... I'm so sorry."

"Harry - " Ron sobbed. "Please go to Hagrid - his corpse, I mean ... He's so alone ... I'd come with you, but I can't ..." He was shaking again.

"It's okay ... I'll do it in a second."

He turned to the twins, saw hard faces, eyes red and swollen. "Fred, George ..."

George said, "Ron's right, Harry, and we feel the same - let's talk later."

Hagrid's dead body was lying face-down on the ground.

Harry rolled it over, studying the face which had relaxed in death, closed the sightless eyes. He sat down. "Hagrid ... you were the first friend I had, and the biggest, until we met Lleyrin, but still the greatest ... And now you're dead, and I have to figure out how's life without ..."

He fell down onto this broad chest, this motionless body, started to cry, cry, quietly, unstopping.

Behind him, Cho's voice said, "Goodbye, li'l bird ... Make sure you'll meet your dragons - wherever you go ..."

Noise from the entrance made Harry look up. The huge figure of Madame Maxime came running.

She reached them, flung herself down. "Mon 'agrid, mon 'agrid ... Tu m'as quitté ... sans toi ..." Her voice faded in a pained breath, hands clinging to a dead body, now stroking over a calm face ...

After a moment, Harry touched her shoulder. "Madame - est-ce que vous voulez rester seul avec lui?"

The Beauxbatons Headmistress recognized him. "Oui, 'arry - si vous avez trouvé le temps de dire Adieu ... Vous étiez un ami - un des rares amis de lui ..."

He nodded. "Oui - il était mon premier ami ... Mais j'ai dit ce-que j'avais le besoin de dire ... Il y a des autres morts." He stood up.

Walking back, hand in hand with Cho, he found the place empty where Charlie's body had been. So it had been moved inside.

Coming toward the entrance, they saw another figure appearing - Almyra.

She ran the few steps, had her arms around Cho. "You're okay - I'm so glad to see you."

Before Harry found time to watch this outburst of other people's emotions, Almyra grabbed him, hugged him. "Oh, Harry."

Hugging her back, he asked, "Did you meet the Weasleys?"

She nodded, then separated from him. "Yes - I saw Charlie - his corpse, I mean."

He studied her face. "How ..."

Almyra had understood, shook her head. "There was a kind of 'maybe', in the future - except there is no such future any longer ... I feel sorrow, yes, but right now I could shout, or cry - seeing you two alive and well."

She looked at Cho, beaming. "I saw your attack ... Incredible!"

Cho's face showed deep satisfaction. "Not at all ... You're the one in first place who should know - I'm always going for the throat."

Remembering the scene, Harry suddenly remembered something else. His hand hit his forehead.

"My God - Cho, we didn't even use Lleyrin's powder ... Everything was happening so fast ..."

Cho interrupted him. "Didn't you? ... Well, I did - the moment this ship broke through the water ... What do you think made me act like that? - It wasn't exactly my usual style, was it?"

A sound came from Almyra, half a giggle, half a sob. Then she had herself under control again, looked at Harry. "I couldn't see what you did - nobody could see it, there was all this light around ... What happened?"

"Voldemort escaped."

Almyra stared at him. "Are you angry - because Voldemort escaped? ... Harry, give it a rest. - Tell me *why* he decided to flee."

"The two wands did something ... After they were finished, only one wand was left - and it was mine. Except ..."

Almyra had to stop herself before shaking him. "What??"

"Well - it's twice as strong as before, or more ... I guess I could blow this ship out of the water - only problem is, I have to figure out how to do *careful* spells."

Cho said, "He's found something else ... You'll like it, Al - no doubt about that."

"Right," said Harry, feeling Almyra's questioning look. "Nagini - she was on the ship, and she said now I'm her master, and she's at my command ... I couldn't leave her there, not to mention another option."

In disbelief, Almyra asked, "Did I get that right? - You've stripped Voldemort of his wand, and of his snake, and that's why you're so upset?"

"Not really - but it feels better than thinking all the time about Hagrid and Charlie and the others, like Flitwick ... Want to see her?"

"Yes, of course!"

They walked back to the lakeside. A massive double ring was lying in the grass, the head coming up at their arrival.

"Nagini, this is Almyra, a friend ... You'll learn more about her later."

The snake's head waved toward Almyra, then back to him. "Your friend has many shapes, master."

Harry glanced up. "Al - she's sensed your Animagus shapes!"

Almyra examined the snake with shining eyes. "Fantastic ... and clever too - what a finding."

Only now, Harry realized - Almyra had responded to his words. Eager to get confirmation, he asked, "So I spoke English, right?"

"Huh? ... Oh, of course - yes, you spoke English." Almyra's eyes widened. "Harry - can you control it?"

"Don't ask me - maybe I've got something else from Voldemort, or his wand, or his snake ... As long as it works, I don't care."

"Where will you keep her?"

"Good question." He looked at the snake. "If you weren't so incredibly big, things would be a lot easier."

"My size is the result of an engorgement charm, master. It was done by my former master, so I could provide more fluids for him. Genuinely, I am much smaller."

Harry stared, speechless.

After a moment, he asked, "Doesn't it hurt, to be bigger? ... Or would it hurt to reduce you again?"

"No, master. For snakes, the usual problem with engorgements does not occur - legs, arms, necks, all these joints and ankles."

"Hmm ... You seem to know a lot about magic. Do you have magical power of your own?"

"I don't know what is normal or magical, master. I have some abilities, but maybe all snakes have them."

"Abilities? ..." Harry felt like in a dream. "Which, for instance?"

"It is difficult for me to answer this question, master. They feel entirely natural to me, so I don't know what is special or common."

"You have sensed shapes in Almyra ... Can you sense things in humans?"

"Yes, master. I feel them."

"Do you feel if they're evil, or good?"

Nagini's voice seemed almost apologetic. "I don't know what is evil, master, or good. I sense truth, or a lie, but I cannot tell you if the truth is evil or the lie is merciful."

A thought struck Harry. "Nagini - you've just earned yourself a job ... There are a lot of wizards to be interrogated - with your help, we can verify what they say."

"It is satisfying to know I can serve my master, in exchange for the covering of my own demands. As for those wizards, I was present in many conversations between my former master and them."

"Our Headmaster will listen with interest ... Now let's see how we can make you a little smaller." Harry threw his wand, registering an unusual clumsiness. "I'm a bit reluctant ... With this super wand, you might end up as an earthworm - that's not what we have in mind."

Almyra had watched him. "The winning wand ... Let me see, Harry."

He held it up. "Here - looks the same as ..." He stopped, staring at his own wand.

It was longer than before - obviously the reason why he had trouble getting it out of his cloak. The part at the tip was darker, not the light grey of holly but almost black ... maybe blackthorn.

A voice resurfaced in his memory. "... *thirteen and a half inches, very powerful, Mr. Potter ...*" Mr. Ollivander had said these words, talking about the sibling.

Two and a half inches more - pretty much the size of that black piece at the top. He examined it closer. The wand changed seamlessly from holly to blackthorn, or whatever kind of wood this was.

His fingers felt the piece, not sensing any dent, any disruption. This brilliant light had ...

Suddenly, the black piece was in his left hand. His right held a light grey wand of eleven inches - holly from end to end.

Cho smiled. "Your old wand, Harry - and an attachment if power's all that counts."

He held the piece at the tip. It snapped in - fixed like ink in a parchment, dentless, only the change of colour showing the difference. He tried to take it away. It held, hard, unbending.

How had he ... then he knew.

Hand at the headpiece, he imagined the light again. The piece fell off into his hand. Beaming, he said. "Got it ... A Black Patronus, or something like that ... Now we can put Nagini straight."

"What?" Almyra's face showed alarm.

"Calm down - it's okay." Harry pointed. "*Reducio!*"

In the grass laid a snake, brilliant as before, still of impressive size, however manageable.

"How do you feel, Nagini?"

"Lighter, master, and not as hungry as a moment before."

"That's good - the quantities you'll need now aren't a problem at all." He heaved her up, feeling surprise at the considerable weight. "Ring around my body - and be careful with my ribs."

"Certainly, master."

Snakes couldn't grin, could they?

The snake felt warm, dry, smooth, and heavy, like a thick coat of massive weight. Her head was on his shoulder. He grabbed his Steel Wing. "Ready? ... Let's go."

Walking along, Cho said, "I can't await hearing their comments if they see you coming ... There's nothing like a little fun at the end of a long day."

"Now you've got two pet animals," said Almyra, "Hedwig and Nagini."

Hedwig ... Hagrid's present. Harry's eyes started to burn.

Almyra saw it. "I'm sorry - it was a stupid remark, Harry."

He choked. "No, it wasn't ... I have to get used to the thought, although it may take some time."

An idea was forming in his mind. He pondered it, knowing instantly it was the right thing. "AI?"

She glanced at him.

"Nagini's not a pet animal, not more than Sirius for me, or ..."

"... or AI for me," completed Cho.

"Right ... And Hedwig - I can't be a partner for Hedwig ... But I know who can be."

Two faces spun around, looked at him - Cho's, showing the first signs of a beaming smile, Almyra's, a worried expression ...

"Harry," she said, almost choking, "you can't do that ... She was Hagrid's present ..."

"Yes - and I'll always remember ..." He had to steady his voice. "But that's what I mean - a pet can be a present, while Hedwig's more than that, and deserves the best life she can have ... Hagrid would be the first to agree, the way he had it with animals. And besides, I would of course come to ask for a letter."

Almyra swallowed.

"Then - we still have to ask Hedwig what's her opinion, but I know what she'll answer, and you know too, don't you?"

The faintest nod from Almyra.

"So?"

Almyra beamed at him. "Yes ... Thank you, Harry, it's so ... If you hadn't that snake around you, I would ..."

Cho was grinning. "Sister and brother - fine and well, but ... Sometimes, a snake comes in just handy."

32 - Never the Same Again

Returning to the entrance, they found half of the squad waiting for Viktor, heard that the squad leader was busy collecting the others. A task would await them, except Viktor had not yet revealed details.

Seeing Harry and Cho, the squad members came forward to surround them, to congratulate, to pat shoulders ...

Then they saw Nagini.

"Relax," called Harry. "This is Nagini - abandoned by Voldemort, she decided I'm her new master ... What could I do?"

Almyra, her hand on Nagini's head, grinned toward the others. "You won't be frightened by such a beautiful snake, would you?"

They were, actually - still more of being teased by a girl, not even a squad member, rather flying by herself ... Then Angelina made the first step forward, and the tension broke.

Bob inspected the snake. "Harry - you're simply in the wrong house ... You should be Slytherin, it would fit better."

"Yeah," replied Harry, "that's actually what the Sorting Hat said."

He had done it - he had managed to shut up Bob, who stood there, a speechless stare in his face. In some sense, this felt like the greatest victory of the evening.

Viktor appeared, followed by the twins.

Harry stepped forward. "Fred, George - are you okay?"

"Well," replied Fred, "Viktor has a job for us - better than sitting around."

The twins glanced at Nagini. No remark came, not even a question. Clearer than words, this non-response gave Harry the answer.

"Squad - attention!"

They looked at Viktor.

"Your task is to find the Firebolt attackers who've been shot down ... There might be a survivor, and that's why we have to do it now - find them, and if someone's still alive, bring him here so he can be treated."

Protest, somebody calling, "Are you mental?"

It made Viktor furious. "We're no dark wizards, right? ... It's one thing to shoot an attacker - it's something totally different to let an injured person die, just because it's dark and we're tired."

Some faces looked ashamed. Cho shouted, "No, Viktor - we're no dark wizards, we're light ones."

Laughter. Viktor calmed down.

Adrian Pucey, easily the biggest in the squad, called, "Mind you, Viktor - light, not to be confused with lightweight."

Chuckling, Harry suppressed a reply. This issue was a bit sensitive while within pounding reach of Cho, particularly so if she was still under the influence of Lleyrin's dope - with or without a snake around him.

Almyra asked, "Can I help? - My night sight ..."

"Our third teammate," grinned Cho. "C'mon, get dressed - er, shaped, I mean."

What followed gave Harry the most frightening experience of the day, would nest in his thoughts for weeks to come, and some of it forever. The first minutes, however, were almost funny.

Reaching the area in which they had to find ten bodies, above which Almyra was sailing as an owl through the night, he threw his wand. "*Lumos!*"

A strong beam shot to the ground, cutting a circle with sharp contrasts of light and darkness.

Cho giggled. "Harry, you look like a landing aeroplane."

Shouts ahead indicated the first finding.

Coming closer, Harry saw two of the Hufflepuff Chasers standing around a body - another twin team, as long as their third teammate would remain in the hands of Madam Pomfrey.

"He looks dead," said one of them, "but how do we know for sure?"

Right, how ... Then Harry knew.

Touching down, he bent over the corpse, saw an unknown face, traces of blood under the nostrils and at the ears. "Nagini," he asked, "can you tell me whether he's alive or dead?"

"There is no life in him, master."

Harry looked up. "The snake can sense it ... He's dead."

The Hufflepuff Chasers shot glances of admiration and respect to the snake, then started to carry the corpse toward the building.

Naturally, Harry had to come for each finding, confirming one dead after the other, quickly losing the good humour gained from the last minutes. It wasn't pity he felt, it was a growing sadness - all these dead wizards, dead like Hagrid, and Charlie ... In death, the differences between an evil attacker and a honest defender were astonishingly small.

Draco Malfoy's corpse was a surprise to him - though only for a moment. It never had been a question, Draco would be part of the attacking forces, and quite obviously his choice would have been a Firebolt.

Harry looked at the blood-smeared face. For years, it had overshadowed his vision of Hogwarts - this face together with Snape's. And now was Snape fighting side by side with him, and the face on the ground would never again sneer, or distort in hate ...

"I said farewell to him."

Recognizing Bob's voice, Harry looked up. But it was Cho who answered first. "And I said it to his father."

Harry nodded. "None of them would've changed."

Minutes later, they reached another finding. The body was glittering - traces of a dust bomb. The twins stood there, looked at Harry. "Our work - be careful with the dust."

Harry bent down. "Nagini?"

"He is alive, master, although not awake. But this is no unconsciousness."

"He's dreaming," said Harry, wonder in his voice.

"Really?" George was smiling. "That's good ... Half an hour ago, we did what we could to kill them - but now that it's over, I was asking myself where's the difference between them and Charlie ..."

Fred nodded. "We bombed two - one dead, this one alive ... We'll never know who did whom - and we'll make sure we won't find out, because that's the last thing we want to know."

"Yeah," replied Harry, "I can imagine."

"Harry?" Cho's voice.

Glancing up, he saw her pointing toward the sky. An owl was flying a circle, then went forward.

They followed Almyra, stopped when she flew another circle. Lighting with his wand, Harry saw the body. He twisted - the eyes had blinked, then closed in the sharp light.

Touching down, he didn't need Nagini. A man's voice said, "Are you coming to rescue me?"

"Yes."

"That's kind ... But you're too late - my God, how late."

"We couldn't come earlier ... Anyway, our doctor witch can do miracles - how do you feel?"

"You got me wrong - I wasn't complaining about you ... I messed it up all by myself, although with the gentle help of Voldemort. And now I feel nothing - I think my spine's broken."

"Oh - then we shouldn't move you ..."

"Don't bother - it's over soon enough ... Who are you?"

"I'm Harry Potter ... Who are you?"

"I had the feeling ... My name is Geoff McKinnon - nice to meet you, Harry Potter, after all that time ... Say, did you meet Voldemort today?"

"Yes."

"And you're here, which tells me enough ... Is he dead?"

"No - he disappeared."

"Yeah, that's his trademark, as soon as it starts to get hairy ..." The man's voice turned mockingly. "But don't worry, you'll get him eventually ... At least, it gives me some time without this company in hell."

"You're not dead! Madam Pomfrey can ..." Harry stopped, seeing the man's shaking head.

"Save it," said the wizard. "Even if this lady can cure a broken spine, what good is it? No, thanks - I've messed it up, and it took a hard fall to realize that ... Harry Potter, please do me a favour - make an end, quick and clean."

Horrified, Harry looked at the figure.

McKinnon's spoke to him in a reassuring tone. "I know what I'm saying, and I'm serious ... It's an act of mercy, and for all I know, Harry Potter, you have the nerve and the mercy I'm asking for."

Harry swallowed. "Wait a second."

Toward Nagini, Harry said, "He asks me to make him die - only I don't know how to do it ... Do you see a way?"

"The Killing Curse, master."

"But I don't have the evil power to do it!"

"Your new wand has the power, master, so it is under your control."

Shuddering, Harry looked at his wand with the dark top. Nagini seemed to know what she was talking about. He had inherited the Killing Curse ...

The wizard said, "So you can talk with that snake too - something else in which Voldemort wasn't as unique as he wished to be ... Anyway - will you do me the favour, Harry Potter?"

"Isn't there anything to change your mind, Mr. McKinnon ... You know, Dementors won't be used any more, neither as ..."

"I have just one wish left - to die now, before it really starts to hurt ... So if you can do it, I'll be grateful, and my last words should be, 'Thank you, my boy'."

Harry stood up, made a step backward. "Ready, Mr. McKinnon?"

"Ready ... Thank you, my boy." The wizard closed his eyes.

Harry pointed. "*Avada kedavra!*"

A green flash, strong and hard as the lighting beam before, shot through the air, hit the wizard, disappeared in his head. The face relaxed.

Harry stepped forward again. "Nagini?"

"His life is gone, master."

Harry slumped down as if kicked, stared at the corpse. McKinnon's face looked considerably more peaceful than a minute before. Still ...

A hand at his shoulder. He glanced up.

Cho said, "In Chinese culture, suicide is the last honour - and if someone needs help to do it, it's the last honour to receive ... You had the mercy, Harry - and I love you for that."

"Gimme a minute, Nagini."

When the snake had rolled down in the grass, Harry stood up and came into Cho's waiting arms. His crying was short, much shorter than at Hagrid's corpse, except somehow this seemed the only difference.

* * *

Climbing the stairs to the Entrance Hall, Cho turned to Harry. "Trip's over - now I have to pay for Lleyrin's dope ... I'll just reach my bed - good night, Harry."

He kissed her. "Sleep well."

Almyra took Cho's shoulders. "Let's go ... See you tomorrow, Harry."

He watched them disappear, checked his own state. Tired, yes, for sure - only wide awake.

In the Entrance Hall, he saw Ron at the desk, writing. So he too had preferred work before drowning in sorrow, and work was there enough - registering prisoners, corpses, wands, Firebolts - writing to no end.

Somebody was sitting at Ron's side - a girl, somehow familiar. At this moment, her face came up. Janine.

Harry reached her. "Janine! - I'm so glad to see you here, with ..."

His glance fell on Ron who looked up, a mix of sadness and happiness in his face. "Yes," said Ron, "with ... It wasn't that difficult, Harry - not now."

"Oh, Ron!" He tried to grab his friend, to hug him.

"Harry! ... Could you drop that snake first?"

"Oh ... She feels so natural already."

A moment later, Nagini was lying on the desk, and Harry could finally hug Ron, and welcome Janine in the traditional French way.

"Well," said Ron, "life goes on, and you realize there's no time like today to put things straight." He was beaming toward Janine, who beamed back.

"Yes," said Harry, his voice suddenly flat and tonelessly, "life goes on - only sometimes putting things straight means it doesn't."

Ron's head turned sharply. "Harry? What ... Hagrid?"

"No ... We found the Firebolt riders - Nagini could tell us immediately whether they were dead or alive ... Two were still alive."

"Two? ..." The worry in Ron's face deepened. "But there was only ..."

"Yes - the bombed one ... The other had a broken spine, but he was alive. Then ..."

Ron was holding Harry's shoulders. "What?"

"His name was Geoff McKinnon. He said he had messed up, and asked me - asked me to ... Ron - my new wand can do the Killing Curse."

Ron gasped, stared at Harry in consternation.

Janine had followed the conversation. "You did the right thing, 'arry - not many could 'ave done it."

"I know ... *Thank you, my boy* - that's what he said last." Harry swallowed. "I'll be fine ... Seeing you two, that's the best that could happen right now. I'm so happy with you."

Now both were beaming at him.

"There are more students from Beauxbatons," said Janine. "We helped guarding the entrance while the teachers were fighting outside ... You should go inside, 'arry - there you'll find two you know."

Harry's grin returned. "I got it - to leave you alone."

The reply gave a hint of the old Ron. "Don't forget your snake, Harry."

The Great Hall was full. But more spectacular was the view of the teachers' table - seat by seat, strange faces were sitting there, eating, drinking, around the table watched by Goblins, their weapons ready.

Dark wizards - captured, rescued, fed, afterwards probably sent downstairs into a dungeon.

Glancing around, Harry could see students of the younger classes. Dumbledore had lost no time to re-establish normalcy as much as possible. True, there was no time like today ...

"'arry!"

He saw a hand wave. A second later, he saw two smiling faces - Gérard and Marie-Christine.

"Hello - so we meet again."

A moment before, every seat had been occupied. Had it been the sight of Nagini? Anyway, he could sit down.

Talking French, Gérard said, "My dear 'arry - I'm so proud ... Now I can say, I fought side by side with 'arry Pottère - only mine was inside and yours outside."

Harry laughed. "It wasn't that much different - some more snakes outside, as you can see."

"You must tell us everything - we saw some light, that was all ... Where did you find this magnificent snake?"

"Her name's Nagini. She was Voldemort's snake, but she was also our lucky factor before - she told us about the attack ... So I couldn't leave her on that ship, could I?"

Marie-Christine had the first opportunity to speak. "And Voldemort?"

"He escaped."

Into the stunned silence, Harry said, "But first he lost his wand - his and mine merged into one ... Look." He showed his wand with the new head.

Marie-Christine said, "I'm dying to hear ..." stopped seeing his face. "Pardon, 'arry - what a foolish remark."

He waved. "It's okay."

Gérard said, "I saw him die, 'arry ... I deeply regret what I said at the ball - 'agrid was a man with a Giants' heart and courage."

"Thank you, Gérard ... Yes, he wasn't clever, but he had ..." Recalling Gérard's words, Harry stopped himself, then said thoughtfully, "You know what - you've found what should be written on Hagrid's grave - 'A man with a Giant's heart and courage' ... Gérard, you have style, really."

Incredible - Gérard blushed.

Marie-Christine saw it. "Mon dieu, Gérard - nobody will believe what I'm seeing ... Maybe it doesn't make you look better, but certainly more amiable."

The blushing deepened.

Harry smiled. "With all those deaths, the living can see things more clearly, right?"

Now Marie-Christine's face went pink.

"As members of the Hogwart defence, you are both entitled to hear the full story - plus a private conversation before or afterwards, to cover details of scientific relevance." Harry grinned. "But not today ... I have to find Dumbledore - he must know about Nagini as a witness, and I have to find Lupin ... Can we meet Saturday? I'd like to invite you to the Gryffindor house, although there'll be a hard competition from the other three."

Marie-Christine's eyes were shining. "Thank you - accepted immediately ... But one last question, since you mentioned Lupin - I wonder why the Dark Forces didn't send Dementors. Do you know more?"

"Yes." It seemed so long ago. "They did, actually, and Giants too ... It was them what the wizards in the train were waiting for - except they never made it past our own Giants."

Gérard said, "And you saw it, yes?"

Harry nodded.

"And you helped them, yes?"

"Yes - Cho and I found them just in time ... There were so many Dementors, and they're resistant against Quarterstaffs - but not against a Patronus."

Marie-Christine asked, "Did you make them flee?"

"Those who still were alive, yes."

Filling another silence, Harry said, "The result was that Lleyrin and I - well, Gérard, please say never again something against Lleyrin, at least not with me around."

Gérard twisted. "Certainly not, 'arry - but why?"

"According to this bond, and according to Giants' ethics, I would be obliged to kill you ... That's not my intention."

Gérard's smile came a bit forced. "I fully agree - let's drink to that."

"But only juice!!"

The tension washed off in their laughter.

* * *

Harry had to wait still some time before he saw his chance to talk with Lupin or Dumbledore. His weariness was growing, slowly, he felt his mind calm down as well. Death and loneliness, love and friendship - even the strongest emotions could be stored away, to be examined more closely some day soon.

Then he saw both teachers together.

They recognized him, were about to pass with a wave, stopped suddenly - thanks to Nagini, no doubt.

"Harry," said Dumbledore, "what I can see tells me we have to talk now ... Let's go to my office."

Harry wondered - what would be Fawkes' reaction, with Nagini around his body?

He shouldn't have worried. The phoenix was up in no time, accepted the other shoulder as gladly, was sending a wave of calmness and contentment stronger than ever.

Registering it, Dumbledore said, "You're certainly Fawkes' favourite, Harry, and for good reason, but today it's beyond any measure ... Do you know why?"

"Yes, I think I know ... Look at this, Professor." He showed his wand.

Dumbledore's eyes were sparkling fire. "I might guess, but - tell us, Harry."

He summarized the events of the evening, starting with the Giants and his Patronus, raising a burning satisfaction in Lupin's face. Then he described the fight of the wands and Voldemort's disappearance, and how he had found Nagini.

Dumbledore nodded. "After what she did for us, whether voluntarily or not, this was only appropriate, Harry ... Although she looks smaller than I remember - what do you think, Remus?"

"Yes, much smaller." Lupin looked at Harry. "Did you shrink her?"

"No, Prof - it was only a reduction ... She was engorged all the time."

The two wizards looked at each other, then started to laugh.

Harry felt too tired to join them, and too concerned about the news, to give them more than a few seconds. Then he said, "Professor - Nagini knows when someone is lying ... And she has witnessed many conversations with these wizards."

"Then you'll have a job tomorrow," replied Dumbledore, sobering up quickly. "Interrogations - but let's not discuss the details now."

"There's something else, Professor ... Nagini could tell us which of the Firebolt riders were dead, and which still alive ... And there was one ..."

Fawkes had sensed it first. His aura intensified feelingly.

"His name is - was - Geoff McKinnon. He was alive, although with a broken spine. He asked me to - to end his life ... Then we talked, and he asked me again, so - I asked Nagini, and she said my new wand could do it, and ... She was right."

Dumbledore's hands grabbed Harry's. "So he found peace, Harry, thanks to your help."

"Yes ... He said, 'Thank you, my boy' ..." Harry turned to Lupin. "Prof, it feels right what I did, and I'll be fine - in a while, only ..."

Lupin said, "You feel sorrow, Harry, and that's only good ... More, it tells you something important - the Killing Curse didn't mark you. As a result of the events, you have gained another quality - and like all the others, it's under the control of your own self."

"You mean - if I would have known, I could have killed Voldemort?"

Lupin's head shook violently. "That's not what I said - honestly, I cannot answer your question, although my feeling tells me you were right not to try ..."

Dumbledore said, "Absolutely ... Imagine - it was love that defeated Voldemort, and will protect you in the future. Remus is right - you'll find a way to finish Voldemort through his own decision, and that will be the true end ... Doing McKinnon the favour he asked for is something totally different, there is nothing evil about that."

"You mean - not the curse is evil, only the purpose?"

"Exactly," replied Dumbledore, beaming. "As little as it matters now, Harry - even with Nagini around you, you're still a true Gryffindor."

"That reminds me, Professor - er, what's going to happen with the dragons, I mean, with their bodies?"

"I was thinking of the lake ... A kind of present for the merpeople down there - it will improve our relations even more. The four bodies would be worth a small fortune when minced professionally, but that's our least worry now ... And besides, I know where to get compensation from ... Why do you ask, Harry?"

Dumbledore's face looked very much as if he knew the answer already.

"Nagini's hungry, and I didn't know anything else ... It felt like a sacrilege, but ..."

"Here too, it's the purpose ..." Dumbledore stood up. "Then let's do it now - the sooner Hogwarts returns to normal, the better."

They weren't alone outside, though the only people alive.

Harry watched as Dumbledore, world's most famous dragon expert, walked to the tail of the nearest corpse, that of the Swedish Short-Snout, and used his wand like a scalpel, cutting a piece of arm's length.

Harry asked Nagini, "Can you handle it?"

"Yes, master, although with such a piece, it will take days until I can move again."

"Then let's do with a smaller piece for today, because tomorrow you have to be awake - the big piece will be the reward ... How much can you eat today?"

"The size of a rat, master, not more."

Harry looked at Dumbledore, "Please, Professor - a small piece for today, rat size."

While Dumbledore was cutting, Lupin said, "Talking about rats - nobody has seen a trace of Wormtail, right?"

"No ... Small wonder, he's not the fighting type."

"True, not if he has a choice ... But it means Voldemort still has a skilled servant."

A nasty thought.

Dumbledore came with a hand-sized piece. "Here ... the merpeople won't miss that."

Harry took it - it wasn't worse than seeing Crookshanks feeding. "Nagini - dug in."

"My master is caring, giving me the noblest food I ever had." The snake's fangs closed over the piece, choking it slowly along her body.

"Now then," said Dumbledore. His wand was pointing toward the dragon.

"Professor - wait a second, please."

The Headmaster turned.

"Er - I'd like to try this super wand ... I mean, normally I'd never be able to move such a mass."

"Let's see, Harry." Dumbledore smiled.

"Yes ... What is it for them, *Mobilidraco* or *Mobilicorpus*?"

"Corpus ... Draco would be an attempt with a living dragon, Harry."

"Thanks, Professor." He pointed. "*MOBILICORPUS!!*"

As if kicked from below, the body jumped up, hung in the air.

Harry gasped, "Oh my God ..." With a thump, the body whacked down, letting the ground tremble.

"That's a lesson, Harry - power is one thing, and concentration and control is another."

"Yes, Professor." Harry felt like a second-year.

"Aside from that - I'm deeply impressed ... Remus, what do you think?"

Lupin's face showed awe. "I think Harry should be very, very careful with this wand ... And I think we have to talk about a special training - but not today."

Try as he might, Harry was unable to squeeze another hint from Lupin's lips. However, in his tired state, curiosity was burning with a small flame.

A few minutes later, the ground was empty, and the last waves were rolling out at the lakeside. With his second try, Harry had managed - of course selecting his old acquaintance, the Hungarian Horntail.

* * *

It was the next morning. After a short night, this morning had started with a quick and unceremonial breakfast, followed by Dumbledore's instructions. Now Harry sat with his fellow members of the *Hogwarts Commission* in the Entrance Hall, waiting for the next delinquent to be interrogated.

The commission included seven members, none of them a teacher, a fact which no longer felt unusual after the recent events. However, only six of them were students.

Sirius Black was Head Commissioner, enjoying his task as little as the others. But Dumbledore had left no doubt - the man with the most experience in imprisonment was the obvious candidate for the job of a *District Attorney* - or what came closest to it in Hogwarts, normally a rather small district.

Ron was the natural second - after all, this had to do with a growing pile of parchments - although, to Ron's great relief, not written by himself ...

... thanks to the third member, Almyra, contributing with a steno pen, and several times with her knowledge of Spanish - the defeated Dark Forces had gathered from all over Europe.

Then came Viktor, representing the executive forces, a role which made him something like a *police chief*. More important was his knowledge of Bulgarian and Russian.

Next was Fleur, still carrying the same hat as before - that of the Beauxbatons Liaisons Officer. In addition, she contributed with her knowledge of French and German.

Harry himself had the role of the *legal consultant* or, more precisely, verification expert. The job was easy since Nagini did the work - she told him when the interviewed wizards were lying, and when they said the truth.

Last came the representative of the other side, playing the lawyer for the dark wizards - Hermione. She had volunteered no more than the others, however Dumbledore's choice proved right, Hermione did this job well and with seriousness.

For Harry, seeing Hermione in the opposite role had felt awkward only for minutes. Then, the endless procession of timid faces, hanging heads, hearing their miserable motives, their poor excuses, had united them again in a feeling of sickness and disgust.

Aside from the recording of personal data and confessions, their task was to separate the makers from the followers. Dumbledore intended to send the lightweights home - today, using the Hogwarts Express, and a frog's fart for Ministry opinions. In this judgment the Headmaster was joined by all members of the Committee.

The next wizard arrived, escorted by the two Goblins who served as attendants.

Provided he didn't make trouble, and mainly thanks to Sirius' little trick, he would be done within five minutes. Sirius was their spokesman.

"Prisoner, sit down."

The man slumped on the chair, looking at the floor.

"Miss Granger, at your side, is your legal advisor. She will hold your rights - within the narrow bounds of your situation, and our own."

A quick glance to Hermione, then the head was down again.

"Are you hungry, prisoner?"

The head snapped up, some hope in the face. "Er - yes ... sir."

An easy candidate, considering the way he addressed Sirius. Apart from that, it would have been a real surprise hearing anything other than 'Yes' - owing to Sirius' little trick, which worked better with every half hour passing.

"You will have breakfast - as soon as we're finished here. If you cooperate, it will take only a few minutes ... Speak loudly enough for the recording pen, then you'll sit at the breakfast table quickly."

A choking, a swallowing. "Yes, sir."

At this point, after the repeated mentioning of food, most prisoners had trouble from salivating.

"Your name, prisoner?"

"Humbley, sir ... Horatio Humbley."

Harry's attention was at Nagini, although he'd expected her silence about this delinquent. So Humbley spoke the truth - otherwise, Nagini would say, "Not true, master," and Harry would use the remark he thought most appropriate to get the wizard moving. The snake was very attentive, no longer weak and demure, the dragon meat's effect nearly miraculous - naturally so, with dragon blood.

"Your home address?"

"Er - Little Hangleton, sir ... Main Street twelve."

A town fellow of Voldemort! A first today.

"Do you admit having attacked the School of Hogwarts, with the intention to kill its residents, under the leadership of the person known as Voldemort?"

"No ..."

Harry kept silent, however nobody looked surprised - not with this wretched guy.

"Yes, it's true, I've helped him ... I mean, I came here to curse you - but I'd never kill nobody, sir, not me."

"Would you have stopped someone from killing Hogwarts people?"

Hermione was ready. "I protest, sir - that's a hypothetical question."

Before Sirius could grant her protest, the wizard spoke. "No, I won't ... They'd have killed me too."

"What was your motive, prisoner, to help Voldemort?"

"He threatened me."

Hearing his new companion, Harry selected number five in his collection. "C'mon, Humbley, be honest - your food's waiting."

The guy looked at him, pleadingly. "It's true, sir - only ... He promised me some money, too."

What a rare combination - a threat and a promise.

Sirius took over again. "How much?"

"He said Hogwarts is rich, and I'd get my share."

And dullness.

"Prisoner, what can you offer to compensate for the damage you've brought to Hogwarts, and its people, and the families of those who died fighting you and your accomplices?"

This was Dumbledore's trick - not exactly blackmailing, not far apart either. But the Headmaster was determined to compensate the families of the deads, including humans, Giants, Goblins.

Although not from this poor fellow.

"I don't know, sir ... I'm in debts, that's why I agreed ... I'll do what you tell me, sir ..."

"Do you have property?"

The head was shaking. "No, sir."

"Horatio Humbley, our decision is this ... You will deliver five day's work to a charity union, or the church, what's convenient. - Otherwise, you are free, and you'll return home this afternoon ... Do you accept the judgement?"

Disbelief, then hope. "Yes, sir ... thank you, sir."

Other cases had been more interesting, and more profitable in terms of compensation, while many were almost duplicates. It was a disillusioning experience to see the amorphous bulk of *Dark Forces* separate into single figures - except of course for the real Death-Eaters.

The next one took them only a minute. When he was sitting, and Sirius asked him the first question, the answer was short and informative. "F... you."

"This Commission decides to continue the trial three days from now ... Until then, the lack of food may have improved your cooperation, prisoner ... March off!"

The next one seemed extremely cooperative, smiled approvingly at Hermione, was all good manners and easy-going - until Sirius asked for his motives.

"It sounded like an adventure," answered the wizard, whose name was Abner Gusley. Next instant, he twisted around at Nagini's hissing, fright in his eyes.

"Stop that crap!" snarled Harry. "Try again."

Sweat appeared on the man's temples. "Sir - it's true ... I didn't come to kill anyone - I didn't come for money either ..."

A moment of silence. None of the commissioner's faces was turning to Harry, although each of them were waiting for his next words.

Nagini's hissing stopped.

"Agreed," said Harry, "you weren't interested in killing or stealing ... Then what exactly was your motive?"

"As I said ... some - er, fun."

A quick glance to Harry told Sirius at least it wasn't a lie. "What kind of fun?" he asked.

Abner Gusley no longer looked alert. A moist film was covering his pink face.

Into the waiting silence, Fleur asked, "Prisoner, did you come for sex?"

Seeing his face provided all answer they needed.

As so often, Hermione was the first to react. She wheeled around toward Sirius, disgust in her face. "Sir, do I have to represent this - er, *fun-lover*?"

Sirius sighed. "Please, Miss Granger - you'd do us a great favour because otherwise we'd have to hear him again ... The Commission would highly appreciate if you could manage."

Not looking at her client, Hermione said, "Well ... Okay, go ahead."

Sirius growled, "We can skip the question about your preferences in your victim's age, prisoner - this Commission doesn't bother to distinguish between a rapist and a child molester."

Viktor seemed to remember the man's smile toward Hermione, only minutes ago. He turned to Sirius. "Sir, put him back to the others and let them know - they'll solve the problem for us within minutes."

When Sirius didn't answer immediately, the honourable Abner Gusley fell on his knees. "Please, sir, don't do it ..."

At least, his confession filled the parchment as quickly as Almyra's pen could follow.

Sirius stood up. "Abner Gusley, the severity of your crime is beyond this Commission's scope. You will be held prisoner, to be put before the Grand Jury of the wizard community ... This is no judgement, so we don't need your acceptance ... You were promised a breakfast - may it turn to ashes in your mouth."

Hermione didn't feel like protesting.

When the attendant had escorted Gusley out of the hall, Viktor said, "Now I could do with a break."

"Think twice," replied Sirius. "If we have a break now, it'll be our lunch break ... Better we do a few more of the average kind before thinking about food."

Viktor hastened to agree.

Luckily, the next candidates turned out unspectacular and less sickening, the usual mix of greed, frustration, aggression, and prejudice. Then the Commission had its lunch break - all but Sirius feeling guilty, looking at their dishes while the prisoners still had to wait for the first food of the day.

"Oh, c'mon," said Sirius, "yesterday that lot would have kicked in your teeth, and today you're concerned about a late breakfast?" Still, he didn't protest when they hurried to return as quickly as possible.

The last candidate was the wizard who had been stunned by Viktor. When the Goblins brought him in, Sirius' eyes widened. "Ah ... Mr. Avery, here we meet again."

Clyde Avery, Death-Eater and evil deep to the bone, clenched his teeth. "Sirius Black - the devil as judge ... Charming."

After the man had answered readily for name and address, Sirius said, "You seem very cooperative, prisoner - how's that?"

"There's one improvement over the past months - I don't have to disguise myself any longer, my true feelings, what I think of others, of Muggles, of Mudblood ..."

Hermione's face didn't move. As the day had shown, there were worse things than a simple and clean insult.

"Prisoner, this Commission takes you responsible for the death of two wizards and four dragons, caused by poison curses sent by you, the late Mr. Malfoy, and the fugitive Voldemort ... Do you admit?"

"So he's escaped?" Avery sneered. "That's good news."

"Do you admit?"

"Sure - why not?"

"A third wizard, who had survived the poison attack, was killed immediately afterwards by a Killing Curse. Who shot it?"

"Voldemort."

Nagini kept silent.

"During the next minutes, another wizard, teacher of the Hogwarts school, was also killed by a Killing Curse ... Who shot it?"

"Are you talking about this rapid-fire stunner? ... Well, I guess it was Voldemort too."

"And you didn't kill anyone?"

The wizard looked angry. "It's not that I didn't try - if you want to hear that ... I wish I'd had a clear shot at Snape - I saw him there, except then I was stunned myself ... I'd like to know who did it."

Viktor stared at him, not showing any emotion. "I did it."

"You?? ... You dirty bastard, you're listed in my book! I'll remember you ..."

Clyde Avery's shouting stopped like switched off. His eyes widened, then his hands clutched his throat. He tried to gasp, his face turning bluish, his eyes almost popping.

Seconds later, the blue faded. A sobbing sound - he had breathed successfully. Still, his voice failed to return.

Harry's wand was lying on the desk again. His whisper hadn't passed beyond Almyra sitting next to him, and she didn't move a muscle.

Looking to the steno pen, Sirius said, "The prisoner refuses to answer further questions ... Fine as well."

The wizard was gesticulating, his face turning red, not gaining any attention.

Sirius stood up. "Clyde Avery, this Commission sees you guilty of murder on purpose, and of attempted murder, also of slaughtering four magical creatures of high value ... You will be

held prisoner in the Hogwarts dungeons, to be passed to a regular prison if and when such a place has been built and secured satisfyingly ... As this *certainly* doesn't mean Dementors, don't expect to see the next daylight soon, Clyde Avery ... Your property will be confiscated and used to compensate for the losses you have caused ... Attendant, the prisoner will have his breakfast in his cell - we cannot tolerate a convicted murderer sitting in the Great Hall ... March off!"

The gesticulating had stopped.

Before Harry could resolve the voice lock, the two Goblins took the Death-Eater and escorted him out.

Well, he would hint it to Sirius - later, maybe tomorrow ...

The Commission members yawned, stretched, grateful to have finished this horrible task. Twenty-two prisoners would remain in the Hogwarts dungeons, all the others would be gone as soon as the Hogwarts Express was off.

Harry turned to Sirius. "Say, do you think these confiscations are legal? ... If the Ministry has to be involved, it may take years until we see the first galleon - if any."

"No, Harry." Sirius grinned maliciously. "As for their estate, you might be right. But all of them have considerable bank accounts - and here comes the poetry of justice - all these accounts are managed by Gringotts."

"What else? ... And?"

"I shouldn't have to tell *you* - Gringotts is run by Goblins, actually the Goblins who are mourning the death of a warrior, one of the twelve who fought with us ... Got the picture?"

"Yeah, got it." Harry's expression resembled very much that of his godfather.

* * *

Late in the afternoon came two visitors whom to welcome was a heart-breaking task - Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, about to take home their dead son. Some minutes before they arrived, Ron put Harry aside.

"Listen," he said, "there's something Dumbledore asked me to tell you, in order to get the story straight."

Harry looked at his friend, wondering. "Sounds mysterious."

"No, it's not ... Hogwarts had his helpers insured - a life insurance, understandably at the considerable risk."

"Oh - I didn't know."

"Small wonder ..." Ron grimaced. "And now that Charlie and the others are dead, the insurance will pay. - Got it?"

It dawned on Harry. "You mean ..."

Ron stared into his eyes. "I mean, Dumbledore will inform my parents in a few minutes that the insurance takes effect, and this will be the only version ever heard in our house!"

His head bent down, Ron added, "I have no problem knowing where the money comes from, but for Mum and Dad, the thought would be intolerable ... While an insurance of twenty grand is a simple fact of life."

Harry's eyes widened. In all the sorrow, the thought was some relief. "Got it, Ron ... It doesn't pay for a life, all it does is solving a problem. It has nothing to do with com ... comp - what was the word?"

"Which word?"

Harry felt grateful not to be involved in the first minutes, the arrival of Arthur and Molly Weasley, their meeting with Dumbledore, the family council about the details of Charlie's funeral, where and when to bury him.

He sat waiting in the Great Hall when he saw McGonagall's sign. Dumbledore had offered the guest suite, well known from another occasion that had ended better.

It's now or never, thought Harry. He turned. "Cho? ... Are you coming with me?"

She glanced at him. Her nostrils twisted. "Yes ... Let's go."

This was the second time that Harry saw all living Weasleys together, only today their number was smaller by one.

Mr. Weasley was the quicker part. Harry shook his hand. "Mr. Weasley - I'm so sorry ..."

"Harry ... You must feel the same, with your friend Hagrid - dead like Charlie."

Mrs. Weasley's face looked red, swollen. With her plump body, the contrast to other mothers in Harry's memory could hardly be sharper - Cho's mother, Fleur's mother, even Madame Baillard. Only that all this was meaningless, that Harry's feelings went deeper.

He made a step. "Mrs. Weasley ..."

She grabbed him, hugged him. "Harry, my dear - I'm so glad to see you alive and well ... In all that sadness, it's a relief to know you're safe - you and ..."

Her glance fell on Cho who had come forward, trying to condole, never getting much of a chance.

"You must be Cho Chang ... Mr. Dumbledore told us how you and Harry and Mr. Krum have stopped these evil wizards before they could kill more - and what it was that defeated the Dark Lord, and is protecting our Harry."

Our Harry?

Cho said, "Mine, too."

"Yes, of course, my dear, you're right, and I didn't mean anything different." Mrs. Weasley looked at Harry. "The last time we met, I couldn't warm up too much ..." She looked at Cho. "But it was foolish, I know, and it won't happen again ... Sometimes it's grief that has to open your eyes."

Harry glanced at Ginny. If he could read unspoken messages, Molly Weasley's warming up wasn't limited to far-east immigrants.

"Harry, dear ..."

Mrs. Weasley appeared unusually careful, weighing her words. "Now that poor Charlie is gone, and Fred and George will be out of the house in a few weeks' time, it's so ... I thought ... You know, we spoke with Mr. Dumbledore, and he said there is no longer a need to keep you in Privet Drive ... I don't want to interfere with your relatives, but if you ... I mean, there would be a room waiting for you." She swallowed.

Harry swallowed too. "Really? Are you sure?"

Arthur Weasley said, "I think you mean Dumbledore, since our feelings to you are nothing new, Harry ... Yes, what he said was, Harry and Cho protect each other, so Privet Drive has done its duty." He smiled at Cho. "And therefore it's obvious that you're welcome in our house any time - I mean if Harry ..."

"Call me Cho ... Of course Harry will say yes - he's just speechless."

Their eyes in Mrs Weasley's tear-stained face showed some shining. "In the days ahead, I'll think of the time when you come to visit, and Ron said he'd invite a girl ... I love it with a full house, and a few more girls for balancing out - it's a happy thought."

They were looking at Harry, all of them.

"Er - yes, sure ... I still can't believe it - no more Dursleys ... Thank you, Mrs. Weasley - Mr. Weasley ..."

"Then," said Arthur Weasley smiling, "we have to find a solution - Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, that just won't do."

33 - Awards and Farewells

The Great Hall was humming in expectation. A few seconds ago, the last dishes of the dinner table had disappeared, within moments, Dumbledore would begin with his speech. Harry saw figures not commonly found at the teachers' table - the Goblin who had talked to him, the unfamiliar face of a young man, and the very familiar face of Sirius.

About to ask Hermione who the young man might be, Harry was stopped by Dumbledore's voice.

"When someone has to talk *after* a lot of food," began the Headmaster, "he is likely to encounter some snoring soon." Smiling, Dumbledore looked around. "Considering what I have to announce and report today, I feel safe from that."

There was no laughter, simply because nobody wanted to waste another second before hearing the news.

"My dear students, my dear colleagues - my dear guests and brothers in arms," a nod toward the Goblin, "side by side we fought the Battle of Hogwarts, and together we have won."

Dumbledore's voice burst like a whip. "THE ENEMY IS DEFEATED!!!"

Applause, roaring, shouting, yelling, a deafening tumult of acclaim.

Slowly, it faded, enabling the Headmaster to continue. "As great a victory this is, as small in number our losses, each death leaves a void that hurts. Let us honour those who gave their life in the fight."

Everybody in the hall rose.

Dumbledore held a parchment. "United we stand in sorrow and reverence for our friends and brothers, colleagues and companions, who died for us:

- "Lasson so Quick."
- "Morcene in Jabs."
- "Bruggis of Starlight."

These had to be the Giants.

- "Gurin the Gentle."

Sounded more like a Goblin - the next names would tell Harry.

- "Charlie Weasley."
- "Llewellyn O'Shea."
- "Rubeus Hagrid."
- "Fendergast Flitwick."

After some silence, Dumbledore continued, "We also think of those among the twenty-four Giants and thirty-seven wizards who paid with their life for their lack of courage and decision, rather than greed, hate, and evil."

The agreement wasn't unanimous in the hall, while Harry felt sure - nobody in the squad, nobody of the teachers and students who had helped in the aftermath could hold a different view. Thinking about the numbers, he glanced toward the Goblin - his crew had left gruesome traces in the crowd of dark wizards.

The audience sat down.

"Hagrid and Professor Flitwick, both of which did not leave close relatives, will find their last retreat on a spot near the Forbidden Forest, not far from Hagrid's hut. The funeral will be performed tomorrow two o'clock," Dumbledore's voice became pleading, "and I beg you to limit the number of mourners to those who really want to say goodbye."

This would exclude most of the younger students, some of the older ones, while Harry couldn't think of any teacher not present then.

"Finally," continued the Headmaster, "we remember four magnificent creatures which had to die for our safety, serving with their bodies beyond death - dragons for which our dead dragon guards felt love and commitment, and for which they certainly found names without telling anybody else."

Serving beyond death indeed ... When Nagini had received the large chunk of dragon meat, after the interrogations, informing Harry she would be off duty for days, there was awe in her voice. For the trained ear, a snake voice sounded free of emotion not more than Goblin faces for the trained eye.

Dumbledore started to smile. "After this sad duty, let us come to more pleasant items. First of all, I have to express my own thanks, as well as those of the entire wizarding community, toward Giants and Goblins, ghosts and guests, humans and house-elves - toward everyone who contributed to our common victory."

Dumbledore bowed deeply.

"We could witness so much spirit, so many acts of courage and bravery that it's difficult to honour them - in particular since Giants flatly refuse to accept, as they say, *honours outside a thinking brain*, and since the Goblin warriors on our side declared any medal pale in comparison to the shining but invisible bond between them and our side."

Shining ... Nonsense, thought Harry, seeing some light-eating surfaces before his inner eye.

"Nevertheless - the School of Hogwarts has the great pleasure to assign a few Special Awards for outstanding services." Dumbledore beamed. "The first goes to the Flying Squad as a whole - and thus to each member, be it flying or ground personnel ... Mr. Krum, please come to me as the representative of thirty people who were a cornerstone to our success."

Was a squad member entitled to applaud? Harry didn't care, nor did the others while Viktor stepped forward, shook hands, received the medal that would be placed in the Hogwarts' trophy collection.

"Two Special Awards go to the wizard and the witch who were the first in the front line, breaking ground for the others to follow ... Sirius Black and Minerva McGonagall, please come to me."

McGonagall just had to get up, she was sitting next to Dumbledore. Harry watched his Headmistress, who seemed overwhelmed by her emotions - obviously she hadn't expected this.

When Sirius had received his medal and was about to retreat, Dumbledore held him back, turned to the audience. "For many wizards, Mr. Black is still notorious as the *Prisoner of Azkaban*, who escaped for some evil purpose. It is high time to declare in public - Sirius Black was falsely accused, innocently imprisoned, and the only truth is, he escaped indeed - to save life, and to serve as my personal secret agent in the last twelve months."

With surprise, Harry found himself shouting, waving, jumping, not joined by a majority in the hall, giving proof how many heads still held the wrong picture.

Dumbledore waited for silence. "Now it gets a bit complicated," he said then, "because - but let's do first things first. The action that needs to be awarded is the successful attack toward the three dark wizards on the ship - this was the key to our success. I ask the five squad members to come here."

Harry followed the twins, met Cho, nodded toward Viktor. They stood before the Headmaster, waiting.

"There is a little problem we have to solve. One of these five students received a Special Award already before. Basically there's nothing wrong with a second - however, we certainly want to avoid the impression a Hogwarts Special Award is something you collect in the dozen - like Chocolate Frog pictures."

Roaring laughter.

There was a glittering in Dumbledore's eyes. "This is why I have to ask you first, Harry Potter - what is your opinion?"

Harry needed hardly an instant. "You're right, Professor ... I don't need a second one, that's why I want this one given to Hagrid - he has deserved it, and I can't help but thinking he will know it, and will be happy."

The first to react was Fred. "While on the subject, Professor - as a squad member, I share one too. I want mine given to Charlie, for obvious reasons."

George met his role as the twins' second voice. "True, Professor, and it's similarly obvious that mine has to go to Llewellyn O'Shea."

Viktor didn't hesitate. "Mr. Dumbledore - two awards in five minutes is a bit - er, what I'm trying to say is, please give mine to Mr. Flitwick."

Dumbledore's eyes had switched from speaker to speaker. Now he looked at Cho. "Please, Miss Chang, do me a favour - at least one should really go to the intended person ... I couldn't stand the thought this act of bravery remains unawarded."

Cho nodded. "Yes, Professor - I'll accept mine ... I'm surely glad there is no candidate left to whom it to pass, so I don't need to feel ashamed - but honestly, when Harry called us, I was so scared, I almost ... er, I mean, it feels right to say yes."

Everybody, as it seemed, shared her opinion, most of all the four other candidates, who applauded frenetically while a beaming Cho received her medal.

Dumbledore waited until the five were seated again, then said, "I had planned a few more Awards - four, to be precise, but somehow a few students were quicker ... Normally, a posthumous award always has a bitter taste, but the way it has been done here - so instantaneous, so unplanned, there is not the slightest bit left of a wrong feeling."

Some applause, more faces thoughtful.

"I forgot to mention something in first place," continued Dumbledore, now definitely grinning. "As bad as the recent events have been - as so often, there is something good in the worst ... The School of Hogwarts has found some - er, unexpected resources, and will use them to the greatest effect. That's why, contrary to past occasions, a Special Award is more than just the honour and a medal."

He paused for dramatic effect, then shouted, "Attached to each Special Award is a premium of thousand galleons."

Thunderstruck silence.

Harry glanced to see the twins' reaction. They looked at each other, then shrugged - so what, it said, some other premium was waiting in a vault, and the Weasley parents had a lifelong habit to spend most of their money for their children.

Dumbledore's grinning deepened. "It might be not entirely by accident that I missed to announce this beforehand, since I had some feeling ... However, I'm sure everybody in this hall will agree when I say the passing-over of the four awards applies to the honour and the engraving on the medal, while the premium will be left to the living - those for which the Award was intended."

Watching, Harry saw the twins shrug again, although this time with a wide grin. Since Dumbledore still was waiting for the uproar to fade, he turned to Ron. "Listen, Ron - this premium ... I think the ground personnel is grossly underrepresented in this rain of medals - so we ..."

Ron shook his head. "Forget it - I'm not going to ..."

"Wait - I didn't mean to give the premium to you."

"Oh." Ron turned pink.

"What I had in mind was a split - fifty fifty, and now shut up."

Ron beamed. "Harry ... yes, that's okay. Thanks."

Dumbledore's voice stopped them. "... any misunderstanding takes place, I have to clarify - in case of the squad's Award, it's no question that a full premium goes to *every* member, that is to each of the thirty people."

Ron's face twisted around. He looked at Harry, open-mouthed.

Harry grinned. "Too late, Ron - deal is deal."

Ron turned to Hermione, who had followed their conversation with shining eyes.

She shook her head, smiling. "Viktor's got two premiums, remember? ... I don't feel neglected, Ron, but thanks anyway."

Well, with two dentists as parents, money never had been a critical issue for Hermione.

Dumbledore informed the audience about details of the current state and the next time. Except for twenty-two prisoners somewhere below their feet, all other wizards had left Hogwarts with the train. The Goblins would stay for a while, serving as prison guards - "the most reliable people I can imagine, so I expect politeness toward these our guests, while I will treat any rudeness as a personal insult."

The new resources of Hogwarts included more than money. There were ten brand-new Firebolts, too good to rot in some school inventory, too powerful to be used as training devices for first-years learning to fly. Dumbledore announced this stock would be raised to fourteen, starting as of next year, in which hopefully the next Quidditch match could be performed, the two teams in a match would use these Firebolts, thereby ensuring the winner had won by superior skill rather than from better broomsticks.

Quidditch ... Harry felt a longing for this simple and joyful kind of flying - simple in terms of emotional involvement, not technique. Dumbledore's announcement solved a problem - it was no question, a Steel Wing couldn't be used in a Quidditch match, not if the slightest touch of two players would send them off their saddles.

His attention returned to Dumbledore's announcements.

"... have left two gaps in our rows. One of them is the post of a Charms teacher. For this, we have found a solution of which I wouldn't be surprised if it turns out permanent. Our new Charms teacher ..." Dumbledore's look searched along the teachers' table ...

"... is Madam Hooch!"

Surprise and astonishment. Then what about ...

"Which immediately opens another gap - that of the Flying teacher ... I'm sure the surprise will be more than limited when I announce - the new Flying teacher of Hogwarts is ..."

The shout came from twenty-nine squad members plus Hermione, although not too well synchronized. "VIKTOR KRUM!"

"Exactly! ... This fits well with the reduced involvement in Flying Squad duties. The squad will of course continue to exist, at least till the end of the year, although more as an

Emergency Squad than a team of regular duty. In short - Mr. Krum keeps his old hat and gets the new one in addition."

Hermione was beaming like a Christmas tree.

Harry remembered the conversation at the Delacour dinner table. A teacher at Hogwarts - it had been Hermione's planning, not Viktor's. On the other hand, Flying was a faculty mostly for first-years while otherwise, the task involved almost only Quidditch organization. If Viktor really wanted to raise children and cattle, he would be able to combine both professions - until then, the squad should be history.

"The other gap," said Dumbledore, "is the one opened by the loss of Hagrid. We need a new Keeper of Keys and Grounds ... By some coincidence, this post seems to attract people who did wrong in the beginning and then found their true destination."

Harry had difficulties to follow. Who ...

"There is a young man - his name is Damian Loew. He came to Hogwarts on a Firebolt - if you know what I mean. Although it was only yesterday, to him as well as to others, me included, this seems long ago. Since then, he had time to think it over, and we had the opportunity to talk with him - after Miss Granger had the first and most interesting conversation with him."

Heads turned to Hermione. She showed an expression that might be called non-committal satisfaction.

"Coming to the point - Mr. Loew agreed to take over the post of the Hogwarts Keeper of Keys and Grounds ... His first year will be without payment, as an atonement for his attempted attack, which failed mainly for his unwillingness to do it seriously. This penance was Mr. Loew's own wish, although we feel it appropriate ...

"However - " Dumbledore's voice rose, "should it so happen that, say, three or four months from now, a petition of students or teachers will come to me and say, 'Headmaster, our Keeper has earned our trust and confidence', I wouldn't mind cutting the year to a shorter period."

A blood-red face on the teachers' table showed everybody which head belonged to this Damian Loew.

Harry turned to Hermione. "Is this the prisoner you examined?"

"Yes. He told us everything - including three names of the five attackers who fled ... We'll get them, and he will give testimony."

"What do you think - does it make sense?"

Hermione shrugged. "He's no Hagrid ... But then, imagine how it was when Hagrid got the job, after he had messed up with his pet animal ... Whatever he is, no Dark Wizard, that's for sure."

Dumbledore finished his speech with a request toward students and teachers to increase their contacts with Beauxbatons people. Hogwarts owed them, he said, and since there would be no opportunity to do something official until the end of the year, they were relying on private initiative.

Harry turned to his friend. "That we'll do, Ron, won't we?"

Ron was all smiling. "I guess pretty soon you'll get another invitation to some chateau, for telling stories to a ten-year-old ... I strongly hope you won't forget old friends then."

"Definitely not - although this won't be the next step ... I've invited Gérard and Marie-Christine for tomorrow."

"Uh-oh - what's Cho's comment on that?"

Harry looked innocent. "What do you mean? ... These two are closer than ever - the events have cleared things for them as well."

Just then, Ron seemed to remember something else. "Only them? Why ..."

"These were the only ones I found the time to talk with, you dummy ... Remember what Dumbledore said - *private* initiative!"

Ron nodded, was up next moment, no doubt searching either Fleur or the portkey link.

Harry went to the Ravenclaw table, grinned at Cho. "I like it with the rich and famous - especially if one of them ..."

Obviously quite concerned, she interrupted him. "Do you think it's okay what I did? ... Dumbledore's such a tricky guy - I never expected ..."

"Nor did I - although there's nothing about the money that feels wrong to me, not after all these dark wizards we had to examine this morning, and besides - whatever you did, the money was yours ... The only difference is the medal - but you really deserve it, honestly."

Almyra nodded. "Absolutely."

Cho looked at her. "You fought with the squad."

"So?"

"So you should have been honoured too."

Almyra waved dismissively. "I don't feel excluded, or ignored."

"Maybe so ... But I feel too rich, compared to you. That's why I'd say ..."

"No!!" ... Under no circumstances!" Almyra tried to stare as menacingly at Cho as could be seen the other way around, every now and then, only with less success.

Harry started to laugh.

Cho glared at him. "What's so funny?"

"A minute ago, I had the same conversation with Ron - before we knew the premium goes to *each* squad member."

Cho looked mollified. "And?"

"We split." Harry grinned. "Next second, Dumbledore announces the premium for each of us - you should have seen Ron's face."

"I think I did." Cho turned to Almyra. "Now? ... Split?"

Almyra hesitated only an instant. "No."

"Do I have to get nasty?" growled Cho.

Almyra smiled. "Don't ... Harry might help *me*."

Cho examined Harry's face. "You might be right ... Among Giants, refusing a present is a heavy insult - actually, among Chinese too ... So I'm really mad, that's why I'll go upstairs in a moment and tear this parchment apart - just for revenge."

Harry asked, "Which parchment? ... Oh." A look at Almyra's pink face had given him the answer - a parchment about a loan, for a steno pen.

Almyra seemed very embarrassed. "That's unfair - it's even more than a split."

"Your own mistake." There was deep satisfaction in Cho's voice. "You know me well enough - you had your chance, and you messed up."

"Erm - thank you."

Harry said, "Far be it from me ..."

Cho nodded. "Exactly."

"Far be it from me ... ouch - to interfere with your negotiations, but there's still a short-term transaction due - and now's the right time." He looked at Almyra. "Ready?"

"What ..." Cho stopped. "Of course ... Do you mind me coming with you?"

"We wouldn't go without you ..."

Cho looked pleased.

"... to make sure you can distinguish Hedwig from Al ... Ouch!!"

Reaching the owlery, they found Hedwig awake. Harry was welcomed with a gentle peck, then Hedwig saw Almyra, and turned very excited.

Harry smiled. "Well, that answers any question, doesn't it?" He took the owl. "Hedwig, old girl - we had a good time together, but now I have to take care of a snake - and you've found someone who'd like to share a few night trips with you ... So - thanks for your help all these years."

He turned. "Al, old owl - here, she's yours."

"Thank you." Almyra had only eyes for the owl. "Hello, Hedwig - I'm sure we'll have a good time too, what do you ..."

Harry grabbed Cho's hand. "Let's go."

* * *

Saturday morning, late breakfast, nothing to do - the enemy was beaten, and O.W.L.s - who could seriously think about O.W.L.s on the first free day after a week full of hard work and dramatic events?

Hermione could.

"Honestly," growled Ron, "that girl really can spoil your fun."

Fun? Ron had announced he would - after another cup - be found in the office, busy cleaning up the mess of parchments that had piled the day before, and Harry might call him in time before the guests from Beauxbatons arrived.

What he really meant was, Harry might call him in time before the funeral, which was scheduled at two o'clock.

Sirius came through the hall, reached their table. "Harry - Dumbledore's asking whether you'd find the time for a conversation."

"Something in particular?"

"Oh - well, just the weather, and your educated guess about the favourites in the next Quidditch cup ..."

At least, it had brought back Ron's good humour.

"Got it ... I'm coming."

Entering Dumbledore's office, Harry didn't recognize the figure in the guest chair immediately, his vision further obscured by an excited Fawkes. An instant later, the woman turned, showing two rows of white teeth.

Rita Skeeter.

Dumbledore's eyes were sparkling. "Harry - please sit down. You certainly remember Rita Skeeter ... We are discussing press strategies, and - er, your name came up. So I agreed to invite you, without any commitment, for a first discussion of the issue."

Harry turned the guest. "Then I should call my press agent."

The witch nodded. "Certainly ... Who is it, by the way?"

"Hermione Granger."

"Oh ... I see."

"Only joking." Harry looked at a Dumbledore, who seemed to have trouble keeping serious. "Professor - as far as I'm concerned, there's nothing to ..."

Dumbledore's hand stopped him. "As I said, Harry, this is totally non-committal - in contrast to some other meetings held in this office. Your reaction is no surprise, this was the reason why Rita asked me to be present - she had the feeling otherwise you would flatly refuse to talk with her."

"Well, for once, she's correct."

"Just because it's not yet printed," was the woman's reply. It seemed downright impossible to insult her.

"My dear Rita," smiled Dumbledore, "your cynicism is so heart-warming, and that's why I always forgive you."

For what Harry could see, the press woman took this as a compliment. And slowly, it dawned on him - Dumbledore would give a damn whether Rita Skeeter managed to talk with him, unless he had a personal - or official - interest.

"Professor," he asked, "what's the real reason for this invitation?"

Headmaster and witch looked satisfied, deepening Harry's suspicion. "Rita's interest is obvious," explained Dumbledore, "she wants to write articles about the Battle of Hogwarts, she wants all information she can get - and a bit more."

Rita Skeeter nodded.

"So far," continued the Headmaster, "it's perfectly normal ... I, on the other side, want to achieve a result from this press activity, and suddenly you see Rita and myself in the same boat."

Rita Skeeter began, "What he has in mind, Harry - may I call you Harry?"

"No."

The witch smiled. "What he has in mind, *young man*, is a press campaign to get rid of Fudge."

"Oh ... By the way - considering the alternatives, call me Harry."

The witch smiled more. "It's a pleasure to work with you, Harry - call me Rita."

Harry didn't care much this way or the other, while Dumbledore's request kept running through his mind. He said, "I take it, *Rita* - you want interviews, right?"

"Absolutely, Harry ... You know how a press campaign works?"

"I'm not sure - Rita."

"It's a sequence of hits below the belt, not to forget kicks in the ... Anyway, it's a playing with emotions and prejudices - facts are just good for placing another insult ... *Everybody* knows Fudge's a jerk, only that's not enough. What we need are stories like this - because the Ministry was unable to send Law Enforcement, your friend Hagrid had to die ... See the picture?"

Harry swallowed.

"I'm frank with you, Harry - outside a press article, I'm honest and trustworthy ... I stand to my word - the tricky part is to get it." For a change, Rita smiled at the Headmaster.

Stand to her word ... words - written by a ...

Harry saw his chance. "Okay, Rita - here's what I offer ... Interviews with me and Cho, with Ron, with Almyra, with Viktor *and* Hermione ..."

"You mean I wouldn't get the others without you, Harry?"

It was Dumbledore who answered. "You wouldn't, Rita."

She nodded. "Go ahead."

"... *and* with Nagini."

"Who's Nagini?"

"Voldemort's snake."

In the face of the press witch appeared pure, undiluted greed. "And what do I have to do for these treasures, Harry?"

"Two things ... The first is a gratuity."

Rita Skeeter looked surprised, then her face went wry. "How much?"

"One of these writing pens - for Ron."

She inhaled sharply. "You know what they cost, Harry?"

"No - and I don't want to know ... I just want a pen."

"Hrrmm ... And the second?"

"In the same press campaign, or maybe another one, you clean up Sirius Black."

"The Prisoner of Azkaban?" Rita seemed astonished. "Why?"

"Because he's innocent."

"Who cares about that? ... What's your personal involvement - aside from the fact that everybody thought he was after you?"

Harry didn't answer - any remark felt too risky toward this clever witch.

She beamed. "You're a quick learner, Harry ... Just for your information - making Sirius shine is a key part of the campaign, here you were storming open doors ..."

So her questions had just been an attempt to squeeze him! Well, as she said - he was learning.

Rita's expression turned business-like. "Do we agree, Harry, that I can use the interview material in my own style? I have to hit the crying nerve, and the angry nerve, so I have to tune it a bit."

"So far, we don't agree on anything, Rita - except that Fudge's a jerk."

"You get your pen - for the interviews and free hand with them."

He was hesitating.

"Relax, Harry - I'm going to bite Fudge, not the hand that feeds me ... All I need is the right to turn the answers of a seventeen-year-old with normal taste into some lines of kitsch."

"Yeah, I know exactly what you mean ... that's the problem." Harry's own decision was clear. The others ... He said, "You'll have my answer - our answer - in half an hour ... I need to talk with the others for this *tuning*, Rita."

Fifteen minutes later, he had all of them together in Ron's office. First, he told them what Rita Skeeter wanted and for which purpose, careful not to call her *Rita*.

Hermione didn't say anything, kept looking wonderingly at him.

Ron said "It's certainly a good cause, but you know what you have to expect, Harry, don't you?"

"Yes ... But we get something else."

"What?"

"One of these writer pens - for this office here, to be borrowed every now and then."

Five seconds later, he had their approval.

* * *

The place was full. Row after row, teachers and students stood in a half-circle around the two open graves, Flitwick's to the left, Hagrid's directly in front of Harry. The vicar from

Hogsmeade was speaking, rasping Harry's nerves, making it impossible for him to map these words to Hagrid's picture in his mind.

His composure was raptured further when Fang, the boarhound, started to wail in the nearby hut.

"The Lord has it given ..."

The two coffins looked as if this double funeral was for a grown-up and a child.

"... the Lord has it taken ..."

An emotion was running through the mourners - the traditional words were a bit too literally true, although it had been the Dark Lord ...

"Praise the name of the Lord."

"Amen."

Dumbledore and McGonagall raised their wands, murmured. The two coffins moved, stopped. Slowly, they descended out of view.

Dumbledore stepped forward, stared down into Hagrid's grave. "Farewell, Hagrid, my friend ... I trusted you with my life, and I was right - you gave yours for us." The Headmaster turned to reach Flitwick's grave.

The huge figure of Madame Maxime came forward. She was murmuring in a low tone. It stopped. A dry sob, then she took the shovel. Harry heard the thud of the earth on the coffin.

Fang was howling.

Why didn't they proceed?

Cho pushed him gently, whispered, "They're waiting for you."

His vision blurred, Harry stepped forward. Half turning, he nodded to Ron and Hermione, who came forward, joined him at the open grave. As much as he could see, Hermione didn't look better than he himself, while Ron seemed a bit more composed - maybe you could handle such things better when you had to bury your own brother two days from now.

"Hagrid ... We're here to say goodbye to you ... and to thank you for everything." About to turn, Harry stopped. "And don't worry - we'll take care of Fang ... Bye."

They walked over to the second grave, joined the waiting queue. After a moment, Harry could see clearer.

Hermione asked, "Any idea what to do with Fang?"

"I spoke with Sirius," replied Harry, "that's all that crossed my mind so far ... He said he doesn't even know where he himself will be the next time, so ..."

Ron said, "I was thinking of my parents, but - he's just too big for that small house."

"Yeah - it doesn't fit any better than the idea of Sirius - or Lupin, just because ..."

"I'll ask Grubbly-Plank," said Hermione. "She might have an idea."

Harry let other people pass him in the queue, waiting for Cho. The last reverence for Flitwick would be simpler, but he wanted to do it together with her - after their encounter in the exam patrol, it seemed the only reasonable way.

Then it was done, and they waited until Almyra joined the group.

Harry wanted to have a look at Fang and his water pot. They walked to the hut. Inside, Fang showed excitement at finding so many visitors, to be welcomed with wagging and licking and sniffing.

Harry was grateful when Almyra grabbed the dog - too fragile felt his balance in this hut.

Toward Hermione, Ron asked, "Do you know where Loew will be?"

"No - but I can't imagine him here ... He's not an option either."

Cho said, "I think I know what to do with Fang."

Hermione glanced suspiciously - after all, Cho was Chinese, for them, a dog was ...

Cho saw it, grinned. "Calm down - I mean, I know someone to give him a good place."

Hermione blushed, although not much.

Harry asked, "Whom?"

"Wait and see ... I cannot guarantee anything, but I have a feeling."

When Almyra was ready to let go of the dog, they marched up to the school buildings. Behind them, a place with two graves was emptying from the crowd.

"Well," said Harry, "he's gone."

In the Entrance Hall, two people were coming toward them - Viktor and Fleur. Viktor said, "Squad meeting - in fifteen minutes."

Fleur said, "Ron, Harry - your guests are here."

"Which meeting?"

"Which guests?"

"Which room?"

A second later, six people tried to speak simultaneously, only Almyra wasn't joining.

As quickly as it had started, the chaos faded. Harry agreed to join a meeting at such short notice, provided special guests were allowed.

Cho agreed to do the same, provided her guest was Almyra.

Viktor agreed to allow special guests - provided they would behave, and his own would be Hermione.

"That's a contradiction in itself," said Ron.

Hermione snapped back, "Did someone tell Janine what a bad mistake she's going to make?"

Then Cho wanted to know which other guests were waiting.

Harry said, "Gérard and Marie-Christine ... I invited them."

Two faces were looking suspiciously at him - Cho's and Almyra's.

"I met them in our hall - at the evening of the battle. They have fought with us - at least, they were ready to do it in case the others had stormed the entrance, which is just as well."

"And what else?"

Harry grinned. "Come and see."

They found them waiting in the Great Hall. By the time the first hello was over, Ron and Janine had left the group.

Cho eyed Gérard, then Marie-Christine. "I have the feeling some priorities have changed recently - or am I mistaken?"

For once, Gérard wasn't the first to answer. "No," replied Marie-Christine, "you're not mistaken - although 'arry promised to tell us everything about your fight with Voldemort."

"Then let's go," said Harry. "The squad's waiting."

Five minutes later, they were sitting in a classroom, after Harry had introduced all special guests, earning a thankful glance from Ron when he presented Janine as one of the "back-up fighters from Beauxbatons", and after suppressing his own grin - a pair of open eyes was enough to see how things stood between Ron and his special guest.

Viktor marched to the front. "Okay, folks ... Officially, this meeting follows our good tradition to exchange information, experiences, and opinions - only that today *all* of us will contribute ..." with a glance toward Almyra, "including what I might call 'flying personnel outside the squad'."

He grinned. "So much for the official title. But unofficially, and after I've announced what has to be said about our schedule for the next weeks, this is just a chat round - everybody wants to hear everything, and from everyone."

And so they did.

Harry listened in fascination when the others told their stories how they had fought the Firebolt attackers, and how they had started to fly stun attacks toward the dark wizards, even the last member following when they saw Voldemort locked in the light sphere, while the twins were throwing dust bombs in pairs, with Lee Jordan ready to enervate them in case of a stun hit.

Every now and then, Harry and Cho had to explain details in French. Otherwise, their guests could follow, did so with shining eyes, Marie-Christine looking like a little girl at Christmas.

Then it was their own turn.

Cho spoke first, telling a breathless audience how she had crushed Malfoy, then driven a wide arc before returning to the ship, waiting until the sphere faded, so she could see Harry and Voldemort struggling about a wand.

"Why didn't you use your wand?" asked a Ravenclaw Beater.

Cho shrugged. "It wasn't exactly a decision ... Everything happened so fast, and from that angle - I'm righthanded, and all I could think was I must make sure he's not cursing Harry ... Well, he didn't."

"And then, after you came back?"

"That's Harry's story."

Harry grinned. "She was teasing Voldemort ... Drove him nuts. She said - what was it ... Oh yes, *What's this beanpole doing with your wand, Harry?* ... He just couldn't stand it." But of course, he had to start at the moment of his touch-down.

After finishing his story, he showed his wand. "Here - the top, that's what's left of Voldemort's wand ... It's awfully powerful, but I can take it off."

He demonstrated how the wand was sized down to his old one, then put the top back.

Marie-Christine asked. "What made you hold wand against wand, 'arry?"

"Beats me ..."

She hadn't understood.

"It wasn't planned - all I knew was, it's the wand that has to do the fight ... I wasn't sure I could counter Voldemort's curse at exactly the same moment, and so I thought, stop him *before* the spell ... And when the two wands crossed, there was a feeling - it was no doubt this was the right thing to do."

Then he had to tell how they found Nagini, and of course, he had to explain why he and Nagini knew each other so well, and how it all had started. This brought him off the hook.

Because now the squad wanted to hear Almyra's story.

In particular, they wanted to know how it was to be an eagle and to dive down, attacking a broomstick rider. This was fine with Almyra, who had skipped her Parseltongue study as quickly as possible, however to the great disappointment of Marie-Christine.

Finally, it was Hermione's turn to tell the story of her interrogating the prisoner, and what he'd said, and who the man was that now held the job of the Hogwarts keeper.

"I think he's the right choice," finished Hermione. "I mean, Dumbledore really has a touch to put people at the right places - Hagrid, Snape, Lupin, Black ... And besides, keeper isn't the most challenging job - he'll do fine."

Afterwards, at supper, while Marie-Christine was looking around, watching the teachers' table with great interest - mainly for Snape and Lupin, Harry watched Gérard and his casual handling of the Hogwarts drinks.

"Don't you miss something stronger?" he asked.

Gerard showed a quick grin. "No ... Normally, at such a question, I should have said, 'The best British wine is the one left in the bottle', except that recently I've taken to - er, skipping some remarks - and some drinks too ... And besides, there are things stronger than liquor."

"Oh yes," admitted Harry.

A fine pink showed in Marie-Christine's face. But maybe it had to do with Snape and Lupin, who were looking toward the Gryffindor table, smiling.

* * *

Sunday morning, Harry's breakfast fell earlier than usual, and short too. The reason, the same which caused even Cho to leave the table and follow him outside, stood before the building - a very impressive group of Giants, in loose march formation, Lleyrin in front.

They were here to say goodbye.

Seeing Harry and Cho, the Giants smiled and waved. It didn't look as precise and military-like as something similar from the Goblins, however, this might have been a matter of perspective.

Lleyrin bent down. "Harry Potter and Cho Chang, my thoughts will be with you. We will wait for the day to see each other again."

Cho said, "Lleyrin - please wait for me." She spun off.

Harry asked the Giant chief how long they would be on the road. The first of them would be at home tomorrow morning, replied Lleyrin, those with the longest way tomorrow evening. Harry was told their next meeting would be in Lleyrin's home valley, as the Giants saw no reason to visit Hogwarts again, and that Lleyrin's home would wait for this honour.

Toward a human, Harry might have asked, "Are you happy to return home?" Only - this was not a human, and Giants had a way with stupid questions ...

Cho appeared.

In her hand was a leash; at the other end was Fang. She gasped a bit. "Lleyrin - I'm not sure whether I should call it a present ... His name is Fang - it was Hagrid's dog."

Lleyrin stroked Fang, whose tail disappeared between the hind legs. Harry said, "Well - he's kind of a coward ... Don't rely on him too much."

"A coward," replied Lleyrin, "is the true hero's first stage."

Effortlessly, he took Fang into his arms and stood up. The boarhound squeaked, then calmed down quickly. A careful snout was coming up, exploring this unknown territory, the eyes testing the magnificent view.

"Cho Chang - I'm not sure either whether this is a present for me, anyway I know someone who will be delighted."

"I'm glad about that, Lleyrin ... Will you tell me who this someone is?"

Lleyrin the Fist, narrator of some story about a Giant near waters, showed a faint smile. "I thought you know, Cho Chang - who else but my wife, Seselith in June?"

34 - A Long Year's End

After some days in which moments had spanned to eternities, the last weeks of the Hogwarts school year went by at an incredible speed. They were filled with work, work, work.

Not all of this work turned out stressful in a physical way, certainly not as much as these learning sessions that lasted until Harry's head felt like fuming. Although, sometimes he wished it really would.

For example, when Rita Skeeter arrived for the next interview.

The start had been a bit edgy. She came rushing through the hall toward his place. "Harry - your Cho's refusing to stand an interview."

"That's correct ... By the way, she's her own Cho."

The second half of his remark seemed wasted at the press witch. Rita Skeeter snapped, "I thought we had a deal."

"Yes, we do - the interviews can start as soon as we see a writer pen around."

"I said you'll get it - I stand to my word."

Harry arched his eyebrows. "No doubt about that, Rita - except you didn't say *when*."

Was she smiling, or going to bite?

"Charming litte b ... I'll be back."

She was. Since then, Ron seemed floating in Heaven, only muttering at the times Harry or Hermione wanted the pen for their O.W.L. work. When Hermione suggested a direct pipeline from the next ink factory to Ron's office, his only reply was, "Good idea - if we can afford the monthly fee."

Also since then, Rita Skeeter kept pestering them no end. She really got her share of the deal. Luckily, Harry's friends didn't complain to him, first because he was suffering at least as much as the others, also because Ron stood always on alert to hush them up.

However, it was Ron himself who asked, "Harry, what's the difference between Rita Skeeter and a harpy?"

"Hmm ... Maybe none?"

"Oh yes, there is ... Harpies come in pairs."

Harry took pains not to read the articles in the *Daily Prophet*. It was definitely better this way - otherwise, the next interview might have turned even more unpleasant. Once, Sirius showed him one of the acceptable outpours, a very interesting one since Harry couldn't remember any interview that might have provided the source material for this result.

- **Fudge Doesn't Budge**

While the political pressure is rising by the hour, Cornelius Fudge, the how-long-still head of the Ministry of Magic, has lost even the tiny momentum he managed in the past - for example, at dinner banquets. At the same time, bid shops in Diagon Alley do business around the clock, offering bids for the day and hour when this caricature of a politician will resign. The best odds, nine-hundred to one, are offered for his stay - if you want to lose money, dear reader, go for that.

Asked where he would place his own money, Harry Potter, famous already for his defeating Voldemort and more famous soon for his key role in the fall of Fudge, said, "I'm not bidding. I would depend on something Fudge has to do - an absurd idea. A year ago, I told him the names of all the dark wizards I saw with Voldemort - nothing happened. Some days ago, they came and killed my friend, and Fudge is still in his office. I can't believe it. But while he's still around, ask him where he placed his own. All I bet is - Fudge will make money from his own dismissal."

The Ministry spokeswitch refused to comment on that. As we understand this, Fudge no-budge is sharing his odds with nobody.

But it worked. At the end of the third week, it was Sirius again who broke the news, returning from a three-days trip to London. "Harry - it's done ... Fudge has resigned."

"Great ... Whoever'll be next, at least that awful Skeeter woman won't be around any longer." Then Harry remembered the second goal of this campaign. "What about you? Is your name cleared?"

Sirius had a strange expression in his face. "Yes - shining like a badge ... I owe you and the others, Harry."

"No you don't - it was more than due ... Who'll be the new minister?"

"Well - it will be a big shifting of chairs, and a few people will take the opportunity to balance out old accounts, so Fudge's not the only one whose head is rolling ... By the way, Percy Weasley will be assigned officially for what he's already doing all the time."

"And Arthur Weasley?"

"Keeps his job ..." Seeing Harry's disappointment, Sirius explained, "He wasn't interested in the thin air higher up."

Harry realized, Sirius seemed surprisingly well informed about the pulls and ties in the Ministry. A moment later, he also realized that his question hadn't been answered, hardly by accident. "If you know all that," he pressed further, "you certainly know who'll win the race."

"There's little doubt - it'll be the former head of the Department of Magical Catastrophes - kind of a hardliner, but we'll see a movement toward law and order - an obvious effect from the events ... And the head of the Law Enforcement Squad, which belongs to this department, will move up to department boss."

Harry watched Sirius' face. "And who'll take over the Enforcement Squad?"

"Uhm - that's me, actually."

Harry's first reaction sent joy and pride through him. "Wow - then you'll get your own Steel Wing, right?"

"Maybe." Sirius smiled. "Harry - basically I'll be police chief, so you might expect me behind a desk most of the time ... But you're right - some people will be surprised about the places at which the police chief will be seen."

Only then, Harry became aware what it meant.

Sirius said, "Look - the past weeks were all but the norm, and I'm not built for a teacher at Hogwarts ... But I'll be around every now and then - Harry, I bet we'll see each other more often than before."

"Where will you take your residence? ... How do you ..."

"A house goes with the job - quite nice, actually, much too big for a single person ... I think I should have a look around." Sirius smiled.

Harry remembered a Firebolt, paid from an account that might have been down to zero afterwards. "Do ... do you have money, Sirius?"

His godfather laughed. "Don't worry - another side-effect from the campaign was a compensation for the time in Azkaban ... They'll remunerate me with five galleons per day spent in prison - enough for any household I might have in mind."

Harry tried to calculate.

Sirius saw it. "About twenty-two grand - and the salary for a police chief is so that I won't be tempted to look for bribes."

Harry laughed. "You and bribes."

"It's a slippery ground, Harry ..." Sirius didn't smile any longer. "Nobody's going to offer something as plump as money - at least not in the first place. But imagine - some day you get an invitation to a weekend in some fancy villa, and it's very nice, and suddenly there's this girl at your side, finding everything great you're saying ... That's how it starts."

Harry stared.

Sirius' grin returned. "Not your problem, Harry - and I'll be careful."

Invitations - contrary to what Sirius had said, there was indeed an invitation which caused Harry trouble. Fleur kept pressing - very nicely, however also very insisting. Eventually, they agreed to a Sunday afternoon, from coffee till late evening - he and Cho, Ron and Janine, Hermione couldn't find even this time, despite the writing pen.

And of course Bill and Fleur.

And Nagini.

Gabrielle inspected the snake with limited interest - for her, this was just another pet animal, not much different from Harry's arm. Harry would score better with his own transfiguration, as the girl made clear while pointing out that her own career in Beauxbatons would start soon, and her shape would be a horse, what else, and it was to be expected any time, once she was settled there.

Monsieur Delacour nodded. "Yes, my sweetie, and then you'll let Harry ride on your back."

This was a new thought for Gabrielle, one that had to be pondered carefully before agreeing.

When Harry told her how he and Cho had fought Voldemort, he became Gabrielle's shining hero again - until she heard that Voldemort had escaped. Her disappointment was unmistakable. "How could you, 'arry?"

He shrugged. "I think it wasn't the right time yet ... Sometimes, you have to do one step after the other - imagine, your first transfiguration gets you a horse head and nothing else."

Gabrielle giggled. "An inverse Centaur - that would look funny." At least, she seemed to accept that even heroes, and maybe herself included, had to try more than once.

Monsieur Delacour had obviously followed the press campaign, or what echo was reverberating in French newspapers. He said, "Your godfather is going to be the chief of police, 'arry - what does it mean to you?"

"His name is clean - that's the good part. Maybe he can gain a reputation of his own ... Otherwise - he'll be far away, although we never saw each other very often."

Madame Delacour asked, "Does he already know how to handle those prisoners in your school?"

"That will be his first major task, and not a simple one ... Aside from that, all I know is - as long as Sirius has a saying, there'll never be a prison guarded by Dementors."

* * *

Interviews by Rita Skeeter weren't the only ones. But the other ones happened less frequently, and Harry could be sure the pen would write down what he said - those with Almyra.

Their first action was to repeat the interview about his *accident* at the age of one. For Harry, the session brought no failure, no success either. He didn't learn anything new. A green flash, the voices - that was all. Also, he was unable to come up with an early image of his parents, since he had seen them coming out of Voldemort's wand, this image dominated everything.

Then, still with Dumbledore around, they tried another trance. The effect was null. He lost no contact, no vision, no orientation.

"That's what I expected," said Harry. "Nagini's here - so where should I go?"

Almyra asked, "And what if she's in another room?"

"Oh, drop it ... I'm sure, if she's sufficiently far away, I would travel again, only that this time her signal would be loud and clear."

Since the dragon meat feeding, Nagini showed a different personality. Talkative, joyful - Harry would have felt little surprise hearing her telling jokes, although she assured this was impossible to her, after listening to his explanations what a joke was.

Once, she gave a very decent and careful hint about feeling vital enough to survive a life in freedom.

Harry asked, "Do you want such a life?"

"No, master. I only told you because originally you didn't intend to take me."

"Yeah - long ago, wasn't it? ... Anyway, this issue is settled, although it's good to know you won't starve if something happens."

The presence of Nagini added a completely new twist to Almyra's study. Suddenly, control was the focus, or the absence of it, owing to the involuntary nature of his Parseltongue.

Almyra asked him to talk English with Nagini. Try as he might, he couldn't. Then she asked him to talk Parseltongue with herself. It didn't work any better. Then she took Nagini around her shoulders and asked him to try again. He obeyed - talking English toward Almyra, Parseltongue toward the snake.

Harry didn't care. For him, the only important aspect was, he addressed his conversation partners with the proper language, something he hadn't managed similarly well before Nagini's arrival, or not at all.

Almyra speculated whether he could talk Parseltongue toward another person with this ability, in particular if this person addressed him that way.

"The only one coming to my mind is Voldemort," replied Harry. "Aside from the obvious problem - assume he doesn't realize either what language he's using, then how should we know?"

"Cho says, on the ship both of you were using English."

"Sure, because she was around ... Al, I think that's a dead end - after all, if it wasn't involuntarily, I wouldn't be here."

"You're right ..." Almyra dismissed her speculations with a sigh, said, "Well, then - all that's missing is an interview with Nagini ... After that, we're done."

"Oh ..."

"Yes, oh ..." Looking as embarrassed as Harry felt, Almyra added, "But we're both still around, aren't we?"

"Sure ... I still have to finish my Parseltongue O.W.L., and I wouldn't mind some help when picking the proper pieces from your work."

Almyra beamed. "I'd like it, Harry - after the interview with Nagini."

"Here she is - go ahead, ask her."

Almyra laughed. "I'd like to see your face if I did."

"Why - I won't notice the difference anyway, remember?"

A few days later, Harry translated for Almyra, remembering the scene with Fleur on the Beauxbatons stage - feeling a twist in his stomach when realizing she had done so for Hagrid and Charlie, both of them dead. Hmm - if there was a dark spell on translations, it didn't affect the translator.

Almyra wanted to know how it was for Nagini to talk. Normal, said the snake. Could she distinguish between English and Parseltongue? - Easily, understanding the one, not knowing the other. How did Parselmouths feel to her? - Different, simply because these were the only candidates for a master. Otherwise, the emotions Nagini felt were stronger than alterations in language. Did she know a common factor among Parselmouths? - No. Did she know how someone could become a Parselmouth? - No. What was her own comment on Harry's ability? - It was inevitable, although the greatest luck that could happen to her.

Almyra got excited. Why was it inevitable?

Because it was bound to happen, that was all Nagini knew. - Could she look into the future? - Yes.

Almyra got thrilled.

What did she see? - The inevitable. What was inevitable? - The end of Voldemort. Could she see details, events, dates? - No.

Almyra calmed down. "My feeling tells me there's more - except I just can't find a way to ask the proper questions."

Harry said, "Al, please be careful with this information ... The last thing I need is another interview round - this time with Professor Trelawney."

* * *

There was still another loose end Harry wanted to tie up - the Ollivander essay. He no longer felt the need to visit the National Gallery, all considered, he certainly had enough material for his O.W.L. However, politeness demanded a letter to Mr. Ollivander.

He wrote the events down - it was real fun, using this writer pen, except this showed no resemblance to his handwriting, looked a bit like Ron's ... Was the pen adapting to the most frequent user?

He found Almyra. "Al - I'd like to send this letter."

She smiled. "A pleasure - we'll fly this evening."

"Huh?"

"Well - I'll turn after a few miles."

With a mix of amusement and sympathy, Harry watched Almyra's nervousness until Hedwig was back three days later. She had a letter from Mr. Ollivander.

Dear Mr. Potter,
thank you very much for your extraordinary report, which puts an entirely new light on the issue of sibling wands. I remember something similar described in the old essay - only the two wands had eaten each other until nothing was left. There is little doubt for me, this has to do with a very close relationship between you and the magical creature which provided the wand cores.

Thank you again for this exciting information,
your
Hazelard Ollivander

Now that was interesting, and a precious information to be used in his O.W.L. And three days ago, Harry had been so sure the essay couldn't tell him anything new.

Whatever - he had enough material, now it was time to finish the papers, which meant passing the pen between him, Ron, and Hermione or - often enough - to write with the own hand like in the bad old days.

This done, the O.W.L. exams could come.

And come they did.

* * *

Harry entered the room. The first face he saw was that of Grubbly-Plank, the faculty teacher in this O.W.L. - the one about Giants. To her right sat - no, floated - Professor Binns, to her left sat his own Headmistress, Professor McGonagall.

The faculty witch greeted him with a smile. "Mr. Potter, please sit down ... You didn't specify a Trustee for this exam, so I have to ask you now - is there a teacher of your choice who should participate, replacing one of my colleagues?"

"No, Prof - it's fine as it is."

Grubbly-Plank's lips twisted. "Good ... Your topic is Giants, quite common this year, although we might expect a few not so common details from you, Mr. Potter. We have read your paper ..."

Toward her co-examiners, she asked, "Any questions left open regarding the paper?"

McGonagall shook her head.

Professor Binns looked up. "Mr. Potter, I recognized significant differences in the handwriting of your paper. Do you have an explanation - other than the obvious one, that someone else wrote it?"

This old bean-counter.

"Yes, Professor - for parts of it, I used a writer pen, dictating the text ... These pens don't go as far as to take over personal handwriting."

The ghost looked at Grubbly-Plank. "And this is allowed?"

It was McGonagall who answered. "Yes, Bartholomew - the rule says an O.W.L. and its document have to be own work, using tools at hand ... In short, it means - if it's your brain, the body doesn't matter."

Grubbly-Plank's lips twisted harder.

"Oh - well, then," said the airy ghost, "please go ahead."

Grubbly-Plank coughed, then she had herself under control again. "Mr. Potter - how would you describe the essential nature of Giants?"

"They are - serious. I mean, they have a lot of humour, and quite a tricky one, really, but they don't talk just to fill a silence. You have to be careful what you say - as a human, you're easily trapped by your own stupid question ... But one gets used to it. They're not narrow-minded in what you're saying, or how you say it, only that you have to be attentive with the names - with the full names, that is."

A scene surfaced in his memory. "As far as I can remember, there's just one occasion in which there's absolutely no choice of words - other than the traditional ones."

"And which occasion, Mr. Potter?"

"If a Giant says to you, *My life is in your hand, from now till death us part.*"

Binns got excited. "Did you hear these words, Mr. Potter?"

"Yes, Professor."

"And you answered ..."

"I will save it in my heart, er - from now till death us part." He had skipped the name, however, Grubbly-Plank and McGonagall could guess easily.

Binns turned toward his living colleagues. "That's remarkable, extra-ordinary, quite extra-ordinary ... I remember, the last time this happened between a Giant and a human was about eighteen-hundred-and ..."

Grubbly-Plank tried to pat his hands, looking perplexed for an instant when her own hand hit the table. "Yes, Bartholomew, certainly - but may we continue with Mr. Potter's report?"

"Oh - yes, of course, I'm really waiting to hear ..."

To Harry, this meeting hadn't felt hard from the beginning, while now the exam was easy play. If he had known what would happen, he would have signed for a History O.W.L., to be examined after this one - with his first sentence, Binns would have been hooked.

"Thank you, Mr. Potter ... I'm sure my colleagues will agree when I say we can skip our internal discussion - you have passed, Mr. Potter, quite excellently so."

"Definitely," agreed Binns.

McGonagall just beamed.

* * *

Number two was about unforgivable curses and sibling wands - following the sequence in which Harry had listed his O.W.L.s on the signing parchment. Entering the room, he felt expectant to see the third teacher, besides Drilencu and Dumbledore.

It was Snape, smiling.

"Mr. Potter," began the Bulgarian, "welcome in our round ... Your Trustee is Professor Dumbledore, who's present, so would you say the appointments are correct?"

Harry grinned toward Drilencu. "Yes, Prof."

"Fine ... Coming to your paper, which is a very interesting document, I saw something like a last-minute addendum to the topic of sibling wands. Just out of curiosity, Mr. Potter - how come?"

"Well - there's an old essay about sibling wands, written by someone in the Ollivander dynasty, and the only known sample left is in the ..."

Drilencu stopped him. "We know about this, Mr. Potter, and that it was impossible for you to have a look into this document ..."

Harry interrupted Drilencu. "Yes, Prof - but I got a letter from the current Mr. Ollivander, and this information caused me to extend my paper - sorry, I wasn't able to rewrite it completely."

Drilencu smiled. "That's accepted, Mr. Potter - more so as this information is absolutely fascinating, considering your own experience ... However, let's do it in the proper sequence."

Reading in Harry's paper, Drilence said, "Regarding unforgivable curses in general, I suggest to keep the topic rather short. But there's one question I'd like to ask ... Mr. Potter, you claim to be immune from the Imperius Curse, listing as proof that even Voldemort wasn't successful when trying."

"Yes, Prof."

Drilencu looked up. "Would you allow me to try, Mr. Potter?"

Harry's answer came immediately. "Sure - I mean, yes, Prof."

Drilencu smiled. "Thank you, Mr. Potter - in this case, we can skip it - I'm not claiming a stronger curse than Mr. Snape, who told me about your training ... But I would like to know how you'd response to a curse from Mr. Dumbledore - certainly one of your most trusted persons."

"Absolutely ... Yes, I'd like to know for myself."

Dumbledore shrugged. "Well, then ..." He pointed. "*Imperio!*"

Harry felt dizzy, not well at all - had he drunk too much champagne? Couldn't be, he wasn't that stupid, only ... Dumbledore looked a bit funny, still funnier was that he told Harry to hit Drilencu on the nose ... There had been a time when this seemed a good idea, but now?

"No, why should I?"

An instant later, his vision cleared. Dumbledore looked normal again, except for the unusually wide grin on his face.

Drilencu seemed impressed. "Thank you, Mr. Potter - as far as I'm concerned, your claim is proven beyond any doubt ... Well, if there's nothing else in the range of the three curses, we can come to the more ..."

"Sorry, Prof - there is something else."

Drilencu looked surprised. "Really? ... There's nothing in your paper which ... What is it, Mr. Potter?"

"That's because I just didn't know how to formulate it ... It has also to do with sibling wands, or with my new one - I can do the Killing Curse, without having mastered it."

Drilencu stared at him. "You can ..."

"Yes, Prof."

"This is not an assumption - you *know* it?"

Dumbledore came to help. "One of the Firebolt attackers who had survived, although with a broken spine - actually, it was Geoff McKinnon - asked Harry to end his, how he put it, messed-up life ... As it turned out, his new wand enables Harry to perform a successful Killing Curse."

Snape's eyes, which had widened at McKinnon's name, looked at Harry with sympathy.

Drilencu swallowed. "Yes, Mr. Potter, you're right - an O.W.L. paper is not the best place for such details ... Anyway, I'm sure the best proceeding is to let you give a short summary of the first encounter of the sibling wands, and describe the second in more detail."

Harry did.

"... then I found out how to reduce this super wand to my old one, was quite glad because it's a bit strong." He demonstrated with his wand.

"And then I got Mr. Ollivanders letter, in which he describes that in a similar case the two wands destroyed each other completely."

Drilencu asked, "What is your own explanation for the different results, Mr. Potter?"

"I have none, Prof ... Mr. Ollivander thinks it has to do with the relationship to the magical creature who provided the core ... This would mean, in the other case, both opponents didn't give a d - um, didn't care about this creature."

"And you do, while Voldemort didn't?"

"Yes, I think that's correct."

Drilencu's face indicated that thinking aloud in an O.W.L. exam wasn't exactly to his taste, regardless of the circumstances. "For your own part," the Bulgarian said, "you can certainly confirm or deny, don't you?"

"Oh, yes, Professor - it's Fawkes, and we're indeed very close."

Dumbledore smiled. "To say the least ... I might be able to cover the other side - when Voldemort was still Tom Riddle, there was nothing which indicated any particular feeling from him to Fawkes, or the other way around ... I remember every student to whom Fawkes would come as soon as he enters the room - simply because there a very, very few ... Riddle was none of them."

Drilencu seemed fascinated. "I'm no expert in magical history, but assuming that Mr. Ollivander is our best source, I come to the result - the recent events are breaking new ground in the scientific knowledge about wands."

He turned to Harry. "Mr. Potter - what you have revealed goes beyond the scope of the Defence faculty, but I'm certainly glad you have placed your O.W.L. here, so I could watch and hear ... By the way, of course you've passed the exam ..."

* * *

The same room again, still Drilencu, only two hours later, and the two co-examiners of the previous round had been replaced by Lupin, as agreed, and by a totally unexpected teacher - Professor Trelawney!

Harry looked at Drilencu, at Trelawney, back at Drilencu, and suddenly he had trouble hiding a grin - of course, it was around Drilencu's arrival when the long-legged witch had started to join the teachers' table more often than before - quite regularly, actually.

Drilencu saw his expression, kept his own steady. "Mr. Potter - here we go again ... This time, your Trustee is Professor Lupin, who's present, while Professor Trelawney was *very* interested in your Patronus - I hope the appointment is to your satisfaction."

Harry tried to make the grin look like a smile. "Certainly, Prof."

With the sweetest face, the Divination witch said, "My dear, this O.W.L. was *absolutely* irresistible - I simply *had* to come."

Harry couldn't resist. "Because of the Patronus, Prof?"

Lupin examined the table, hiding his face.

"Yes, it was the Patronus too," replied Trelawney, "but I have to admit ..."

Would she ...

"... all my predictions concerning you, my dear, failed miserably, as we both know well, and such a cumulation of fate against all odds is so highly unusual - I'm really looking forward what will take place here."

"Oh ..." Recovering from his surprise, Harry said, "Actually, I for my part hoped everything would go as planned."

"Of course, my dear, I'm sure it ... No, after all, I shouldn't say that, should I?"

Somehow, nobody in this room seemed to take the event serious - until Harry described the exact nature of the memory he used for his Patronus. He hadn't liked the idea, however, as Lupin's example had shown so undeniably, the memory was so essential for a Golden Patronus that there was no other choice.

Then Lupin walked to the back of the room and took a cover from a rack. What came into light was a motionless Dementor.

"Yes, Harry - our one-time training object ... That's the best we could muster."

Harry glanced at the hooded shape, back at Lupin. "Prof - it doesn't feel cold ... There's no feeling at all."

"I know - but I tested it ... It works."

"Oh - well, then." Harry took his wand, pointed, concentrated. The arc resurfaced in his mind ... "*Expecto Patronum!*"

A golden ball erupted from the tip like a projectile, formed a Centaur as if cast under high pressure. The Centaur made a step forward.

Harry stared. So breathtakingly quick ...

The Centaur turned to him. "There's no danger, master ... Shall I make an end to him?"

Harry's mouth fell open.

Recovering, he saw Lupin's head shaking, said, "No ... Leave him as he is ... Thank you anyway."

"I'm honoured, master." With a graceful bow, the Centaur disappeared.

"Oh, my dear - it was so wonderful!" Trelawney's eyes were shining.

Harry stammered, "That ..." He looked at Drilencu. "I didn't expect that ... It was ..."

Lupin came to him. "Harry ... Yes, I knew it - your wand!"

"My ..." Harry stared at his wand - so very familiar, except for the black top. "Stupid me ... Of course, the super wand."

Drilencu beamed at Trelawney, then turned to his candidate. "Mr. Potter, I don't know exactly what's coincidence here - was it your encounter with the power of Divination, or this awe-inspiring wand ... All I know for sure - you have passed."

* * *

It took Harry a second to realize why Viktor was sitting there, framed by Madam Hooch and the Astrology witch, Professor Sinistra. Then he remembered - Viktor was the faculty teacher since a few weeks ago.

"Hello, Harry ..." Viktor seemed almost embarrassed. "I'm certainly more excited than you - if my counting's right, you have done more O.W.L.s as a candidate than I as a teacher ... Anyway, you didn't specify a Trustee, so - is this round okay with you?"

Harry grinned. "Yes - Prof."

"Stop that nonsense - I'm nervous enough, without you teasing me ..."

"Sorry, er - Viktor." Inwardly, Harry exhaled deeply. The Transportation O.W.L. was his weak spot, at least compared to the others. It crossed his mind how Hermione was doing - for her, only the Potions O.W.L. was a self-runner, the other seven had to be the result of hard work.

"Okay," said Viktor, "from my point of view, we could skip the Steel Wing part completely - there's no sense in telling each other what we know by heart ..."

Harry froze. Viktor was crushing his only solid bastion, didn't even realize!

"... but that might not be true for all of us." Viktor looked at the Astronomy witch. "What's your opinion, Selena?"

"To be honest - I hoped to learn a bit more about these frightening devices ... After the recent events, I heard the wildest rumours about their capabilities."

"Then, of course, if this is fine with you, Harry."

Harry nodded, seeing Madam Hooch suppress a grin. She had seen through him from the day he had signed the topic. "Well," he began, "Steel Wing Mark Two, a prototype model which never has been used anywhere else, as far as we know. It's about twice as fast as the fastest

broomstick commonly available, which is the Firebolt. But speed is just one aspect - there are others which definitely prevent a Steel Wing be used ever in a Quidditch match ..."

He stopped when Professor Sinistra signaled that he had delivered enough details. "One thing's still unclear to me," said the witch, "how did we get them, if they're not available anywhere else."

Viktor answered. "Officially, from an anonymous sponsor ... But we know - the Goblins gave them to us, in the course of our united fight against the Dark Forces."

"Oh, I see ... Thank you, Viktor - and Mr. Potter - this was very informative."

Madam Hooch smiled. "Time's running short, Mr. Potter - but I'd like to hear your judgment about broomsticks as a transportation device in general - maybe with an example outside the range of racing or combat broomsticks."

She looked as if saying, 'You'll get your result, but only after a bit more needling than from the other two.'

Time running short was music in Harry's ears. "In general," he said, "well, it has a few severe shortcomings. If you take, for example, the Omniair DS Twenty-Seven, probably one of the best family broomsticks money can buy, you see it's badly suited for children. Only with a safety belt, which is *not* part of the regular equipment, you can ..."

"Okay, Mr. Potter - " Madam Hoch grinned appreciatingly, "you've done your homework - very good."

Yeah, thought Harry, and if not at home, then in a French castle.

Viktor looked at his co-examiners. "Well, then ... Sylvie, Selena - are we done?"

They nodded.

"All right - Harry, it's over - you've passed."

* * *

"Listen," said Harry to Nagini, who curled around his body, "now it counts - let's make a good impression."

"Certainly, master."

He opened the door, walked in.

Professor McGonagall, this time in the middle, Grubbly-Plank, now to her right, and the small Herbology witch, Professor Sprout - only women, looking in his direction, although not at him, their attention completely captured by the snake.

"Mr. Potter," said his Headmistress, "how thoughtful of you, to appear with the proper - er, snake - and such a beautiful example, really ..." McGonagall stopped, looking startled at Nagini hissing in Harry's ear. "Did she ... did she say something to you, Mr. Potter?"

"Yes, Prof."

"May we hear it?"

Harry blushed. "Er - yes, of course ... You know, Nagini can sense truth and - er, well, she said you weren't honest - um, in fact, you were a bit frightened ... Sorry, that's what she said."

The impossible was happening - McGonagall giggled.

Grubbly-Plank came to help. "Mr. Potter - it shouldn't be entirely new to you that your unusual ability is sometimes a bit rasping on the nerves - in particular hearing yourself talk that language."

"Yes, Prof, I know - only I can't hear it ... to me it sounds like perfectly normal English, no matter who's speaking, Nagini or myself."

McGonagall had found her balance. "We know, Mr. Potter ... Concerning the basic facts, I'd say your paper covers them well enough ..." She browsed through the pile. "The descriptions here are well - er, selected ..."

She blinked. Next second, Nagini hissed again.

Quickly, MagGonagall said, "So I suggest to concentrate on your - er, partnership with this snake. I think that's the proper word, after you have stated clearly in your paper this is not a pet animal ... And on her astonishing abilities."

"Yes, Prof - although I should point out immediately that these abilities are of course dominated by her own view. To give an example, Nagini calls a lie a lie - for her, it doesn't matter whether it's a joke ..."

"... or a polite formulation," helped McGonagall.

"Er - yes, or a flat-out false statement on full purpose. However, since we're together, I can see changes - although I'm not sure whether it's her, learning concepts like humour, for example, or it's me, learning to know her better. At any rate, a true distinction between good and evil is still beyond her scope ... She knows the concept of mercy, but her perspective might sound quite awful to us."

"Do you have an example, Mr. Potter?"

"Well, most of her experience results from her former master, which is Voldemort, and that's why she might consider killing somebody as an act of mercy."

Carefully, McGonagall said, "Sometimes, we have the same view."

"Yes, Prof - but only if the person asks for it."

McGonagall saved further comments while Harry described Nagini's view of the world in general and of humans in particular.

Grubbly-Plank asked, "Can she be violent?"

"Definitely ... She's not poisonous, her technique would be strangling - but in this like in any other aspect, she puts herself totally under the control of her master."

"Which is you - so we better let you pass, right?"

Harry grinned. Nagini kept silent.

Professor Sprout asked, "What's her food, Mr. Potter?"

"Oh, this and that - mostly mice ... Lately, she has developed a faible for hunting by herself - it's surprising how many mice are found in Hogwarts ..."

"Not at all," muttered Grubbly-Plank.

"... but I've found two suppliers - a cat and and owl."

"An owl?" asked Professor Sprout. "How's that?"

"Well - not really. It's Almyra Benedict - she likes hunting too, but she prefers the food on the Ravenclaw table."

"And the cat?"

Sensing the glance of her colleague, McGonagall said hastily, "It's not me, Jesamine - beware!"

Now Harry giggled. "No - it's Crookshanks, Hermione's cat."

"Good, Mr. Potter ... If you could give us an example of a conversation with the snake, I think we're done."

"Yes, Prof." Harry looked at Nagini. "All right, pal - I guess we're through ... What do you think of the three witches?"

"The one in the middle has lost some of her fright, master. But she is still watchful, in both of her shapes. The one at the left is very self-confident - by the way, she has also more than one shape ..."

"Really??" Surprised, Harry stared at Grubbly-Plank.

Seeing his stare, the witch said, "I'm not sure whether I should ask, but - is something wrong, Mr. Potter?"

"No - it's just ... Well, as I mentioned earlier, Nagini can see Animagi ..."

Grubbly-Plank blushed. "Of course - I forgot ... Erm, yes, I have to admit, I'm working on it, only ..."

"Prof - for her, you already have two shapes."

Grubbly-Plank beamed. "Oh, really? ... Now that's good to know, then ... Did she tell you which?"

"No - and I didn't ask ... I don't know even whether she can see them - so far, there was no need."

Grubbly-Plank seemed relieved. "Then, just as an act of courtesy, Mr. Potter - let's leave it that way."

"Yes, of course, Prof."

McGonagall said, "I'm sure my colleagues agree, Mr. Potter - before Nagini unveils our most intimate secrets, you've passed."

"Thank you, Prof."

Walking out, Harry had to fight a temptation, winning only just.

* * *

It was over - he had passed five O.W.L. exams, and the single one making him sweat had been Viktor, only Professor Sinistra's curiosity had saved him from a lot of teasing by Madam Hooch, and from something the students had started to call *grace of the lord*.

Listening around, Harry could hear about quite a number of *grace of the lord* decisions. The term showed a remarkable example of bad taste - after the recent events, in which the fifth-years had fought Lord Voldemort and his cohortes, the teachers simply couldn't let anyone fail.

Ron arrived. Harry asked, "How was it?"

"Whew - better than expected ... Dragons was a bit tricky, until I told the story with the dragon meat for your snake - don't know why, but suddenly Grubbly-Plank was all smile."

Harry laughed. "But I know."

Ron glanced at him. "Except you're not supposed to tell - I can see it in your face ... Anyway, it worked ... And can you imagine? - Of all teachers, it's Viktor who's giving me hell? Squeezing like ..."

"You too! ... He did almost the same with me - it was only thanks to Sinistra that I could spend most of my time about Steel Wings."

"Sinistra was nice - " Ron showed a haughty grin. "The other two didn't have the foggiest about star constellations and light speed ... Was almost as easy as Administration."

"Who were the teachers?"

"Dumbledore, that was clear ..." Ron's grin turned malicious. "Guess whom he appointed as number two and three - Filch and Loew! ... It was great, just great - Dumbledore and I had a

nice chat, Loew sitting there and listening like a first-year - and Filch sweating as if he's the one to pass the exam ... Well, I guess that was exactly what Dumbledore had in mind."

Then Ron registered Harry's thoughtful face. "Everything okay?"

"Yes ..."

"Then why are you looking as if Drilencu's cut you short by two?"

"He didn't, although it was ..." Harry grinned. "Guess who's been number three in the Patronus O.W.L.?"

"Trelawney??"

"Yes - and she said something like whenever she predicted what would happen to me, she was wrong ..."

"In this, she was right."

"... and then she said, but this exam would certainly go as planned, only she shouldn't say so, and of course - by accident, I used the power version of my wand for the Patronus."

"What happened?"

"The Centaur talked with me."

Ron started to laugh, couldn't stop. "So you - hehe - you can talk now Centauri - hehehe - is it Alpha Centauri or Omega Centauri?"

Harry managed to answer, "No, just English," before drowning in his own fit of giggles.

They had to wait still a while before Hermione arrived, looking exhausted, however with eyes shining.

"Hey, champion - finished?"

"Yup." Hermione fell down, deep satisfaction in her face. "Eight O.W.L.s, and I did it - I really, really, did it ..." Only now, she seemed to realize what she had achieved. There was disbelief in her eyes, a moment later replaced by ...

"Well," she said, "if I'd known how things would go, I should have signed for nine."

"What??"

"Yes - with Quidditch as the ninth."

Ron stared at her. "Are you mad? ... You don't know Quidditch from Queen's quark, so what do you ..."

"Maybe not." Hermione barely noticed the insult. "But I know the Quidditch teacher."

"Viktor ..." It sounded like spat out.

This time, Ron's remark had effect - Hermione's head jerked up. "What's that supposed to mean? ... Yes, Viktor ..."

"Your little Viktor was grilling us worse than all the others ... Unbelievable - as if we never ran a squad together. You're lucky you didn't try - the closer the acquaintance, the ..."

"HE'S NOT LITTLE ..."

Heads were turning.

"... and what do you mean, *ran a squad together*? ... If my memory's correct, there's just one squad commander, and his name isn't Ron Weasley, is it?"

"Oh, the lily-white lady of the limp-walker has been ..."

"STOP IT!"

Ron and Hermione stared - Harry's wand was pointing. "If you don't stop right now," he snarled, "honest to God, I'm doing it for both of you ... And you know you're chanceless against that thing."

Their glances went to the black tip, back to his furious face.

"Ron?"

It wasn't fright - only the certain knowledge, Harry would do it. "I'm sorry - I take it back ... He's not limping, and he's not little - a bit dainty, yes ..."

A giggle rose in Harry, was swallowed. "Hermione?"

"I didn't say anything that wasn't ... Okay, yes, it's true - without Ron's office work, squad schedule would have been a mess in no time."

"All right ..." Harry exhaled, trying to cope with his own adrenaline, turned to Hermione. "What Ron was trying to point out, it won't be a mistake telling Viktor that students in an O.W.L. exam don't mind at all talking about what everybody knows - because then for sure they know, too." He told Hermione what had happened in his Transportation exam.

She giggled. "That's good to know ... You're my witness, Harry - if the need comes up."

"Need for what?"

"Well ..." Hermione blushed a bit. "You may have heard about a regulation dealing with - er, terms between teachers and students. Now - I'm out of Quidditch for sure, but if the issue ever'll be discussed, I can say - Viktor's meanest to those close to him - ask Harry."

* * *

Listening to Dumbledore's words, Harry studied the decorations in the Great Hall for this end-of-year feast. It wasn't that they looked bad, no - but white? By tradition, the winner of the House Cup determined the colours and symbols, except there was no house using white.

So the scores weren't complete yet - small surprise, after so many events that cried for some points awarded. And obviously, Dumbledore wasn't ready to give a hint by the colour of the decoration, not this way nor the other.

"... recent events had their impact not only here in Hogwarts but also, and even more, in Durmstrang. This is the reason why Professor Drilencu, our Defence against the Dark Arts teacher, has asked for dismissal. He wants to return and help getting rid of the last dark traces in the Durmstrang board of teachers."

Dumbledore smiled. "What he didn't say, but what I'm proud to announce is this - there is little doubt Professor Drilencu will be the new Headmaster of Durmstrang."

The applause was - well, polite.

"Do I hear some kind of restraint? It can't apply to his person, can it?"

The new applause was considerably stronger.

The Headmaster looked satisfied. "So it's because of Durmstrang, quite understandably so. Well, to change this attitude, Professor Drilencu promised that his first task as the new Headmaster will be the implementation of a portkey link with our own school - which means the three major schools for witchcraft in Europe will be united soon."

And finally, Drilencu received a roaring reward.

The large Bulgarian stood up. "Thank you ... I know what I'm doing to you - on this carousel of a teacher's seat, I didn't even last a year ... I apologize for that - and for my big mouth at the beginning."

After the laughter, Dumbledore spoke again. "Luckily, we can close the gap immediately, although not quite as you might expect ..."

Did he look at Harry?

"... After discussing the issue with my colleagues, we found out this is an opportunity for breaking old habits and facing new challenges - and for fulfilling old dreams. The new teacher for Defence against the Dark Arts ..."

Harry tried to read the face ...

"... is Professor Snape!"

The Slytherin table was yelling, whistling, shouting. After a moment of stunned surprise, Harry joined them with his applause.

"Which immediately raises the question, who is the new Potions teacher? And the answer is ..."

Following the glances, Harry knew it an instant earlier ...

"... Professor McGonagall!"

Another wave, raised by the Gryffindors, joined by the other tables.

"And now, the last appointment shouldn't be too difficult to guess. The new Transfiguration teacher will be ..."

"PROFESSOR LUPIN!"

Dumbledore smiled in Harry's direction. "That's correct, but no points for the answer - it was too simple."

Still, a surprise - Lupin, who wasn't even an Animagus? Maybe Harry had missed the latest developments, with his own trouble from interviews, he hadn't asked Almyra if her project had shown any progress.

"Talking about points - the House Cup is waiting to be awarded. So far, we see the points as follows: Gryffindor is in fourth place with three hundred and seventy-seven, one point ahead is Hufflepuff with three hundred and seventy-eight, second place is Ravenclaw with four hundred and four behind the current leader which is Slytherin with four hundred and thirty-two."

Expectant silence fell over the hall.

"Yes, you are right - this is the current state *before* several events of the past months have been properly rewarded. So let's come to that ..." Dumbledore grinned. "First - to the members of the Flying Squad, for protection services throughout the year, I award fifty points each."

The applause ebbed quickly, followed by laughter - so each house had three hundred and fifty points more, without changing positions a bit. Well, that was true only when assuming ...

"Next - to Mr. Ronald Weasley, for administration services toward Hogwarts in general and the squad in particular, I award fifty points."

Ron's face looked relieved - a second before, he had been tortured by the question whether Dumbledore had counted him as squad member. Harry, in contrast, had felt little doubt, was counting by himself - Gryffindor had surpassed Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw, however still five points behind Slytherin.

"The next award is highly unusual in more than one aspect, but no doubt justified ... For outstanding services before and after the attack toward Hogwarts, I award fifty points to a snake called Nagini."

Harry's applause found little company, the others seemed thunderstruck. A moment later, however, his own mouth came agape.

"Now the question is, which house is the one to earn these points?" Dumbledore's lips twisted. "You may think it would be simplest to ask herself, only - bear in mind how much she's

prejudiced by the opinion of her master. On the other side, looking at the houses and their origins, I find it only fair to give these points to ... Slytherin."

Speechless, Harry watched Bob dancing, waving at him, his former teammate's face showing a broad grin.

"As much as we appreciate the challenge between our houses, this year has brought a stronger union than ever between them. And there are two people who were the first to close a gap that held for centuries - the one between Slytherin and Gryffindor. Therefore, I award fifty points each to Robert Daunty and Angelina Johnson, whose love didn't bother with such outdated barriers."

The noise was deafening, with two beaming students looking at each other across the distance between the Gryffindor and the Slytherin table.

Harry counted again. Meanwhile, Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw were far behind, but Slytherin still in the lead with fifty-five points.

"... power of love - it has done more than uniting houses. It has defeated the darkest evil, has made Voldemort powerless against those who are graced with this force. And this is why I award hundred points each to Harry Potter and Cho Chang."

With the jumping figures around him, Harry could see the Ravenclaw table only for instants, the sight of Cho still more obscured by the Ravenclaw students who were applauding her.

Forty-five points in the lead ... What could still come?

"Also, we have to consider the most extraordinary collection of O.W.L. exams ever seen at Hogwarts. I award fifty points to Miss Hermione Granger for eight O.W.L.s successfully performed."

Harry shouted and waved with the others toward a pinkish Hermione. Ninety-five points in the lead before Slytherin - they couldn't ... Could they?

"That leaves two items on my list ... We have awarded the squad for their services, so it's only fair to award another member of the *flying personnel*, although not on a broomstick - fifty points for Miss Almyra Benedict."

His hands already hurting from the applause, Harry saw heads on the Gryffindor table busy counting points. However, Ravenclaw was ..

"And the last points also go to Miss Benedict - for her services in the rescuing of Professor Lupin, I award seventy-five points."

The Gryffindors froze, stared at the Ravenclaw table, where hell broke loose. Ravenclaw had beaten them by two points - nine hundred and seventy-nine against nine hundred and seventy-seven!

"... two points!" Harry started to laugh. After four years in a row, Gryffindor had lost the House Cup to Ravenclaw. While the decoration was changing from white to blue, presenting bronze eagles all over, he walked to their table.

Surrounded by students - was it really only months ago that he would have been frozen in horror? - he kissed Cho. "Congratulations - you're the worthy successor."

Then he turned to a beaming Almyra, hugged her. "Super - absolutely brilliant ... Al, I'm so proud of you."

She hugged him back. "I owe you, Harry - remember the meditation?"

"Not a point - not a single one ... They're yours, and you deserve them."

"True," said Cho, "not a single one - simply because we cannot afford it."

Almyra said, "He did it on purpose."

"Dumbledore?" Harry thought it over, had to agree, felt no objections. "Even so, there's no point that feels wrong ... What a poetry - the eagle winning by an eagle."

Under another storm of applause, Cho kissed him again. "That's nice - you're the best loser I can imagine."

He grinned. "Your compliment's a little sharp at the edges, but thank you anyway."

* * *

Harry's luggage in front of him looked considerably smaller than at his arrival - a large cage was gone. While not from his view yet - it rested not far away at the top of Almyra's trunk. For compensation, a big snake curled around his body.

Suddenly, Lupin stood there. "Harry - can we talk in my office?"

"Sure, Prof." Surprised, he followed his teacher and friend.

Fifteen minutes later, just in time for the carriages, he returned, looking thoughtful.

When the Hogwarts Express had found a steady rhythm for its rattling, Almyra let her eyes wander through the compartment, said, "A snake for a dog - otherwise, it's the same."

Harry, Ron, Hermione, Cho, Almyra - plus Nagini, Crookshanks - at first a bit testy because of the snake, now relaxing - Hedwig and Pigwidgeon. On their way from the platform nine and three-quarters to Hogwarts, it had been Sirius instead of Nagini.

And lots of things had been different then.

"Have you heard news from Sirius?" asked Hermione.

"Not directly - but look at that." Harry showed a recent issue of the *Daily Prophet*, received minutes ago from Lupin.

- **Enforcement Squad Strikes**

Sirius Black, the new head of the Law Enforcement Squad, scores even earlier than predicted by his most loyal supporters. As the squad office confirmed, two of the three fugitive 'Firebolt riders' have been arrested, while the search for the third is still running. The term was given to the group of dark wizards who attacked the School of Hogwarts from the air, using the advanced racing broomstick 'Firebolt' for this purpose.

Asked for their names, the squad office refused to answer, pointing out this information would be kept confidential until the last fugitive is arrested. Known, however, is the name of the eyewitness, a 'Firebolt rider' himself, who volunteered to testify. This is Damian Loew, currently serving a kind of open non-prison sentence in Hogwarts.

Hermione looked pleased. "A fresh wind is blowing, after all the time."

"But it's still small fish," replied Harry, "and you know what Sirius is really looking for ... Wormtail."

Cho said, "I don't mind if the others are lying low for a while ... That's supposed to be vacation time, isn't it?"

Harry was about to speak when the door opened. Bob and Angelina peeked through the door frame. "We're on our goodby tour ... that's our last Hogwarts Express."

It crossed Harry's mind - a year from now, Cho would do it, and then he would have to stand the last year of Hogwarts without her ... He dropped the thought quickly.

Bob glanced at Nagini, grinned. "Harry - wasn't that Dumbledore's greatest joke ever? ... Fifty points for your snake, given to Slytherin - I'll remember that when I'm old and grey."

"It didn't help you much."

"Maybe not, but you were missing these points badly, weren't you?"

"They weren't mine." Harry pointed toward his chest. "I asked Nagini, and she fully agreed with Dumbledore's decision."

Bob laughed. "Considering her abilities to sense people - this is another proof you're a Slytherin ... Anyway, have a good time."

There were quite a lot of seventh-years scanning through the train, saying goodbye to friends and acquaintances. Dumbledore had declared the official end of the Flying Squad, with the students having completed Hogwarts, twelve out of twenty-nine Steel Wings would be gone.

The door opened again. The twins, and Lee Jordan.

"Harry, Ron - we'll see each other at home ... Cho, you really have to be careful with your Steel Wing - next time, you won't get off so lightly ... Al, you know what's still missing in your collection - a harpy ... Hermione, take care of Viktor ... As soon as our shop's open, all of you'll get an invitation ... Bye."

At home ... *Not* Privet Drive, rather a small house, inside bigger than seemed possible, with a ghou, gnomes in the garden ...

Hermione said, "Talking about Animagi - Al, how's your project going with Lupin - as a Transfiguration teacher, he'll be expected to provide more than a werewolf once in a month."

Ron said, "That's how we like our Hermione - tactful to the extreme."

After a glance toward the spot where she assumed Harry's wand, Hermione said, "Well - it's just a question ... I mean, we know each other well enough - if Al doesn't want to answer, she won't do it, would she?"

Almyra said, "You're right, Hermione."

Cho was the first who started laughing.

Hermione took it good-naturedly. Then she asked, "Harry - you spoke with him just before we left ... Do you know more?"

Ron grinned. "I mean, you know each other well enough - if ..."

"Shut up - let him answer." Hermione didn't bother to get upset, just looked expectantly.

Harry said, "We didn't talk about that - I wanted to ask him by myself, but then I forgot."

Cho had watched him. "Then about what else?"

"About Zen - more exactly, about a Zen master."

"And?"

"This Zen master - it's a friend's friend's friend, says Lupin ... He asked around, and that's the result."

"A wizard or a Muggle?" The question came from Almyra.

"A ..." Harry stared at her. "I didn't ask - it seemed obvious to me he's a wizard, but now that you're asking ..."

"What does it matter?" said Ron. "Zen is Zen - is Zen, that's all I know about."

"Well - um, it matters," replied Harry, "because - he was ready to do a training seminar with me."

"Why?"

"When?"

"Where?"

"How long?"

Since the questions had come from more people than just Cho, Harry saw the opportunity to try it by himself. "Last question first or in the sequence of asking?"

Almyra grinned, while on Cho's forehead appeared a hard crease, not unlike Harry's own scar. "Young Potter - you better confess right away!"

"Erm - yes ... One reason for this seminar is - I have to get my super wand under control - that's why I'm sure he's a wizard ... But it's more - it's Zen, and the unspoken hope is, I'll get a handle on an approach how to proceed further against Voldemort - at least an idea."

"So that's the why." Cho's eyes didn't leave his face.

"Yes ... It starts a week from now, and the first set is planned for four weeks."

"Oh, no!" moaned Ron. "And I thought ... Damn, Harry, you really can spoil the best fun."

Cho asked, "And where?"

"At this Zen master's home ... Somewhere in Japan."

"A Japanese?" Cho grimaced. "You better not tell my parents."

"Why? - And why should I tell your parents in first place?"

"Last question first or ..."

Harry grinned. "Touché ... In the sequence of asking, please."

"Because Chinese and Japanese - that's a story of its own ... And why my parents? Because I was asked to invite you, and you may run out of small talk at this occasion."

Almyra said, "She was asked, Harry - otherwise she wouldn't have dreamed of ... Ouch!"

After a while, even Ron could overcome his disappointment, pointed out himself that two weeks with Harry would still be more than expected not so long ago. Harry's - or Lupin's - strongest supporter in the discussion was Almyra who expressed the hope Harry might return with some knowledge that could be passed further - to people close to him, as close as a sister, for example.

Then Hermione had the good curiosity to address Harry's second pending problem, by asking, "How are you going to call your new - er, I mean, Ron's parents?"

"Good question." Harry didn't know.

They agreed quickly - Arthur Weasley represented the minor problem, he wouldn't object his first name, and *Yes, sir* always a good thing to say. No - the more delicate issue was Molly Weasley.

Of course - one term stood out of discussion, what with Harry's vivid memory of his own mother.

Cho found the solution. "In China, such relationships are quite common, that's why they have quite a number of terms. I'd say - call her *Ma Weasley* ... It's close enough, and still a clear distinction from ... you know."

Harry tasted it. "Ma Weasley ... Yeah, that sounds about right."

Ron grinned. "You know, Harry, when Mum's really upset, all you have to do is to forget the 'Weasley' at the end ... She'll be wax in your hands."

Hermione said, "And of course, you'll use it to the extent."

And slowly, Hogwarts fell behind, and the summer vacation was drawing closer.

And finally, the Hogwarts Express reached King's Cross station, came to a halt.

It took Harry a moment longer to grab his luggage, and Cho had the same problem, while the other three managed without trouble, were out of the compartment.

They hugged.

"Six weeks - I don't know how to stand it without ..."

"Me either ... I'm waiting for the day."

They kissed, murmured some more words that didn't carry far. Then they followed the others.

There stood the Weasley parents, waiting - in contrast to some other people to whom Harry had sent a letter, mustering more politeness than he really felt. Thinking of the room that was waiting for him at The Burrow, he had an idea. Reached Hermione, asked, "Say - do you have a fifty cents piece for me? ... I have to phone someone."

She had.

"Thanks - you'll get it back ... Bye."

He heard the buzzing, a second, a third. Then a man's voice. "Halliwell Moving Services."

"Good evening ... Er, Mr. Halliwell? - You gave me your card last summer - after I helped for a day, and after you helped me move a desk and ..."

"Oh - yes, I remember ... That you, son?"

"Yes - Harry Potter's my name."

It didn't raise any reaction. "You asking for work, son?"

"No, Mr. Halliwell ... I need someone who'll move some pieces of furniture - actually, just those from last summer."

"That's our business. So you're moving?"

"Yes, Mr. Halliwell."

A short pause. "Other relatives?"

The man's voice had been pointedly expressionless - quite in contrast to Harry's own when he answered, "No, not relatives ... This time, it's a family."

----- The End -----